



DRAGON'S ISLAND

—  FATED IMMORTALS  —

VERA RIVERS

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FATED IMMORTALS: BOOK TWO

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Fated Immortals Book Two

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Vera Rivers

vera@verariversauthor.com

VeraRiversAuthor.com

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CHAPTER I

DAHLIA

D *ammit.*

The single word pounced through my head as a rush of heat surged through my lower body, shifting my weight uncomfortably as I stood in line at the coffee shop. I knew what this meant, and the timing couldn't have been worse. It was as though all the fates were lined up to conspire against me today, one after the other, and it didn't bode well for what I had planned for the upcoming hours.

I counted six people ahead of me in line, and although I'd been waiting for seven minutes already—according to my very dated phone—the line barely seemed to move at all.

No wonder I'd been so cranky and miserable the last few days. My period had been late before, but stress had ensured that it was almost half a cycle off. Between the move to Montshire and the plane ride over, my body was all out of whack. Of course, now that I was aware of it, all the symptoms came crashing in around me in a torrent, fueling my already bad disposition. My back started to throb, a headache crept in. I desperately needed the caffeine fix I'd come in for, and I was running out of time before my job interview. I looked at my phone again, like I had expected the time to go backward somehow.

It hadn't.

This was a prophetically terrible start to my day. I considered throwing the entire plan in the garbage and starting from scratch, but that wasn't really an option, either. How

could I even contemplate doing that when I was almost out of money and hanging on by a thread? I'd thrown too many days in the garbage already, which was why I was in the predicament I was in now.

You could always swallow your pride and call your sister, Bianca, a little voice in my head whispered. She'd be happy to throw you a few bucks.

"Shut up," I muttered aloud.

"Pardon me?"

The man in front of me turned and eyed me with unveiled surprise. Hastily, I offered him a taut smile and shook my head.

"I was singing," I lied. "Don't you know that song?"

He didn't look convinced but shifted his attention back toward the front, where we shuffled forward one place. I swear, it was the first time we'd moved in at least four minutes. I wanted to scream at someone to open another register, but it wasn't the barista's fault that they were understaffed—or that I was in such a mood. Anyway, I enjoyed coming to this coffee shop. It had been my favorite place since I'd arrived in Montshire, and I wasn't about to ruin it because my nerves were on edge because of hormones and this impending interview for a job I wasn't even sure I wanted. If only the line would move faster, so I could use the bathroom and be on my way already.

The soft chime of the front door wouldn't have caught my notice except for the fact that half the line turned and inhaled in unison, like royalty had just entered the establishment. I couldn't help doing the same as a stunningly handsome man entered, but that was where my interest ended. Romance was the last thing on my mind when I had much bigger problems. Rent, for example. Food, another.

I really hadn't thought this move across the country through, not properly. It had seemed like such a good idea on paper when I was living cozily in Atlas' mansion in Covale City, protected under his wing with my twin sister. It had been

time to branch out on my own, find out who I was while Bianca and Atlas started their lives together. In my mind's eye, it had seemed so much clearer.

But the reality had been a slap in the face. The little bit of cash that I had begrudgingly taken from Atlas to set myself up was depleted, and I had to find a job before the month was over or face eviction. The thought of informing Bianca of my failure after everything she'd done for us, literally saving our lives a few times, made my stomach churn. Sure, she'd be happy to do it without throwing it in my face, but the failure was something I would never live down. I had to figure this out for myself.

My eyes fixated back on the muscular, blond man who swaggered into the café, my curiosity piqued. Perhaps if this god of a shifter had been in Covale City a year ago, I might have paid him more mind before he marched up to the front of the increasingly long line, taking in his mane and steely blue eyes, fixed on the counter where the barista appeared to stop everything and wait for him to speak. He was unbelievably attractive, and another gush of warmth rushed through me, this one nothing to do with the first I'd felt.

Stop it, Dahlia, I growled at myself, annoyed at the prospect of an attraction. It was the last thing I needed, particularly with someone so obviously arrogant. Who did this guy think he was, sashaying to the front of the line like no one else was in the shop? Couldn't he see there were others ahead of him? He didn't even make eye contact with the rest of us in line, like we didn't exist.

Because we probably don't exist in his mind, I thought, infuriated by him. What an asshole.

"The usual, Clara," he ordered, splaying long fingers over the counter.

Even from where I stood, it was clear that they were manicured. I scoffed internally. He'd probably never done an honest day's work in his life. Why did money and looks always fall to the undeserving?

I gawked at his cockiness, turning slowly to look at the others in line, waiting for someone to speak up. To my absolute chagrin, not a single being made a comment at his butting, most averting their eyes altogether, shooting their gazes to their devices, pretending that it was no big deal.

Anger swelled inside me, eyes darting toward the wall clock. Minutes flittered by, bringing me closer to my interview with my outfit a mess and no time to do anything about it. My annoyance grew into a tsunami.

“Here you are,” Clara said a minute later, and I noted that his order came up in record time. No one else had received their drinks so fast.

He winked at her and turned away, heading back out the way he came. As he passed by me, words bubbled out of my throat.

“Must be nice to be such a big shot that you don’t see anyone else in the room,” I barked before I could stop myself. “I wonder what it’s like to be that blind.”

I heard the gasps around me, immediately causing me to second-guess my words, but it was too late now.

“What?”

He turned to look at me, and as he did, his drink lurched slightly, spilling droplets over the ivory of my button-down shirt. Horrified, I stared at my breasts then back at his face, noting how much it had softened when he took in my features.

“Are you always this clumsy, or just when you’re being a prick?!” I yelled, furious, storming toward the counter to find a napkin. The dabbing only made matters worse, smearing the coffee stains into the white of the material. I had made a massive, visible splotch.

“It was an accident,” he said, an amused lilt to his tone.

My angst only appeared to tickle him, a fact that infuriated me more.

“You should be more careful,” I whiplashed. “Don’t they teach you how to walk around here, or is that just another fun

fact about Montshire I have to learn—avoiding men who trip over their own feet?”

He began to laugh, making me want to slap his face, but I caught the horrified looks of the other patrons in line, making me reconsider my anger. Clearly, this man—with his cocky strut and brilliant grin, who forewent coffee lines—was someone who wasn't accustomed to answering to random women.

“I said I was sorry. What else do you want? A blood confession?” he asked innocently. “I can offer you one of those if you insist.”

I didn't have time to entertain him now. I had an interview to get to, and a short fuse as it were. My shirt already had a stain on it. I didn't need to be meeting with Tom with a blood-red face, too.

Without another word, I whirled around and stormed out of the building, ignoring his amused look and the whispers and stares of the customers. Screw all of them. I'd never see them again, and my financial future depended on the outcome of the interview. The coffee could wait. I just hoped the interviewer would overlook the obvious brown spots all over my best shirt, but unless we were doing the interview in pitch blackness, I didn't see how that would happen.

But as I hurried from the Queen Bean, I couldn't resist sneaking one last look at the smirking blond and his ridiculously handsome face, still watching me from the gleaming rectangular glass as I beelined it toward the sidewalk and into the sunshine.

I don't care who he is. He's still an asshole.

CHAPTER 2

DAHLIA

This was such a bad idea.

I stood on the sidewalk and stared up at the building. Even at eight o'clock in the morning, it appeared daunting and disturbing—all wrong for me.

Painted black save for the red, unlit neon sign which boasted the name “Cooters”, everything about the place reeked of what I'd wanted to run from my whole life. I'd passed the establishment several times in the past six weeks since I'd been in Montshire, its purpose undeniable. It was a strip club. Anyone with eyes could see that, even in the pale morning light.

It stood out like a sore thumb on the otherwise tropically colored street. All around the block, houses and stores were decorated in pastel blues, pinks, and teals. A line of exotic umber trees lined each side, each over thirty feet high, casting shade against the brilliant sun rays when the noon heat struck. It was all so cheery and bright—except for Cooters, the crass name mocking anything remotely family-valued in the neighborhood.

No one's forcing you to be here, I reminded myself curtly. You're not a victim. You can leave anytime you want.

And that was the key difference. I had to remember that. This was not Jesse's compound. This was not running from Dad and trying to escape being sold into marriage to a shifter who collected wives for sport. I had a choice, and so did the women who worked in the establishment.

I was choosing this job because in Montshire, jobs were hard to come by. It was a coveted place to live in, with the endless, beautiful temperatures and picturesque landscapes. There was no gang-hold here, not to the extent of some of the other regions. People lived freer in Montshire, even if Oliver Charles was hardly known to be a saint, but that meant making sacrifices. Like working in a strip joint if I didn't want to hit up my sister and Atlas for money.

But I couldn't help asking myself if the decisions I was making were the right ones. Left to my own devices, was I doing what was best for me?

I didn't have time to reconsider. The next stop was living on the beach in a box.

Inhaling a deep breath, I took a step off the curb and almost got run over by a sports car whizzing by. My heart hammering, I raised a fist indignantly, but the vehicle was already gone before I could formulate a cry of protest.

This morning was not going as I'd planned at all. All the signs were there for me to pull up stakes and go home. Steeling my nerves, I started across the road again, this time after carefully checking for traffic, and made my way to the side entrance, like Tom had instructed me in the email. That entrance was even more unwelcoming than the front, a set of metal fire escape stairs leading up to a glass tinted door that only showed my reflection. I grimaced, the coffee stains glaring back at me.

I hoped it was dark enough inside the club that he wouldn't notice.

Tentatively, I opened the door, and immediately, my sensitive wolf shifter nostrils were assaulted by a combination of cheap body spray, baby powder, and man-sweat.

It was decidedly unpleasant, but I swallowed the mild gag in my throat and stood in the narrow hallway, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the dimness. Jesse's compound had smelled worse.

“Dahlia?”

My head turned at the sound of my name. A freakishly skinny man appeared from a door to the left, his shaggy dark hair half-hiding an emaciated face. “I’m Tom. You found the place okay?”

I nodded and forced a smile.

“It’s hard to miss,” I offered dryly.

He returned my smirk. “Come this way. We’ll sit in the main room.”

Nodding, I followed him through the maze of corridors until he pushed through yet another set of double doors, leading us directly into the middle of the club. It was exactly how I’d envisioned it from the outside, how any strip club looked in any movie or television show. A bunch of tables and booths littered a wide space surrounding a huge, dilapidated stage with a shining, brass pole. The bar ran the entire length of the far wall. The only things missing were the half-naked women, horny men, and loud music.

“We hold a three-hundred-person capacity,” Tom offered proudly, mistaking my gawking for admiration. He gestured for me to sit down at a table near the stage.

“You get three hundred people in here?” I asked dubiously.

Instantly, I cringed at my tactless question. That was no way to start an interview.

“Sometimes,” Tom replied, also taking a seat in front of me. “I mean, Montshire has quite a tourism industry, and we get a fair amount of bachelor parties. People come in from all over to see our females. We have beautiful females here. It’s one of the most coveted places to live in the country.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve never danced?”

I bristled but managed to hide my irritation.

“No. And I don’t want to,” I replied shortly. “I just want to serve.”

“All right. I’m just asking,” Tom blurted. “You’re very pretty. Brown-eyed blondes do very well. I’m talking four figures a night.”

Gritting my teeth, I shook my head. I was on the verge of getting up and leaving. I should have known that he was going to force me into something I didn’t want to do.

Relax, I thought to myself. My defenses were up. He was just giving me options to make an informed decision. I was not being forced into anything.

“I just want to serve,” I said again, my breaths quickening.

“Better money in dancing, though,” Tom insisted, causing my pulse to race.

Internally, I felt my instinct hone, my body readying to morph lest I needed to take on this snake shifter. Would he try to kidnap me and traffic me into a life of servitude? Did he have others waiting in the wings? Suddenly, I felt vulnerable, unprotected, and stupid. He read my expression and grinned, sitting back, folding his arms over his chest. He shook his head vehemently.

“Don’t look at me like that, Dahlia,” he told me, rolling his eyes.

“Like what?” I demanded suspiciously.

“I’m not trying to convince you. That’s not my style—not anyone’s style around here. We don’t push the girls to do anything they’re not comfortable doing. It’s just been my experience that most waitresses end up dancing.”

His confidence both relieved and irked me simultaneously. He wasn’t going to kidnap me, but he did seem awfully sure of himself. It made me think of the hot blond at the coffee shop who had bypassed the line earlier. Inadvertently, I looked down at my stained shirt and then back at Tom.

“Not me,” I growled. “I’m happy with serving.”

The front door opened, and my head jerked toward it, stunned at the unexpected intrusion. My guard flew back up again. Had he sent out some signal based on my refusal? Was

someone coming to take me now? Tom had been clear that no one would be in at that hour, and he appeared just as confused by the visitor as I was.

“Hey, we’re not open—” The words died on his lips as the newcomer came into view, and my jaw hit the floor.

Am I imagining things? What the hell is happening today?

“Good morning!”

Tom was on his feet, embarrassment coloring his face as I sat back, a peculiar expression on my face. The blond from the coffee shop sauntered inside, nonplussed and amused.

“Oliver! I-I didn’t realize you were coming in today.”

“And I didn’t realize I needed to run my schedule by you, Tom,” the blond god replied.

My mouth remained agape as the name rang through my ears again.

Oliver. As in Oliver Charles?

Blood drained from my face as Oliver fixed his gaze on me, the same lazy smirk touching his lips, and his cobalt blue eyes raked over me like they had at the coffee shop. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t made the connection at the Queen Bean, but now that he was here, I realized how much trouble I was apt to be facing.

This is the guy that Atlas warned me about before I left Covale City. The immortal dragon shifter who runs Montshire! And he owns this club, too, doesn’t he?

I really should have stayed home. I could have spared myself loads of humiliation.

“I’m just surprised,” Tom blubbered.

“Don’t be,” Oliver replied, nodding back toward me.

Tom merely stared at him for a minute, until Oliver rolled his eyes.

“Well?” he said, ambling forward, his coffee still in hand. “Are you having an interview, or aren’t you?”

Tom stood helplessly, looking from me to Oliver and back again.

“Yeah,” the manager agreed uncertainly. He was trying to figure out what was going on, and I fully felt his pain.

“Then get on with it,” Oliver announced, pulling up a chair. “This I have to see.”

I sank back into my seat, only recognizing at that moment that I, too, had stood in the wake of Oliver’s arrival.

What’s the point? I clearly am not getting this job if Oliver has any say in it.

CHAPTER 3

OLIVER

I hadn't intended on stopping into Cooters that morning—or any other. The mere name of the business was best left for afternoons, well after I was better caffeinated and my stomach was in a better place for the atmosphere of debauchery and whatever else that went on behind the black walls of the establishment I'd owned for far too long.

It was my business, but even I needed some kind of mental preparation to deal with the staff, particularly Tom, the snake shifter manager who was slithery for more reasons than just his alter ego. I had other things to attend to that morning, ones that had nothing to do with the strip club or the doe-eyed blonde who'd reamed me out.

If not for having encountered the blonde woman not once, but twice, in the same half-hour span, I probably wouldn't have gone in, either. But after almost running her over when she so stupidly stepped into the road in front of my car, not twenty minutes after mouthing off to me in the Queen Bean, well, how could I resist following her? It was as if the fates were mocking me, summoning me toward her in a way that I couldn't ignore.

At first, I thought I'd imagined her as I zoomed past, but when I circled back and watched her amble toward the side entrance, I realized she was the same woman, and I wondered what the chances could be.

Who was she, and what was she doing in my club? It was bittersweet watching her disappear through the door, knowing

the only reason she'd be there at that hour was for an interview.

I prided myself on knowing most of the residents of Montshire, if not personally, at least by reputation. It was my business, after all, my town. I had people looking into my people. But this one was an enigma to me. She was beautiful, her long, blonde hair styled modestly around her shoulders, white shirt a demure style that did nothing to hide the slender but alluring curves of her lithe body. Even from a distance, she made my cock twitch, my imagination running rampant with what was going on beneath the fabric of her clothing. I needed to see her up close again, to get a whiff of her succulence.

Her anger in the café had intrigued me, arousing me in the most peculiar manner. She had no idea who I was, and that was interesting in itself. There were so few who could claim that in these parts. She wasn't afraid of me.

At least, not yet.

I liked that. I couldn't decide if I wanted to fuck her or punish her. Maybe both.

I stared at her face intently, noting how she struggled to avoid meeting my steadfast stare. I licked my lips, unable to hide my smirk.

"This is the most silent interview I've ever seen," I announced, sitting myself at the table with Tom and the stranger. "Or have you finished already?"

"No," Tom hemmed. "It's just... she's only applying as a server. You don't need to be here for this, Oliver. It's not the kind of thing that interests you."

I whipped my head around to glower at him, a tinge of embarrassment touching the back of my neck. He was inadvertently calling me out on my attentiveness, but I wasn't about to let Tom see he was abashing me.

"And *you* don't need to tell me where I need to be, Tomas," I retorted. "Last I checked, this was still my place. If I want to sit in on dishwasher interviews, I think that's my

prerogative, don't you? Or do you have an issue with the way I run my business?"

He recoiled, dropping his eyes at my naked challenge.

"No, no, of course not," he blubbered. "You can stay if you want. I mean, of course you can stay. You're in charge. I... I'll just get on with the interview."

Tom stopped to regain himself, and I fixed my eyes back on the woman who pretended not to look at me even harder. She had set her gaze on the table in front of her, but she tried to hide that she was checking me out through her peripheral vision.

I made no secret of looking at her.

Relief flooded me, although that feeling was commingled with guilt; the realization that she was there for a serving position giving me a sense of ease. There was no shame in dancing. All the girls were treated well and paid fairly. There was absolutely no pimping on my watch. If the ladies wished to do side business, they were all consenting adults who could do as they pleased with their own bodies.

I had no say in their decisions, nor did I take a cut of their earnings. If I ever caught wind of pimps sniffing about, they were swiftly and unceremoniously escorted from the premises and banned, not only from my club, but from Montshire for life. Those kinds weren't welcome in my realms, and I made no secret about it. What remained unspoken was what became of those who refused to leave without incident. Needless to say, they were dealt with, their corpses never recovered.

But more often than not, the dancers chose to earn extra cash in their own fashion, which was why I could not help but take some comfort in the fact that this innocent flower before me was not venturing into that dark world—at least not yet.

Still, cocktail serving could be bad enough. The patrons could get just as handsy when there was enough alcohol involved. If her intention was not to get mauled, she was not going to be successful on the floor in any respect. It was a harsh reality, but a reality, nonetheless. And it wasn't just my

hard-on speaking when I thought that she was the most beautiful female that had walked through the doors of Cooters likely ever. Being within arm's reach of the patrons was just not a good idea.

“I see no harm in sitting in on this interview,” I insisted, draping an ankle over my knee and sitting back, coffee in hand. “Although, I admit, I would think that someone would think twice about coming to a job interview with a cleaner shirt on.”

I flashed the blonde a charming grin, relishing the ferocious scowl that formed on her rosebud mouth as she finally jerked her head fully up and stared at me. The way her lips dripped into a teardrop at the bottom made me think of honey, falling from a wooden spoon, and the crotch of my jeans tightened against my groin uncomfortably. I was forced to put my leg down, certain that she could see the bulge in my pants as I sat there, but her focus was on my face, the annoyance rising in palpable waves.

I loved it.

Even in the club's dimness, it stained her peaches and cream cheeks a rosy tint and flushed the elegant lines of her neck. To my utter delight, she answered me.

“Yeah. Some jerk sprayed his coffee all over me after cutting in line at the coffee shop this morning,” she fired back. “Some rich asshole who thinks he owns the town, I guess.”

I barely swallowed a laugh when Tom barked out, “Hey! Show some respect in front of the owner!”

Once again, my head pivoted toward the manager, my own eyes narrowing into slits.

“Did anyone ask for your opinion, Tomas?”

Tom appeared dazed by my reprimand, and he shook his head.

“N-no, sir.”

“Then I suggest you keep it to yourself.”

Tom paled more, a startling contrast to the woman's pinkish complexion, her perplexity growing as she openly gawked at me now.

"I didn't catch your name," I said, flipping my focus back toward her, as though Tom was no more relevant than a barfly. "I'm Oliver Charles, as you might have guessed."

I half-expected her to give me a caustic response, but to my surprise, she only offered her name.

"Dahlia. Dahlia Barrett."

She was definitely a delicate flower, after all. Dahlia. I liked that. It suited her.

"You're new to Montshire, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Where are you from?" I pressed when she offered nothing else.

I was having doubts about her ability to work in a strip club if she couldn't talk about herself. She was going to need a bit more ego than this. I noted that her gaze shifted slightly with my question, and my brow rose with interest.

Are you running from something, sweet thing?

"Covale City," she answered. "I've been here a few weeks."

"Jobs are hard to come by in Montshire."

"Tell me about it."

She grimaced lightly and sat back, her expression a fusion of exasperation and hope. She met my eyes. "But I'm a really hard worker. I'll be a good server."

I shook my head.

"No," I said, perversely enjoying the way her face fell. "You can't serve."

The idea of sweaty, meaty hands groping at that fine ass as she balanced heavy trays infuriated me in ways I couldn't easily identify. I was annoyed at an event that hadn't even

happened yet. I didn't want to think how I might react once I saw such a thing on camera.

"Please—" she begged, but I cut her off before she could humiliate herself. That wasn't what I wanted, either.

"You'll bartend," I concluded.

"What?" Tom sputtered before he could stop himself.

I cast him a sidelong look with narrowed eyes, and he immediately clamped his lips closed, darting his eyes to the floor. Smart boy. He was quicker than I remembered him being.

"I-I..." Dahlia mumbled, confusion fully overtaking her now. She was struggling to say the right thing, not wanting to lose the opportunity but also afraid she was in over her head. "I didn't apply for that job."

"Are you saying you don't want it?" I challenged, sitting forward to press my forearms against the table.

I caught her glancing at the ripple of my muscles, a gulp inching down her throat. I couldn't help but smirk at her reaction.

"I *do* want it," she breathed uncertainly. "I just..."

She inhaled shakily and blurted out the truth. "I have no experience bartending."

I peered at her, taking in every detail of her high cheekbones. The scent of her primal pheromones made my pulse quicken and my cock harden. She was a wolf, rough breeding. She hadn't been reared in boarding schools with etiquette classes. A core of steel was beneath that naked innocence, as if those chocolate eyes were merely a cover for a pit of strength.

I wanted to know it all. And claim it, too.

"You don't think you have what it takes to learn?" I quipped. "It's not exactly rocket science, but if you don't think you can handle it..."

She blushed and frowned again, her feelings toward me still mixed. She was undeniably attracted to me. I could tell by the way she snuck glances at my arms, my legs, my face when she thought I wasn't paying attention.

But I'm always paying attention, Little Flower. You'll see.

"I can learn," she agreed quickly. Her lips parted as if she wanted to ask me something, but she seemed to change her mind.

"Good. Then you'll come back tonight at six o'clock for training. Wear all black."

With that, I rose, not bothering to wait for a response or acknowledge Tom in any way before making my way toward the rear of the building, where my office was located. It was getting hard to walk with my erection as thick as it was, Dahlia's eyes boring into my backside. I wondered if she could tell how hard I was just by the way I walked.

I barely made it into the sanctuary of my office, locking the door before my hand slipped down the front of my waistband.

My eyes flittered toward the security cameras where Tom and Dahlia had risen awkwardly from their now finished interview. There was no audio, but I could imagine the strained conversation between them. There wasn't much more for them to discuss. I had overstepped Tom, and now there was nothing left for him to do but show her out.

Welcome to the team, Dahlia, I thought as my hand curled over my cock under the waistband of my pants.

I'm looking forward to working with you.

CHAPTER 4

DAHLIA

What the hell had just happened?

The question repeated every few seconds for the next several minutes, like it was on a loop in my mind. Slowly, I walked home, glancing back over my shoulder every couple of steps, like I was being followed. It wasn't the same uneasy sensation I'd had when Bianca, Mom, and I had been on the run for all those years, trying to get some distance from our dad. This was a different kind of feeling, more protected than hunted.

Or maybe it was just wishful thinking.

Oliver Charles was gorgeous. Infuriating as all hell, but undeniably hot as sin. Up close in the dim light of the strip club, pretending I wasn't looking at him, I managed to memorize every feature of his nearly perfect face. Those rugged cheekbones and full, dark lips, parted and amused, almost mocking me.

How did I not recognize him? Really, it should have been my first task when I'd come to Montshire—looking him up, finding out who the head of the region was, and how he ran things, but there had been so many other things to worry about.

I'd put it off, stupidly.

What were the chances that I'd end up working for him? And as a bartender? Why didn't he just let me serve? Why had he stepped in and insisted on that?

A part of me felt like he had been showing off to Tom, but why would he? Tom was his subordinate. It seemed ridiculous that he would put a woman with no experience behind the bar.

Although, honestly, I didn't have any experience serving, either. It just seemed like an easier job for a girl with no work history. Mixology was an art, one that I knew nothing about. Oliver seemed to think I'd be good at it, and he was the boss. I vowed to do my absolute best and keep this job. I didn't have many more options, and I couldn't afford to make an enemy out of Oliver. But if things didn't go well, I'd never work anywhere else again. That box on the beach would become a reality after all.

No, Oliver Charles would be a very good friend to have.

A really sexy, good friend to have. Still, Atlas' warning rang in my mind and wasn't to be taken lightly. What he hadn't warned me about was just how beautiful Oliver was.

Get your mind out of there. He's your boss!

Sighing, I hurried my steps and made my way back to the tiny main floor unit I'd rented at a house on Pillar Boulevard. The place was small, but I didn't need much. Even after Atlas had taken us in and showered both me and my twin with everything we could ever need, I didn't acquire much.

I hadn't even known where to start with a new wardrobe back then, even with the help of Atlas' advisers. We'd lived for so long with so little, it seemed so wasteful to take on too much. Though I had more than enough, I couldn't help but feel guilty every time I spent more on a pair of shoes than Mom would make in a year.

Moving to Montshire, earning my own money, getting my own place... These were all the steps I'd needed to take in becoming who I really was. This bartending job was going to get me where I wanted to be... wherever that was. I was still figuring that out.

I closed the door behind me and wandered toward the tiny kitchenette area that housed a small stove along with a microwave and toaster on barely a foot of counter space.

Shuffling through the cupboards, I found half a bag of coffee sitting on a low shelf, and I scooped out a spoonful to put in the French press. I didn't even have enough room for a proper coffeemaker, which was why I insisted on my morning caffeine fix at the Queen Bean. But Oliver had ruined that this morning. This would be my first dose of coffee that morning, and I really, really needed it.

I filled the kettle, dropping it on the stove burner as I thought about the interaction at the strip club. What had he been doing there, anyway? If what Tom had said was true, Oliver wasn't in the habit of coming to interviews, particularly not menial ones like mine. What had made me so special?

Heat crept down my neck as I thought of his eyes prodding at me, like he could look right through me, beyond my irritation and into my deepest desires... and through the dirty thoughts that inadvertently popped into my psyche when I stared at his stupidly full lips.

The kettle whistled, shattering my reverie, and I grabbed the device off the stove, pouring it into the French press. The aromatic scent of coffee filled my nostrils as I waited for the drink to set, my tongue jutting out to taste my lower lip, but even as I licked at it, I knew it wasn't caffeine I was craving in that instant.



AT QUARTER TO FIVE, I found myself standing in exactly the same place I'd been earlier that morning, waiting for my interview. Sunlight still lingered brightly in the sky, a warm breeze caressing my bare arms, ruffling the hem of my slinky, black dress.

I felt bloated in the garment, but several cars slowed down to check me out. They were all filled with males, all leering as they drove by, some with comments, hooting out the window, but no one stopped or made me cower as they had in a previous life, one not that far removed yet an entire world away. I didn't worry about being grabbed off the street and

shoved in a cavern, left to rot as someone's wife or concubine. It was almost like I lived on a different planet in Montshire. It made me want to feel safe, but I didn't dare let my guard down. Not yet.

I shrugged off my reservations. My options were still limited if I wanted my freedom, and this was the price I had to pay. Women in our world would never truly be free. It was just a fact I would have to learn to accept.

Drawing in a breath, I headed toward the front entrance, and a burly bouncer eyed me curiously.

"Ladies' night is Wednesdays," he informed me. "But we do cater to lesbians."

I shook my head.

"I'm not here as a patron," I mumbled.

He arched an eyebrow, and I exhaled.

"I-I'm Dahlia," I blubbered. His blank look informed me that meant nothing to him. "I'm starting tonight. Bartending."

"Oh. Oh! Okay. My name is Gilly." He offered me a lopsided grin that was neither friendly nor threatening. "Brigid is behind the bar already."

I blinked once, my confusion matching his now.

"Brigid?"

His auburn eyebrows rose a little higher.

"I assume you're training under Brigid? She's the head bartender."

"Oh... sure. Right." I didn't want to make a bigger fool out of myself and nodded. "Brigid."

Gilly opened the door for me, and I hurried inside, nodding at him thankfully. He immediately turned back around and faced the door. I found myself staring at him for a second. He didn't leer at me, not for a beat. He genuinely didn't care about me. I never thought I'd be so pleased about being ignored.

"Hey! You Dahlia?"

I turned and saw a pixie-faced brunette peering around the corner, hand curled to the doorframe. Her eyes were impossibly big in that small face, but despite her small features, I could sense a wicked demeanor underneath. Instantly, I liked her.

“Yes,” I replied. “Dahlia Barrett.”

“I’m Brigid. Oliver told me you were coming. Hell’s bells, girl. You’re going to die in those heels. Wear flats next time, baby. No one can see your gorgeous legs behind the bar, anyway, and you’ll spare your back. That’s half the beauty of being back there. That, and no one can touch you, either.”

She paused and sized me up.

“But you’re a young’un, aren’t you?” she chuckled. “You’re not even twenty-five yet, are you?”

“Twenty-four,” I agreed.

“Damn. I remember being twenty-four. It was literally a hundred years ago.”

She waved a hand for me to follow, and I immediately relaxed, her chirpy chatter easing me as heavy bass flooded my ears. A draft of fake smoke passed by my cheeks as I wandered into the main room, eyes instantly adjusting to the lack of light this time. All around me, scantily clad women in all shapes and sizes lounged in various stages of dance or play. Some sat at tables in intimate conversation, one on stage, making sweet love to that brass pole as if it had just returned home from the war.

Several tawny-toned beauties lined the bar involved in an intense card game, ignoring all the men who tried to get their attention.

“You are cheating your ass off, Veronica!” one girl yelled.

“It’s just a game, Linnie. Settle down,” the other one giggled. “No more tequila for you.”

“Ladies, this is—” Brigid stopped and glanced at me, lowering her voice. “Shit, I didn’t ask. Are you using your real name, or did you want an alias?”

Baffled, I stared at her.

“What?”

Brigid laughed at my dubiousness and shrugged.

“Some girls like to keep their work lives and private lives separate. You can use a fake name if you want.”

“I’m just bartending,” I said worriedly. I had never even considered using an alias.

“I know. It’s still a trying job, baby. When we go home at the end of the day, it’s sometimes nice to forget about this place and everything in it. The last thing we want is some horny guy from the previous night calling out to us when we’re at the grocery store, you know what I mean?”

I eyed her, wondering if she used a pretend name in the club, but I didn’t ask.

“My name is Dahlia.”

Brigid shrugged.

“It’s exotic enough that people will think it’s fake, anyway,” she teased, winking. “Ladies, this is Dahlia. She’s going to be babysitting your asses with me.”

The women at the bar raised their heads and nodded at her before returning to their game, the stakes apparently getting higher by the moment. Like Gilly, the bouncer, they didn’t seem remotely interested in me. Despite my initial reservations, I began to relax.

“Oh, come on, Ronnie! I saw that!” Lynn timer shrieked. “It’s just a stupid game!”

I slipped behind the bar with Brigid while the other woman snickered.

“Only those three can turn a game of Go Fish into a massacre.”

I found myself looking around as Brigid lowered the partition, securing us in behind the bar. A full table of men was clearly looking to catch the dancers’ attention, but none of

the three paid them the least bit of mind. The game obviously took precedent over everything else.

I tensed, glancing toward the bouncers. Surely one of the guards would come up any moment and insist they get to work. But as I watched, the bouncers merely milled about, their eyes strictly on the patrons, never once gawking or even sneaking covert looks at the dancers, regardless of their stage of undress. It was nothing like how I had imagined it in my mind's eye.

“What are you gaping at, honey?” Brigid asked. “You look like a babe in the woods. Don't tell me you didn't know this was a titty bar.”

I blushed, and she grinned wickedly.

“I'm just really surprised that no one is...” I bit on my lower lip. “Never mind.”

I wasn't about to make waves on my first night, especially not when I didn't know what I was doing. I remembered my vow to keep my head down and learn the job.

“Oh, holy shit!” Brigid's cry of surprise turned me around again, and I saw what she was staring at. Oliver had emerged from the back of the club, making his way toward the bar.

My stomach flipped at the sight of him in the strobing lights, reds, blues, and whites catching in his hair. Even from across the vast space, I felt him looking directly at me.

I quickly turned away.

He's going to see me not working already. I have to show him I can do this.

Hastily, I turned to Brigid and asked her for direction. I didn't want to seem like I was doing nothing when the owner walked over.

“What should I do?” I blurted out worriedly.

She wriggled an eyebrow at me.

“Take drink orders,” she said. “I'll show you the cash system as the orders come in. It's not that complicated.”

I pursed my lips, unsure if I should inform her of my lack of experience. But before I could say a word, a powerful hand fell over my waist. My breath caught in my throat, heart stopping. I didn't have to turn to know it was Oliver. His scent had been in my nostrils ever since I'd left there that morning, that combination of spice and pine, both woodsy and sporty, with such a subtle hint of fire.

He was all dragon. It was in the way he smelled alone.

"I'll have a screwdriver."

I cocked my head toward him, and he dropped his hand as if he'd never touched me in the first place.

"A what?"

"A screwdriver."

I stared blankly at him, and he sighed.

"You have to at least try," he grumbled gently. "I'm starting easy."

"It's vodka and orange juice," Brigid offered, ignoring Oliver's scowl. She shrugged when he gave her a pointed glare. "What? You want a bartender who doesn't know how to make drinks? You're wasting time by tormenting her."

I eyed her gratefully and got to work making the drink, but as soon as I began, Oliver started giving me grief about it.

"Ice? Where's the ice?"

Balking, I fumbled to pour out the vodka I'd already poured, and Oliver grunted.

"Now you're wasting the vodka," he complained.

I set the glass down and looked at him.

"Do you want to do it?" I snapped, my nerves fraying.

To my surprise, he started to laugh.

"No, my dear. I want you to do it. And I want you to do it properly."

He stood behind me and picked up the glass, his arm brushing against mine, causing my heart to race. This wasn't

what I needed to keep me focused, but I also didn't want him to pull away.

“Just think of all the times you've been out with your boyfriends at bars and what you've ordered, what the drinks have looked and tasted like—”

Is that what he thinks of me? That I'm some wild child, party girl? If only he knew what my life had really been like...

I pulled away and glowered at him, snatching up the glass.

“You don't know anything about me,” I told him firmly, scooping ice inside and repouring the vodka before topping it with orange juice. “Here's your screwdriver.”

I didn't add what I was thinking.

Now go screw yourself.

CHAPTER 5

DAHLIA

Oliver stayed behind the bar after that but kept a healthy distance, watching me and offering pointers, but without the same level of criticism he had initially. Once or twice, he moved to give me a garnish, brushing his hand against mine, and each time, an electric shockwave jolted through me. I wished he didn't have such an effect on me, but no matter how much I tried to talk myself down, I couldn't stop the beads of sweat from forming under my arms.

Calm down! I snapped at myself. *He's hot, but is there really such a need for that kind of reaction?*

I chalked it up to nerves, to having my boss so close, watching my every move, to my hormones running amok, to the stress of the new job. The loud music and pulsating lights only enhanced my already astute senses, bringing all my emotions too close to the surface.

"You're getting the swing of this, baby," Brigid told me a couple hours into my shift. "You're a natural. In a couple shifts, no one's ever gonna know you haven't been doing this your whole life."

I looked up from where I was organizing a freshly washed load of glasses out of the washer to express my appreciation of her compliment, but my eyes fell on Oliver, leaning against the counter on the outside of the bar.

Lynn timer and Veronica had long since given up on their game and had flanked him, each with an arm on his chest. The

sight of it made my skin crawl, and a burst of jealousy choked me. My reaction was a punch in the face.

“Hello?” Brigid cooed. “Are you in there?”

Inhaling, I ripped my eyes away from the flirty exchange and chewed on the insides of my cheeks so hard, I enacted my canines and drew blood. The pain woke me up.

“What?”

“Never mind,” Brigid snickered. “A party of four just walked in. They’re all yours.”

She nodded toward the left of the bar, opposite to where Oliver stood draped in the dancers’ arms, and I spun around to attend to the new customers. But just as I turned, I saw him shake himself loose of their attention, his eye barely catching mine.

Of course he’s a pig. He owns a bunch of strip clubs. Why would I think he’s some chivalrous gentleman?

It wasn’t fair to make snap judgements about him or anyone else based on his profession. I was already seeing that. My perception of the strip joint had been skewed from the start. The women truly did not appear exploited, just as Tom had claimed. My own experiences had tainted me, and it was going to take some time to overcome them.

Ambling toward the new patrons, I plastered a smile on my face that I didn’t feel, steeling myself from sneaking another look at Oliver. I wasn’t getting paid for keeping tabs on the owner.

“Wow! They keep hiring prettier and prettier around here, huh?” one man called out with a whistle. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Dahlia,” I replied, forcing myself into character. “What’ll it be, boys?”

“You. On a platter.”

They all laughed as if I hadn’t heard that line already six times in the past three hours. These one-liners were getting

stale already. But I remembered that they came with decent enough tips to make it somewhat worthwhile.

“How about a beer instead?” I offered coyly.

“I guess that’ll do,” he agreed, nodding and winking. “Then maybe later, you can give me your number.”

“Let’s start with that beer,” I said evenly. “What kind—”

A commotion broke me off mid-sentence, loud voices overtaking the bass of the music. I whirled around, startled at the volume of the shrieking. Instantly, I saw a flurry of movement, three bouncers and Oliver rushing toward a single patron as one of the dancers backed away from a table.

“Don’t worry about it,” Brigid told me quickly, joining my side. “Sometimes we get real assholes in here. It’s all under control. It gets handled. Just carry on.”

“What happened?” I asked, aghast as Oliver lifted the customer up by the scruff of his collar, his security in tow.

The man screamed incoherently as Oliver nonchalantly marched him out the door, his feet barely dragging against the floor. His sheer strength stole my breath, the single-handed hold shocking.

“He probably got handsy,” Brigid guessed, nonplussed by the commotion. “For the first and last time.”

“Who do I have to blow to get a drink around here?” a voice boomed out from behind me.

My attention was diverted again, and I whipped my head back around once more. Inadvertently, I recoiled at the sight of the being behind me. His crystalline eyes blazed through the smoky darkness, two blue lava orbs, set directly on me.

“Right,” Brigid retorted, stepping in front of me protectively. “Like you need an excuse to blow anyone, Zeus.”

But Zeus didn’t acknowledge her. He was fixated on me alone. He craned his neck around Brigid to peer at me closer.

“What have we here?” he purred, his cold, blue eyes piercing my soul.

Inadvertently, I stepped back, causing the demon to laugh. Truth be told, I didn't have a lot of experience with demons, but I could sense that he was one. He chilled me to the bone with his mere stare, and I wanted to run and hide from him.

"This is Dahlia," Brigid offered when I couldn't find my voice.

Everything about Zeus creeped me out, reverting me back to a meek, little girl. Thankfully, Brigid was there to bail me out. "What do you want?"

"I want Dahlia to make me a drink," Zeus said, ignoring her.

The other bartender rolled her eyes.

"Have at it, sister," she said to me. "There are others waiting, and I could do without Zeus' phallic commentary."

Swallowing nervously, I nodded and busied myself with the glasses, carefully avoiding his eyes.

"What would you like?" I asked nervously, finding my voice, but not recognizing it when I spoke.

"Oh, so many things, Dahlia," he cooed. "So many things. I could tell you all about them."

I told myself that he was just as creepy as any other horny patron who came into the club that night, but I knew that wasn't true. Something was more sinister about Zeus, something darker.

It took everything in my power not to throw my head back and glare at him, his own authority intimidating me in ways I didn't understand. I was afraid of him, and I had no idea why.

CHAPTER 6

OLIVER

I dropped Samuel unceremoniously onto a pile in the parking lot, a fission of pleasure rushing through my soul at the thud his body made when it impacted the pavement. I'd been waiting to throw this clown out on his ass for months, but until now, he'd never given me a good enough reason to.

“Don't show your face around here again if you want to keep it intact,” I told him evenly, spinning around to nod at the bouncers. “Ensure he doesn't come back in.”

It was an unnecessary statement. They knew what needed to be done. It was why they were on my staff, after all.

Brushing my hands together as if Samuel had gotten dust upon them, I let myself back into the club and sauntered toward the bar, freezing in place when I saw Dahlia.

Zeus leaned leeringly over the counter, his arm extended toward her, but Dahlia managed to keep a respectful distance, even as she poured him some sugary concoction in a tall cocktail glass. My neck stiffened, and I found my footing again.

Fucking Zeus. What's he doing here now?

I reminded myself not to make waves with the demon. As much as I longed to punch his smug, self-important face on most occasions, we abided by a certain code of conduct amongst ourselves.

Zeus ran his businesses in Montshire, and I ran mine, sometimes on opposite ends of the spectrum. As the adage goes, keep your friends close and frenemies closer.

“...pretty to be behind the bar,” Zeus moaned as I neared. “Why waste what the gods gave you back there?”

“I’m surprised to see you out tonight,” I greeted the demon. “Isn’t it past your bedtime?”

Zeus sat back and looked at me, a charming grin touching his face.

“Ollie!” he chortled, knowing how much I loathed the shortened name. “I didn’t expect to see you here. Come for your weekly dose of T&A?”

“Don’t be vulgar, Zeus,” I snapped irritably. “Have some respect for the ladies.”

Zeus held up his hands in mock surrender.

“Of course! I wouldn’t want to insult the *ladies*,” he taunted, gesturing toward the half-naked dancers in his midst. “They might get offended.”

I ignored his bait.

“It’s been a while,” I said instead, hoping to steer the conversation into surer territory. “Although I was expecting to see you tomorrow night at your soiree, so this is doubly unexpected.”

“It clearly has been a while,” he replied, licking his lips and setting his gaze back on Dahlia. The look he gave her made my blood boil. “You’ve been holding out on me, old chum.”

Gritting my teeth, I forced a smile.

“I would never do such a thing. You know the doors of Cooters are always open to you.”

“Well, I’m here now and ready for some Champagne Room action,” he said, dropping an elbow on the bar, slyly casting Dahlia another look as she hastily slid the drink onto the counter before stepping away quickly.

Brigid stood nearby, plainly eavesdropping on our conversation. Dahlia was doing a better job of pretending not

to listen as she wandered toward the glass washer and set glasses on the shelves.

“That can be arranged,” I agreed. “Who’s the lucky lady tonight?”

“That one,” Zeus replied without hesitation, pointing directly at Dahlia.

I hissed before I realized what I was doing, my eyes blackening at the suggestion.

“She’s a bartender, not a dancer.”

Zeus scoffed openly at my protest.

“They’re all bartenders or waitresses before they become dancers. She may as well start with someone who actually has money rather than give it up for a cheap blow job in the parking lot.”

My hands curled into fists at my sides.

“What is it with you and blow jobs?” Brigid quipped from behind the bar.

Zeus glared at her but glanced back at Dahlia, who had gone ash white at the suggestion.

“She’s not a dancer,” I growled again, thinking of how I had purposely put her behind the bar to avoid beings like Zeus harassing her.

I hadn’t wanted Dahlia’s naked innocence subjected to this kind of abuse, and yet, here we were. She was barely through her first shift, and she was being propositioned already. By Zeus, no less. Bubbles began to formulate in my blood.

“I thought you prided yourself on allowing the girls to speak for themselves,” Zeus mocked me, wriggling his eyebrows. “If the girl wants to dance, let her dance.”

He turned to Dahlia and licked his lips suggestively.

“What do you say, princess? You and me, a bottle of Ollie’s finest bubbly in a private booth? Have you ever seen a demon cock before?”

Red blanketed me, my fangs elongating before I even knew what was happening. Brigid squealed as I lunged toward Zeus, catching the startled expression on his face.

“I. Said. No.”

Our gazes clashed, and Zeus recovered with his usual ease, a cocksure smile formulating on his lips as he glanced back at Dahlia. She was just as stunned by my outburst as Brigid—and as me. I retracted my teeth and sat back like nothing had happened, tapping on the bar for Brigid to bring me a drink. Instantly, a tumbler appeared in my hand.

“My, my, my,” Zeus purred. “She must have quite the golden puss-puss.”

My head whipped up again, and he laughed.

“I’m just saying. It’s not every day I see the great Ollie Charles getting bent out of shape over a pretty girl, not when he’s surrounded by tits and ass by the pound.”

“Why don’t you find someone who actually wants your attention, Zeus? I never took you as someone so hard up that you would have to take what isn’t yours,” I replied caustically, taking a sip of my scotch.

I felt Dahlia staring at me, open-mouthed, but I carefully avoided her eyes. I didn’t know what had come over me, reacting so strongly, but I knew if I met her eyes, I’d be filled with another wave of protectiveness. I needed to contain myself. I’d already behaved badly—in front of witnesses.

“Hmm...” Zeus purred. “Interesting.”

I choked back the urge to ask him what he found so interesting. I knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Lynnie!” I called, waving at the closest dancer. Her face brightened. Eagerly, she sashayed toward me, Veronica shooting her a dirty look as she walked away. “You remember Zeus?”

Lynnie’s face fell slightly as she realized I wasn’t looking for her attention.

“Of course,” she replied, turning her charms on him. “How could I forget that handsome face?”

“Do you have time to show him the sights in the Champagne Room?”

“For a friend of yours, Oliver? I have all the time in the world,” Linnie mewled, reaching for Zeus’ hand. “Come along, big boy.”

“Oh, so you do remember me,” Zeus chuckled, rising from his stool, but not before he gave me one last knowing look, which bothered me more than I cared to let on.

I ignored him and also stood, taking my drink with me as I retreated to my office, eager to escape the consequences of my own actions.

What the hell had gotten into me?

CHAPTER 7

DAHLIA

I stood in place, gawking after Oliver, willing him to look back at me, but he disappeared down the hall beside the stage without a backward glance.

“Wow,” Brigid sputtered, forcing me to swivel my head. “I should have clued in.”

Blinking, I stared at her uncomprehendingly.

“That’s why he hired a bartender with no experience,” she went on without a hint of bitterness. “You guys are fucking.”

I gasped at the blunt wording and shook my head, but the pixie-faced woman had already turned away to deal with a customer. My head reeled. I certainly understood why she thought that. After the way that Oliver had behaved with Zeus, anyone in earshot would have concluded the same. His possessiveness had come out of left field, shocking me... but also pleasing me, if I was being honest. The idea of going anywhere with Zeus made my skin crawl, a thousand terrible memories of Jesse and all those just like him washing through me in a torrent.

But I wasn’t in Forny anymore, living in Jesse’s compound, waiting to be married off. I wasn’t my father’s property to be sold any longer. Eugene was gone, and I was free. Maybe I still couldn’t wrap my mind around it. Maybe I was constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, even here, what felt like a world away from that life.

Yet Oliver was showing me that wasn’t something I needed to fear.

“How long has it been going on?”

Brigid was at my side again, peering up at me with her intense eyes, curiosity coloring her face. There was no anger or upset. She was genuinely interested.

“I’m not—”

“I think it’s great,” she cut me off. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

She flashed me a warm grin, and I believed her. From the minute I’d laid eyes on Brigid, I could tell she was the real deal. A combination of my wolf senses and years of hyper-vigilance had taught me about gut instincts. Brigid could be trusted.

“Between you and me, I think it’s high time that Oliver took the cork out of his ass and found someone. You’re not like the usual type that comes around; that’s for sure.”

My eyes felt like they widened and narrowed simultaneously.

“Oh!” Brigid tittered. “It’s a compliment. Trust me. You’re just... purer, somehow. Maybe it’s those big, doe eyes.”

Doe Eyes. That was what Atlas called my sister.

“Thanks?” I muttered, and Brigid giggled again, gently whipping a tea towel at me.

“I’m saying, you’re not doing anything wrong...” She pursed her lips, and my shoulders automatically tensed.

“But?” I prompted her expectantly.

“But not everyone is going to feel as I do,” she rushed on, sounding grateful that I’d given her an opening to speak her true mind.

My breath held in my lungs.

“Like who?”

Brigid flapped her hands almost comically around the club.

“Take your pick, sweetie. Any one of these broads would stab you with a stiletto to take a ride on Oliver’s dick.”

I wished that didn't make me blush, but my cheeks stained crimson at her wording.

Brigid howled.

“Hell's bells, girl. How did you end up working here if you can't even hear the word 'dick' without turning six shades of eggplant?”

Shamed, I dropped my eyes.

“I guess that's why Oliver likes you,” she chuckled. “Come on, Dahlia. We've got a line up.”

She smacked me in the butt again with the tea towel and headed toward the counter to serve, but I lingered behind a moment to collect my breath and my thoughts.

Is there any point in explaining that I'm not sleeping with the boss?

Brigid would think I was lying to save face, but I also didn't need the other dancers giving me attitude for misinformation. I was caught in a conundrum, and suddenly, I wished Bianca was there. This was one of those situations my sister would be able to get out of better than I ever could.

“Dahlia!” Brigid called. “These drinks aren't going to pour themselves!”

I collected myself and nodded, flipping a blonde strand of hair over my shoulder.

“Coming,” I sighed, moving to join her. There was nothing I could do about it right now, anyway. And there was still work to be done.

What a first shift this was turning out to be.

CHAPTER 8

OLIVER

Most of the bars and clubs in Montshire had a two a.m. last call, but mine were exempt from such petty rules. I closed when I felt like closing, and tonight, business began to slow down around four.

I remained in my office until Gilly popped his head in to inform me that the parking lot had thinned out, and that he was relieving some bouncers for the night.

“It’s time to wrap things up,” I agreed, rising from my chair to follow him out.

Before I left, I paused to peer at the security camera facing the bar. Brigid and Dahlia stood chatting as they stocked one of the beer fridges, but it was clear that volume was low.

It was time to call it a night.

I steeled myself for coming face to face with her for the first time since the event with Zeus.

“Count your till,” I told Brigid, stalking behind the bar. “Show Dahlia how to do it, too.”

Through my peripheral vision, I saw the blonde beauty amble closer to the fae bartender and peer over her shoulder, the golden tresses falling over the spaghetti strap on her shoulder. My tongue jutted out at the sight of her creamy skin, a now-familiar rush of heat surging through my crotch.

What is it about her?

The music volume had lowered considerably, the bouncers ushering the patrons out for the night, rounding up the

stragglers and clearing out the VIP room delicately. A loud giggle shifted my attention toward the Champagne Room, and I saw Linnie stumble out, wiping the edges of her lipstick-streaked mouth with her thumbs, eyes glassy as she looked adoringly at Zeus.

“Will I see you again soon, baby?” she purred.

“Not if I see you first,” he replied in a stupid, singsong voice, saluting her with two fingers.

Linnie swaggered toward the dressing room as Zeus joined us at the bar, watching her round ass disappear.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed how Dahlia tensed when the demon approached, and her stress immediately put me on edge.

“You know, that one is so luscious,” Zeus sighed dreamily, dropping his chin into his folded hands as he stared at Dahlia, enhancing my annoyance. “But her blow jobs really could use some work. You know what I mean?”

He winked suggestively at the blonde, and Dahlia twisted her head, pretending not to hear him.

“You do know how to give a blow job, don’t you?” Zeus added louder, causing my fists to fold at my sides, but before I could react, Dahlia spoke.

“I’ve counted four separate times that you’ve roused the subject of blow jobs since you’ve been here, Zeus,” she said pleasantly. “You must be quite a conversationalist at parties.”

Brigid snorted loudly, and I guffawed as Zeus balked. Smoothly, I stepped up to my acquaintance.

“And speaking of parties,” I interjected, “shouldn’t you be getting home to prepare? Surely, it’s past your bedtime now.”

Zeus offered me a thin smile, but his gaze was set on Dahlia. He had a fixation on her that bothered me deeper than I could pinpoint. Not that I could blame him. She fascinated me, too.

“Yes...” Zeus agreed slowly. “You’re right. I should be getting back. You.”

He pointed directly at Dahlia, who flinched despite the distance between them.

“She’s not a toy poodle, Zeus,” I growled. “Her name is Dahlia. Dahlia Barrett.”

His smirk broadened. “Dahlia Barrett,” he murmured, and I wished I hadn’t insisted I had him say her name now. “You should join us tomorrow evening, too.”

“What?” Dahlia laughed. “No!”

A mini whirlwind of mixed emotions washed through me.

“Oh, but you must!” Zeus said. “It will be great fun and good food. The company cannot be beat. You will come. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“I don’t—” Dahlia started to say, but I cut her off.

“She’ll come. As my date,” I agreed.

Dahlia’s mouth parted, but when she caught my eye, she slowly pursed her rosebud lips again, apparently understanding there was something she wasn’t seeing.

“It’s settled then!” Zeus boomed happily, slapping his hands against the surface with so much force, the glasses underneath rattled. Even Brigid jumped, the feigned cheer fraught with underlying tension. “I trust you know where you’re going, Ollie?”

“Of course, Zooey,” I cooed sweetly. “Yours is the third biggest house in Montshire. Third only to my two bigger ones, of course.”

Zeus’s grin faded slightly, but he maintained his demeanor and pivoted away.

“*A demain!*” he called, waving without turning.

“*Bonne nuit!*” I cried back in falsetto, rolling my eyes.

Tas de merde, I added silently. Piece of shit.

Dahlia barely waited until he was out of earshot before pouncing on me.

“Why did you agree to that?” she breathed, sounding panicked. “I don’t want to go to a party at his house!”

I pulled her aside as Brigid again pretended not to listen to our conversation, my hand on Dahlia’s arm.

“He’s not going to let up with you. He’s like any man with something to compensate for—you know how that is.”

Dahlia stared at me with a shocking amount of blankness.

“No. I don’t,” she answered honestly.

A strange tingle shot down my spine, and I cocked my head to the side, inhaling her succulent scent deeply. There it was, the elusive quality about her I hadn’t been able to pinpoint.

She was a virgin. That was the crux of her innocence. But that wasn’t what had me spinning in knots over her.

She truly is a little flower.

“He’s like a dog with a bone,” I told her simply. “And Zeus enjoys getting under others’ skin—particularly mine. Now that he can see you’re a bone of contention with me, he will not leave you alone. You’ll come to dinner as my date, and that will be the end of it.”

Her eyes bugged, and she started to shake her head.

“No,” she muttered.

I frowned angrily. “No? You do understand that I’m not used to being refused.”

“It’s just... people will really think we’re together,” she moaned, lowering her voice as she looked furtively around the club.

“No one will think anything. It’s one night,” I reassured her. “And although Zeus is a pain in the ass, he throws decent parties. You’ll enjoy yourself.”

Dahlia released a long sigh, her reservations unspoken but obvious.

“I’m not taking no for an answer. One night, Dahlia,” I promised her, but even as I said it, I knew I was lying to her.

I would never let her have a night to herself again.

CHAPTER 9

OLIVER

I took Dahlia off the schedule the following day, even though she could use the extra training. She needed the day to rest more. I might have oversold the virtues of Zeus' party to her in my bid to ensure she came with me. I'd been to enough of these events to understand that they were pretentious at best, downright soul sucking at worst.

Now that Zeus had his sights set on Dahlia, I had to make it perfectly clear to him and everyone else that she was off limits.

But why?

The query popped into my head unexpectedly, and I raised my eyes toward the security cameras in my office, staring blankly at the screens as if they provided the answer. I had absolutely no claim to Dahlia or any other woman. She wasn't my sister, my daughter, my mate. Even if she were, I didn't run Montshire like some of the other regions of the country were run. Ownership of familiar females didn't apply in my town, not in my clubs, and not in my city.

Everyone here was free, regardless of who they were. Here, they were free to do as they liked, provided no one else was hurt in the process. It was a delicate balance, because some touted their personal beliefs as being affected when I accepted some terms and conditions but not others.

But it was my town, and I could do with it as I pleased.

Which brought me back to this possessiveness I was experiencing over this wolf shifter, this stranger that I didn't

know. She had an effect on me I couldn't identify, and it was daunting.

A knock on my office door shattered my questioning daydream.

"Come in."

The door opened slowly, and my pulse quickened as she appeared in a long scarlet dress that reached the strap of her silver shoe. A plunging neckline revealed a swelling cleavage that stole my breath, two even strands of golden hair sitting atop each peak like a curtain.

"Hi," Dahlia squeaked nervously. "Is this okay? I wasn't sure what to wear."

I rose from my desk to show her my full tux, and her shoulders instantly settled, an expression of relief overcoming her face as she realized that she wasn't overdressed for the occasion.

"You look stunning," I reassured her. "Although I could have picked you up."

"Oh, no," Dahlia said quickly, crossing and then uncrossing her arms. "It's just easier to meet here."

It annoyed me slightly that she was trying to keep it so professional when it took me nothing to know where she lived, but I didn't comment on her boundaries.

"We should go," I told her, not bothering to ask why she thought so.

I assumed she was embarrassed at showing me where she lived, which was ridiculous. I already knew. In fact, I'd done all my research on Dahlia Barrett as soon as I'd learned about her, but she didn't need to know that—at least not yet.

"Are we late?" Dahlia asked worriedly, following me across the threshold toward the front of the club.

Several of the more intoxicated patrons called out to her rudely, begging for lap dances, but she ignored them like she didn't hear them at all. It was me who glowered them into

silence, my narrowed eyes shutting their mouths as they recognized Dahlia was in *my* company.

I couldn't really blame them. Walking behind her, the swaying movement of her hips captivated me until I was almost directly on her, my palms extended toward her waist. She was just so ripe for the taking.

I forced myself to give her space.

Gilly nodded at us as we exited, and I led Dahlia to the Ferrari parked directly beside the building. Dahlia hesitated as I unlocked the doors with my key fob, the winged panels opening to allow her inside.

"I know this car," she murmured, and I swallowed a smile.

She remembered seeing me on the street the previous day, when I'd almost run her over.

"Yeah?"

She cast me a sidelong look but didn't pursue the matter. Instead, she climbed inside, and the door closed as I sat in the driver's seat.

"Who's going to be there tonight?" she asked worriedly.

I started the vehicle and zoomed out of my spot before she could buckle her belt, relishing the small breath she released. I rather enjoyed taking her breath away. I hoped to do it again—hopefully with my cock buried deep inside of her.

"Zeus and his wife, Fabiana," I began.

I caught her baleful look.

"His wife?" she echoed. "He was just at the club getting ___"

She stopped herself from saying it and rephrased her words.

"He was in the Champagne Room with a dancer."

"Zeus will not let a little thing like marriage stop him from enjoying his life," I offered sarcastically.

Dahlia snorted. "I know lots of males like him," she said bitterly.

I parted my lips to explain that Zeus and I didn't share his views, but she went on.

"Who else will be there?"

"Lancaster and Sillas Joy, Gregor and Marianna Vesper, likely the Armory brothers."

I caught her interested look.

"Brothers?" she echoed. "Real brothers?"

I laughed.

"No, of course not. How many times have you met real siblings? They just call them that because they've been joined at the hip since they were boys. I'm not even sure which one is an actual Armory anymore, to be honest. Oh, and I imagine Ash will also be there."

I steered the car left, and Dahlia splayed her hands dramatically on the dashboard.

"Ash?" she repeated, her voice a haunted whisper. "The immortal demon?"

I eyed her through my sidelong vision, taking another right up a winding trail which would eventually take us to Zeus' house on the small hill overlooking Lake Montshire. I had one of my own on the opposite side, but the body of water was big enough that our properties could not see one another.

I was grateful for small things like that.

"You know him?"

"I-I know of him," she mumbled. "He's an Original, isn't he?"

"Yes," I agreed, arching an eyebrow. "You do know that Zeus is also an Original?"

Didn't she realize I was an Original, too? Two thousand years ago, fifty humans were turned into immortal enchanted beings. I was an Original dragon. Ash and Zeus were Original

demon shifters. All the enchanted beings on earth—shifters, fae, demons, warlocks, vampires, and everything else—came from the Originals.

“An Original demon,” Dahlia mumbled, although it sounded like she was talking more to herself. “I’ve never heard of Zeus before meeting him. Maybe he isn’t as powerful as Ash?”

“Not as powerful and not as notorious,” I agreed.

I smirked, mildly disappointed that Ash wasn’t there himself to hear the note of superstitious awe in her tone. I wondered what else she had heard about Ash, but it was too late to ask her. A valet rushed toward the car, eager to free us from the interior.

“Welcome, Mr. Charles. Madam,” the valet groveled, bowing as I handed him the keys. “Please, enter through the front. The party awaits you.”

I offered Dahlia my arm when she hesitated on the stone steps, but she accepted my proffered bicep and permitted me to lead the way toward the glass doors, where a liveried butler immediately allowed us entry.

“Good evening, Mr. Charles.”

I nodded at him, noting the expression of approval on Dahlia’s eyes as she glanced at me before looking around the grand foyer of Zeus’ over-decorated house. It always seemed to me that he and his wife were in constant competition trying to one-up each other with finding a more expensive piece of artwork to shock their guests.

“Is that a Druver?” Dahlia breathed in my ear, nodding toward an offensively large painting of a god striking down a boat on the water.

My eyebrows rose in surprise.

“You know your art,” I complimented her. She parted her lips to respond, but a booming voice stopped me from hearing it.

“Finally! We were waiting on you to eat!”

Zeus appeared in the foyer, dressed in a smoking jacket and a pair of slippers. I almost laughed aloud, but Dahlia was clearly less amused.

“Well, well,” Zeus purred, ambling toward her. “Aren’t you a vision?”

He circled around her, careful not to touch her, and I bristled. “Did you dress up for me, pretty girl?”

I pulled Dahlia closer to me, snarling slightly.

“I think you underdressed for us,” I retorted.

“There you are, darling!”

Fabiana’s voice filtered toward us, and immediately, Zeus straightened, stepping away from Dahlia as his wife appeared. Unlike her husband, the redheaded female was elegantly dressed and draped in jewels that blinded me with every step she took.

“Ah, Ollie! You’re finally here. And you’ve brought a guest, just as Zeus said you would.” She smiled brightly at Dahlia.

“Hello,” Fabiana said sweetly, extending a heavily ringed hand toward my companion. “Fabiana.”

“Dahlia,” she mumbled, accepting the hand nervously and shooting me another worried look. Fabiana was all right.

Her husband was a prick, but that wasn’t her fault.

“Come, let’s get to the dining room. Everyone is waiting on us,” Fabiana urged. “And darling, please do go get dressed. It’s shameful that you’re wearing your dressing gown still.”

She waved her hand dismissively at her husband, and I couldn’t resist snickering this time as Zeus scowled.

Fabiana led the way into the dining room, and I counted several other couples I hadn’t accounted for at the massive table, all of whom nodded politely at Dahlia, welcoming her cordially with generic questions about her background.

She snuck several looks at Ash, who didn’t pay particular mind to her, but handled herself well—at least until Zeus

returned, twenty minutes later and into the second course, dressed in an outrageous red tuxedo. He took his place at the head of the table and grunted at the guests.

“You could have waited for your host,” he grumbled, only half joking.

“I told them to start, dear,” Fabiana replied, nonplussed as she cut into her steak. “It’s not their fault you weren’t ready.”

“At least I wasn’t late!” Zeus insisted, setting his eyes on me.

“Oh, stop,” Fabiana told him, waving off his sullen protests like they were the caterwauling of a toddler. “Ollie wasn’t late.”

She offered us a warm smile.

“You never told us how you met, Oliver. I had to admit that I was surprised when Zeus told me you were bringing a date—not that I’m not thrilled you’re here, Dahlia.”

I balked and glanced at Dahlia. We hadn’t discussed a backstory, but to Dahlia’s credit, she managed to steer the conversation away from the question.

“Is this yellowfin tuna?” she asked. “I’ve never quite had it done this way before.”

“I bet you haven’t had a lot of things done to you,” Zeus quipped.

I tensed, smoke emitting from my nostrils, but before I could jump to Dahlia’s defense, she retorted easily.

“You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, Zeus. Pandora’s box was very pretty on the outside, too, if I remember correctly.”

Those in earshot chuckled appreciatively, and I found myself staring admiringly at her but also wondering how much of what she said was true.

What secrets does she hold beneath that sweet, innocent exterior?

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Zeus insisted. “I’ve been around a while. I have a fairly good sense for those around me.”

Dahlia threw her head back and met his eyes evenly, her gaze clashing with his.

“And yet you can’t seem to take a hint when someone doesn’t like you,” she muttered before quickly darting her eyes back toward her plate, her cheeks flushing as if she’d realized she’d gone too far.

I guffawed as the table erupted into full rounds of laughter, the clinking of cutlery and new conversation overtaking the clear-cut tension that rose between Dahlia and Zeus. She had made a new enemy in him, but I couldn’t help but feel immense pride in her. For all her fear of him, she stood up against the demon bully.

She was more special than I had ever imagined. I was right to keep her close.

CHAPTER 10

DAHLIA

It was no surprise that I had to use the washroom a few minutes after my too bold statement to Zeus. My stomach rattled nervously ever since I'd let my mouth get away from me, but his cockiness had driven me to the edge. How dare he act like he was better than me when he was cheating on his wife? Who did he think he was?

"Excuse me?" I mumbled at one of the silent servers who hovered nearby. "Where is the bathroom?"

"Down the hall and to your left, miss."

I excused myself from the table, and Oliver looked up from his dessert.

"Want me to come with you?"

I arched an eyebrow with unveiled annoyance.

"I don't need a babysitter in the bathroom," I replied shortly but quietly.

No one else needed to hear how raw my nerves were at this party. I only needed to hang in there another hour or so, and then I'd be done with all this.

The thought was bittersweet. I might have enjoyed myself under different circumstances. Oliver was good company, even if we were at Zeus' house.

But he's still my boss, and I need the job more than I need a boyfriend, I reminded myself. And Oliver could definitely not be both. Brigid's words about the dancers hating me still sat heavily in my mind.

I ambled through the foyer and down the hall, pausing at a split in the corridor, biting on my lower lip. There were so many doors to choose from, each of them closed. I didn't want to open any of them, lest they lead somewhere I wasn't supposed to be. Surely one of them was the bathroom.

I decided to turn around and return to the dining room to ensure proper directions, so I didn't venture where I wasn't supposed to be, but when I did, I realized I was disoriented.

I need a compass in this house, I thought with mild exasperation, willing myself to think. I had my purse and phone with me, but it would be humiliating to call Oliver and explain that I'd gotten lost in the mansion.

The sound of heavy footfalls made my heart leap, and I parted my lips to call out, happiness flooding me—but it was short-lived.

Zeus appeared, a strange smile twisting his lips.

"There you are," he cooed. "I've been looking all over for you."

Warily, I backed up, smelling the danger on him as he advanced on me.

"I-I'm just going back to the dining room," I muttered, shoving past him.

His hand closed around my arm like a vice grip, and I yanked myself free, but I wasn't fast enough. His other hand shot out to catch me, knocking me back against the wall to pin me.

"Not so fast," he rasped.

Shivers of apprehension rolled through me, churning my stomach, but as I struggled to break free of his hold, a roar radiated the hallway. Heat sprayed along the wainscoting, and Zeus dropped me, whirling around. My eyes popped as I saw a massive, black dragon overtaking the hallway, brilliant silver teeth displayed as plumes of smoke fell from Oliver's mouth.

"Get the fuck off her!" he snarled, snaking his head forward, unhinging his jaw again to release another line of

fire. “She’s mine!”

It occurred to me then that he was not speaking aloud at all, but that his voice reverberated in my mind, the telepathy stronger than anything I’d ever experienced until that moment. I could barely breathe, the fury in him blanketing the entire hallway.

Zeus backed away, laughing shakily.

“Easy there, big boy,” he replied in a taunting yet nervous tone. “You’ve got it all wrong. I was just showing her the washroom.”

His answer didn’t fly with Oliver, and the dragon released another conflagration.

“Stop it!” Zeus fumed. “Fabiana is going to lose her mind when she sees this!”

“*Stay away from Dahlia!*” His mouth didn’t move this time, the psychic message just as strong, however.

“I don’t want your wolf bitch,” Zeus muttered, stalking away from me. “I have my own. Stop burning down my house, you stupid bastard.”

He disappeared before Oliver could do any more damage, leaving me trembling in my spot. Instantly, Oliver morphed back into his human body, rushing toward me, nude and sooty from the flames. But I was too upset to notice his nakedness in the dying flames, my head still spinning from the near assault. I recoiled as Oliver attempted to take me in his arms.

“Are you hurt? Did he do anything to you?”

I shook my head and folded my arms over my chest, rubbing my hands quickly to calm myself.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” I mumbled, turning away, but as my nerves began to settle, the fire shutting down in the hall, I snuck a glance at his rippling muscles along his legs, abs and arms. For the first time, he appeared to be aware of his own nudity.

“Just wait here,” he told me. “No... go back to the dining room. I don’t want you to be alone.”

I eyed him.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to find clothes,” he said, gesturing at his flesh.

For the first time, I stole a look at his package, and my cheeks burned crimson at what I saw.

He’s huge! Is he supposed to be that big?

Quickly, I turned away, but not before I caught his small smile. To his credit, he made no comment about my sneak peek.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, Little Flower,” he told me.

I blinked at the nickname. “Little Flower?”

He smiled, cupping my face in his hands.

“You are, aren’t you? A sweet, untouched flower? My little Dahlia?”

Conflicted, I pulled away and stared at the ground.

“I’ll wait for you in the dining room,” I mumbled. “Where is it?”

“Follow this hall to the end and take a right. Follow it right to the end, and it will lead to the kitchen, which will take you through to the dining room.”

I nodded and turned to oblige his instructions, my pulse still racing wildly. This wasn’t what I wanted. I had left Covale City to avoid all of this. I didn’t want to live a life filled with shifters and magic, where someone found me special. I wanted to live a boring life, to fade into the background where no one cared about me or my unique qualities.

Why was that so hard to understand? Why did trouble have to follow me everywhere I went? Why couldn’t I just be boring Dahlia Barrett for once in my life?

CHAPTER II

OLIVER

I would have scoured for the remnants of my ripped clothing after shifting, but I didn't want to answer the questions of Zeus' guests when I went to reclaim Dahlia after the incident. Instead, I made my way to Zeus' bedroom and helped myself to his most expensive suit, fully intent on destroying it, too.

Who did that asshole think he was? I had made it perfectly clear at the club that Dahlia was off limits, but he had no respect at all.

Still seething, I made my way back to the dining room, where Dahlia had ventured back to her chair and Zeus sat at the head of the table, sulking.

"What has gotten into you?" Fabiana demanded of her husband. "You're acting like a spoiled child!"

"Perhaps he should be sent to his room," I offered, stalking into the room and reaching for Dahlia's hand.

Fabiana and the other guests looked up, startled by my forceful words. It was clear none of them were any wiser to what had happened.

"Is that my suit?" Zeus demanded, his eyes narrowing.

I stared at him challengingly.

"Yes," I replied evenly. "Mine got a little marred. I didn't think you would mind."

"You have others, darling," Fabiana said quickly, sensing a tension she didn't understand. "Sit down, Ollie. Where are you

going?”

“I think it’s time we were on our way,” I growled, placing a protective hand on Dahlia’s shoulder.

“Oh, no! Not yet,” Fabiana begged. “We rarely get together like this. I would hate to see you go already.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Dahlia stopped me.

“It’s all right,” she murmured, more to me than to Fabiana.

Our eyes locked, and I read a determination there that I hadn’t seen before. She didn’t want to give Zeus the satisfaction of thinking he had scared her—even if he clearly had.

“Good!” Fabiana cried, clapping her manicured nails together. “Sit down and tell me all about you two love birds. How long have you been together now?”

Slowly, I took my seat at Dahlia’s left, careful to remain close, and she twiddled with her teaspoon.

“Oh, you’re a private one, aren’t you?” Fabiana chuckled when neither of us really responded.

“How about you?” Dahlia asked, raising her chin. “How long have you been married?”

Fabiana chortled.

“Oh, at our ages, who can keep track of the years anymore, right, dear?” She nudged Zeus, but he kept his eyes averted, feeling the fire of my glare even from that far across the table. “But that doesn’t mean we don’t still celebrate our anniversaries. We’re headed to Jasnica Island in a few days for the festivities.”

I tensed at the mention of the island, my glower deepening.

“Oh, gods,” Ash grumbled, speaking for what felt like the first time of the night. “Why did you have to bring up the island?”

“What?” Fabiana laughed. “It’s beautiful there.”

“And these two buffoons have been fighting for control over it for the past three centuries,” Ash reminded her, rolling his eyes and settling back in his chair.

The demon had a point. Jasnica Island was a bone of contention between Zeus and me, both with stakes in the land. We had both fought tirelessly for full control of the property, but neither one of us was willing to relinquish the hold.

“I don’t blame either one of them for wanting to have it,” Fabiana offered in her sweet but naïve way. “It’s paradise there. Honestly, I keep telling Zeus I think we should move there full time.”

I bristled at the idea of Zeus living there. If anyone deserved to, it was me, but for that to happen, I needed to ensure that Zeus had no stake in it.

“That’s not going to happen,” I said flatly. “Not as long as I have half control of it.”

“Then I suppose I should take full control of it,” Zeus fired back.

My head jerked up, and our eyes clashed.

“Oh, for the love of all the gods,” Ash grumbled. “Why don’t you two just fight it out and get it over with instead of bringing it up every damn time we’re together? It’s tired conversation.”

Zeus began to nod, but Fabiana shook her head.

“We’re not savages,” she interjected. “We live in a civilized society. However...”

Her emerald eyes gleamed as they rested with interest on me and then fluttered toward Dahlia. The look made my heart stop for a moment.

“What are you thinking, my pet?” Zeus purred, leaning forward.

“How about a friendly competition?” she offered. “Winner takes all?”

“That sounds boring,” Zeus complained, losing interest at the suggestion.

“No! On the contrary!” Fabiana was warming to the idea. “In fact, it will be a test of wits and skill, not brute strength. We will work together as couples, and the best couple will prevail.”

Blood drained out of my face, and I immediately began to shake my head, but Zeus instantly perked up.

“Oliver and Dahlia against you and me, darling,” Fabiana went on. “We’ll go to the island and complete a series of tasks.”

Her gaze fell on Ash.

“He will produce the competition. Ash is unbiased and clever.”

The immortal demon groaned loudly.

“How did I get dragged into this?” he demanded, but he didn’t refuse, much to my mounting chagrin.

“No!” I said flatly. “Absolutely not!”

“Of course Ollie isn’t game,” Zeus mocked. “He’s all talk, no action.”

I bared my teeth, fangs elongating.

“I think we both know that’s not true, Zeus,” I hissed. “If you need a reminder, we can take a walk through your back hallway—”

“I’ll do it,” Dahlia interrupted as Zeus paled at my thinly veiled threat.

My chin whipped toward her.

“Dahlia, you don’t have to do this,” I told her in a low voice, but everyone heard me.

“Yes, princess. You’re better off locked away where your dragon can protect you,” Zeus taunted her.

Fire blazed through her russet eyes, but she held my gaze steadfastly.

“I want to do this,” she told me.

The rest of her meaning was unspoken but heard.

Screw Zeus. Let’s show him.

“Then it’s settled!” Fabiana called gleefully. “Let’s bind it in blood!”

Dahlia paled at the notion as I rose, reaching for a discarded steak knife. Zeus did the same, and in unison, we slashed at our palms.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, horrified at the sight of the blood.

“It’s a blood oath,” I told her, reluctantly pressing my palm to my frenemy’s.

The urge to attack Zeus was overwhelming after what he had done to Dahlia, but I would settle for taking his half of the beloved island from him. Fabiana was right. We weren’t animals—not most of the time, anyway.

“Let’s make this interesting,” Zeus said when he withdrew his hand. He glanced at his wife and winked. “If anyone backs out of the wager, the penalty is instant death. No trial.”

My stomach dropped, and I again started to shake my head.

“We already sealed the deal,” I growled. “You can’t go making an addendum on it now.”

“I can if you agree,” Zeus purred. “But it’s just as I suspected. You’re blowing hot air again. You never had any intention of seeing this through. They’re wasting our time, Fabiana.”

“We accept those terms,” Dahlia piped up.

I gaped at her, but she nodded firmly, the determination in her face firm. She had no intention of losing this bet.

Fabiana laughed happily, oblivious to the underlying animosity between her husband and us. The other party guests appeared delighted by the sudden turn of events, and I

wrapped my already healing hand in a white, linen napkin as I pondered what was upcoming.

We were going to Jasnja Island, but it wasn't exactly the way I wanted to show her the most beautiful place I knew.

CHAPTER 12

DAHLIA

Oh, gods! Oh, gods! Oh, gods! What had I done?!

Every time Oliver looked over at me from the driver's seat, I panicked all over again. I was sure he could read my innermost thoughts, the hysteria climbing as we got closer to my house. If I'd been thinking, I would have had him take me back to the strip club where we'd met in the first place. I'd been doing my best to keep my work life separate from my private life, but in my mass confusion, we were heading home.

It didn't even occur to me that he knew where to go without me telling him. I decided to let that part go. After all, my address was in my employment application. It wouldn't defy logic that Oliver had access to them, but I couldn't help but wonder why he was so interested in me. I was no one.

"You've been awfully quiet since we left," he finally commented, clearly unable to handle my silence anymore. "Care to speak your mind now?"

"I don't even know where to start!" I blurted out, grateful for the opening. "I mean... we're not even together!"

I probably could have worked that with a bit more decorum, but my nerves were shot. In the darkness, his eyes shone, setting back toward the road and making his expression impossible to read.

"Fabiana didn't seem to notice that."

"I don't think Fabiana's powers of observation are that astute," I remarked dryly. "She also didn't notice that her

husband was off attacking me.”

I saw his hands tighten around the steering wheel, and an unexpected flush of pleasure surged through my body, despite the fact that the memory of Zeus’ actions still made my stomach flip. Oliver was weirdly protective of me, and I liked it more than I cared to admit. I didn’t need this. It contradicted everything I’d come to Montshire for. And yet I couldn’t help but enjoy it. Why wouldn’t I? Oliver was everything any female could ask for in a man.

I don’t need a man. I don’t need anything but to find myself for the first time in my life!

I was having a silent battle with myself.

“You made the agreement in the heat of the moment,” Oliver said, his tone oddly flat. I couldn’t tell if he was upset or just thinking. “You don’t have to go through with it.”

I scoffed, thinking of the blood oath.

“Uh, I kind of do,” I reminded him. “The stakes are death.”

He tried to be dismissive about it, but I wasn’t an idiot. There was no backing out of this one. We had both agreed to it, heat of the moment or not.

“I just wish I knew what we were getting into,” I mumbled, swallowing thickly.

My heart started to race again. Was this even a fair fight? A dragon to a demon? I had sensed that Fabiana was a wolf like me, but even so, she was older than me, with much more world experience than my twenty-four years.

“Ash said he’ll deliver the itinerary tomorrow.”

My head swiveled back to take in his profile again.

“He’s a demon, too,” I moaned. “He’ll be fairer to Zeus than us.”

Oliver shook his head vehemently.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard about Ash, but he’s fair. Or I wouldn’t let him ref this process.”

I wasn't convinced. Demons had powers that the rest of us couldn't even dream of. Surely Ash would have some bias toward Zeus, even if it was subtle. I didn't voice my opinions aloud.

"Jasnia Island really is beautiful," Oliver offered lightly.

I eyed him skeptically. I didn't think there was going to be much happening in the way of sightseeing during our trip. I was going to be too worried about getting out alive.

CHAPTER 13

OLIVER

I did everything in my power to put Dahlia at ease on the drive back to her home, but my efforts fell flat. There wasn't a playbook for this, after all. I still wasn't sure how it had happened, now that the emotions of the night were settling.

I shouldn't have allowed her to agree to this. I have to think of a way to get her out of it. It's unfair to put her in this position.

But I didn't say that, because in my gut, I knew that I wanted my island. This fight between Zeus and me had been going on for far too long, and it was high time that we put an end to it.

Dahlia was just as capable as Fabiana, and I had no doubt that I could take on Zeus in any battle of the wills or wits that Ash might produce. The conflict between believing that Dahlia could face the challenge and not wanting to put her in any kind of danger waged in my head.

Plus, it meant that I would spend time with this golden goddess who seemed hellbent on keeping me at bay for some reason.

This could be a good thing for everyone. And Dahlia wasn't wrong—a blood oath was a blood oath. It wasn't a simple matter of saying, "Whoops! We made a mistake."

There would be repercussions if we backed out. For now, we would leave things as they were. Ash was certain to be fair, regardless of what Dahlia thought.

I steered my car in front of the house on Pillar Boulevard and watched as she unfastened her seatbelt, long strands covering her face as if to hide her expression from me. It was on the tip of my tongue to invite myself in, but she spoke first.

“When will we leave?” she blurted out, throwing her chin back to stare at me with some defiance.

Again, my cock grew hard at her barely veiled anger, like this was somehow my fault. Shifting in my seat, I turned to look at her.

“I imagine that Ash will give us all the details tomorrow. It will take some planning and time to set up a competition like this.”

“Have you done anything like this before?”

“A competition for Jasnica Island?” I joked.

She didn’t smile, the stress on her face tangible. “You know what I mean, Oliver.”

I sighed. “No, not me, but I’ve heard of them being done.”

“What’s entailed? What are we supposed to do?”

I smothered a sigh, my hard-on diminishing slightly as I recognized her panic. Her upset wasn’t arousing, and I wanted to put her mind at ease.

“Each one is different,” I replied. “I really won’t know until Ash comes up with an itinerary.”

A low moan fell from Dahlia’s lips, and the sound of it flooded me with promise, reinstating my erection.

Her hand moved toward the door handle, and I licked my lips.

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight,” she muttered, opening the door. As an afterthought, she turned to me and offered me a weak smile. “Thanks for the ride... and for coming to my rescue at the house.”

A peculiar sensation settled down my spine, and I merely nodded, the desire to invite myself inside dying on my lips as she stepped out of the vehicle.

“Will you let me know as soon as you get word on the competition?” she asked, a hand on the roof of the car, head dipped inside.

The swell of her small but full cleavage captured my stare, and I had to force myself to look at her wide, brown eyes.

“Of course, Little Flower.”

A fusion of a grimace and a smirk touched her lips before she slammed the door and headed up the walkway toward the front of the house. My eyes fixated on the undulated swing of her hips. She was entrancing me in ways I’d never felt, as if she’d put a spell on me. I didn’t move from my parking spot, my legs locked in place around my swollen erection well after she had vanished.

Gods, I wanted to chase after her, throw open the door, and crush my mouth to hers, tasting the sweetness of that perfect, rosebud mouth.

But I also wanted to keep her untarnished, untainted. Her perfect innocence, edged in fire and so ripe for the taking.

Maybe on Jasnica Island, I’d get my chance.



I REFUSED to go to my house across Lake Montshire that night. It was too close to Zeus, despite being on the other side of the bank. The idea that he was out there made my blood boil. The more time I had to myself, the more I replayed the vision of him with Dahlia against the wall, taking what didn’t belong to him.

This war between us had gone on too long, beginning as a friendly competition so long ago, I could barely recall the stakes at the time. Back then, Montshire had been ripe for the taking, and taking, I had done. Zeus had slipped in for my scraps, and I had been happy to let him take my leftovers, a healthy marketplace crucial to fair trade. But he had grown too comfortable, and I had become too complacent in allowing him to do whatever he wanted. His power had grown under

my nose, and while he would never rule Montshire, he had certainly grown too big for his britches. It was time to bring Zeus back down a notch and remind him where he came from.

The only way to show that bastard is to hit him where it really hurts. I have to take the island from him.

I parked in the barn at the farmhouse on the outskirts of Montshire. It was no more a farmhouse than the sun is a star, the name a bad misnomer from the previous owners, so long ago, I didn't recall. I had bought the property over two centuries earlier and expanded on the simplistic rural design to create a sprawling estate that spanned three acres of building alone. But it was empty and quiet, which was why I preferred to spend most of my time at the lake house, where at least the lap of the water was company.

I had caretakers for the farmhouse, but no one was there when I arrived, the scent of citrus cleaner wafting into my nostrils.

Automatically, lights swooned on as soon as I entered through the kitchen, no need for me to touch the switches.

Usually, I relished the silence of the houses, my thoughts enough to keep me occupied, but tonight, I wished that I wasn't alone. There was a list of women at my fingertips to call, any one of them who would drop everything to keep me company if I asked.

But the one I wanted was no doubt pacing the floor of her tiny house. My blood began to boil once more, the image of Zeus so close to Dahlia forever etched in my brain, rising bile and rage into my mouth. I could have spit streams of venom into his face if the demon had been standing in front of me at that moment.

Was Dahlia thinking about that, too, or was she thinking about me?

It was odd, wondering if someone else was thinking about me. These weren't things I thought about. My life was far too full to worry about the petty emotions of the countless females who had come in and out of my life.

Yet I knew that Dahlia wasn't like any of them. And the realization was daunting.

Soon, I reminded myself. Soon, she'll be at my side.

I wished Ash would hurry the hell up, so I had an excuse to call Dahlia without looking desperate. This whole feeling was throwing me off, and I wasn't sure I liked it... all that much.

CHAPTER 14

BIANCA

I hadn't slept, and it showed on my face. Dark circles played under my eyes, and my cheeks were paler than usual. My body ached, and as I dressed in a black skirt and tank top for work, I opted to wear flats tonight instead of heels like I had the night before. I was already exhausted, and I didn't want to end up on my face.

If I'd had any sense, I would have just called in sick, but it was my second day on the job, and I wasn't going to look like I was redeeming favors, even though I was sure that Oliver probably wouldn't fire me if I did.

What am I going to do here, anyway? I mused, grabbing my purse and keys, glancing around the unimpressive apartment unit. *Sit here and stare at the walls some more while I wait for word from Oliver about the itinerary?*

I had hoped to have heard something by now, but I didn't dare call him. He had made it clear that he would be the one to reach out when he received news, and I knew I already looked like a nervous wreck without harassing my boss.

No, the best thing I could do for myself was head into the club and distract myself. And make money. That was what I needed to do.

Several times during my sleepless night, I'd been tempted to call Bianca and tell her what I'd done, but I had no doubt that if I did, my sister and Atlas would be on the next plane to Montshire, hauling me back to Covale City. It was my mess, and I had to see it through. The consequences of merely

cutting and running were just too dire. I couldn't put Oliver's life in jeopardy. He had taken a blood oath—because of me. I couldn't very well leave him high and dry.

Locking the door behind me, I headed out to the street, barely noticing the twilight falling around us. Suddenly, I didn't notice the prettiness of Montshire anymore. My cloudy head was too consumed with the worst possible scenarios, what would happen if I didn't do what I was supposed to do, what would happen if Oliver lost Jasnica Island.

It was difficult to tell which was the worse thought—Oliver losing the island, or him losing faith in me.

Gods, you are tired. Stop being an idiot.

The red neon of the Cooters sign lit up the street, and throngs of people milled past the all-black building like it wasn't there.

Gilly was at the door again, and he frowned to see me but made no comment and allowed me inside.

“Good evening,” the bouncer offered.

“Hi, Gilly.”

“You okay?”

I cast him a backward look.

“Do I look that bad?”

He flashed me a quick grin but immediately turned back toward the door. Maybe I should have stayed home after all.

The pounding music overwhelmed me when I entered the main room, the strobing lights doing little for my tired head. So much for a distraction. This was only enhancing my misery.

“Hey!” Brigid yelled out from behind the bar. I hurried to join her on the other side of the counter and took the box of beer bottles from her arms.

“I didn't think you were coming in today,” she said, putting her lips close to my ear. “Your name is off the schedule.”

I jerked back and looked at her, paling, but before I could respond, I saw Oliver stalking toward me, his mouth twisted in a grim line of reproof.

“Uh-oh,” Brigid taunted. “That looks like a lover’s quarrel waiting to happen!”

“We’re not...” I started to say, but she retrieved the beers from me and headed toward the fridge as Oliver confronted me.

“What are you doing here?” he yelled out over the music.

I blinked and shrugged.

“I didn’t know I was fired,” I replied, blinking. “Why don’t I have a job here?”

He scoffed and shook his head.

“You don’t need to work,” he called back. “I’ve wired money into your bank account. You’re set up now. There’s no need for you to come in.”

Confused, I gawked at him.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?” he demanded, equally perplexed by my response. “You’re set. You don’t need to work.”

I recoiled, humiliated and angry that he had taken it upon himself to do that without asking.

“I want to work!” I snapped back, folding my arms over my chest. “I didn’t ask you to take care of me.”

Stunned, he stared at me for a moment.

“No,” he agreed. “But you’re going to need to prepare for the competition.”

I scoffed loudly.

“You’re still here,” I challenged him. “Don’t *you* need to prepare for the competition?”

He grimaced and grabbed my arm, pulling me away from the bar. For the first time, I realized we were the center of

everyone's attention. I held my words until we were tucked away in his office, but the door barely closed before I shook my head wildly.

"I'm still working," I insisted. "I can take care of myself."

Oliver grinned wryly. "Yeah. I can see that," he mused. "But there's really no need for you to be here."

"There's the same need as there was before!" I retorted. "If you needed a bartender two days ago, you need one today, don't you?"

He seemed at a loss for words for a second.

"Why are you being so stubborn about this? Most women would kill for this opportunity."

My eyes narrowed, and every muscle in my body twitched.

How could I expect him to understand when he knew nothing about me? He didn't understand where I'd come from, about how men had spent my whole life lording their money and power over me. It was time for me to reclaim my own power, and I wasn't going to be at anyone's mercy.

"Maybe you don't understand women," I growled, spinning around to march back out toward the bar.

Brigid's face lit up when she saw me.

"So, you're not fired?" she asked. "I thought you two broke up or something."

I decided not to respond. It was just easier than trying to explain the situation with any sense. It didn't make any sense to me, and I was in the middle of it.

"What needs to be done?" I asked instead, determined to throw myself into work. I was there to do my job, and that was what I intended to do.



OLIVER MADE his presence known all evening, hanging around the bar, watching me with unveiled scrutiny. I kept thinking he

was going to reprimand me in front of everyone or embarrass me for defying him, but he didn't.

Several of the dancers approached him, vying for his attention, but he ignored them all, his eyes boring into my skull until I was distinctly uncomfortable with every move I made. At one point, I saw him physically remove Linnie from his lap when she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Is he doing that for my benefit, or because he genuinely doesn't like her?

Surely Linnie had once had his attention, or she wouldn't always be on him. She was beautiful, just like the other dancers, all who flocked around the blond dragon, yearning for the stare that he was giving me and me alone.

I was beginning to feel half-naked under his never-faltering gaze.

"I stand in awe of your blessed va-jay-jay, sister," Brigid tittered at me.

I blushed. "What?"

"I've never seen Oliver so smitten with anyone. He can't keep his eyes off you."

She wasn't wrong, but I knew it had nothing to do with my lady parts.

He probably just admires me for standing up to Zeus, I reasoned. I fixed my focus on the endless stream of customers entering the establishment, my nerves eventually relaxing as the bass of the music overtook me. Work had been a good idea after all. I was getting into the swing of things, and I was making my own money.

As the night began to wind down to a close, Oliver blindsided me, steering me off into the storeroom for a moment alone.

"I don't understand why you're doing this," he growled.

"Working?" I challenged, my guard returning.

“Yes! Have you checked your accounts? I was serious. There’s more than enough money in there to sustain you.” His eyes narrowed. “Unless you just like the attention you’re getting from all these horny bastards.”

I would have laughed if he didn’t look so serious. My smile faded, and I met his eyes evenly.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” I replied quietly. “But I need to do this. For myself. It has nothing to do with the horny bastards.”

His face softened, and he exhaled.

“You really do need to focus on training for the competition,” he insisted. “I wasn’t kidding about that.”

A shiver of dread coursed through me.

“How?”

He shrugged.

“There will be a physical element, as well as a psychological one. You have to be prepared—mind, body, and soul.”

I hesitated. I hadn’t wanted to bring it up, but he had roused the subject first.

“Did Ash give you the itinerary yet?”

“No. But he will. The day’s not over yet.”

I dropped my eyes and nodded.

“Well, I can’t really train unless I know what I’m training for, can I?” I said lightly, reaching for the door. “Until then, I’m on the clock and should probably get back to work.”

His jaw slacked, but he didn’t try to stop me when I hurried out of the storeroom, my pulse racing.

Training. Mind, body, and soul. The competition was making me more nauseous with each passing minute, and I still had no idea what was going to happen.

Maybe I should call my sister and have her whisk me out of there, see if she and Atlas couldn’t figure out a way to save

me somehow from the whole death pact I'd walked myself into. It seemed much safer than facing a demon on a remote island.

CHAPTER 15

OLIVER

It both infuriated and turned me on that Dahlia refused to leave the club. A part of me wondered if she wasn't doing it for the attention, but the more I watched her through the night, diligently doing her job, the more I realized that everything she'd said was true. She didn't want anyone taking care of her. She had almost been offended by the idea of me putting money in her account, even though that was just what needed to be done.

She doesn't understand what's upcoming with this competition.

I wanted to sit her down and make her see that she needed to focus fully on winning me the island, but I was starting to see that Dahlia was going to do what she wanted, regardless of what I had to say about it.

Eventually, I forsook trying to convince her otherwise, though I couldn't shake the sense of foreboding that accompanied me all day long. I still hadn't heard from Ash, and like Dahlia had mentioned, the day was basically over now.

Where was he?

I got my answer an hour before I would have shut things down. The demon ambled through the front doors, the red carpet basically laid out for him. He wasn't a familiar face in Cooters, but that didn't matter. Everyone knew who Ash was in Montshire.

His full upper lip curled into a slight sneer as he entered the main room, half the patrons and staff stopping mid-sentence to gape at him. When Ash glanced in their direction, however, everyone was quick to look away.

He met my eye at the bar.

“I was starting to wonder what had happened to you,” I remarked dryly, pretending I wasn’t relieved to see him. “I thought maybe you’d changed your mind about hosting this thing.”

“I never really agreed to host it in the first place,” Ash grunted. “You two assholes kind of put me on the spot, if I recall correctly.”

I snickered and tapped on the bar to get Dahlia’s attention.

“A drink for Ash,” I called out.

Ash’s eyes narrowed as she approached, his dark eyebrows knitting into a vee of surprise.

“She works here?” he asked, confusion lacing his words.

Defensiveness trickled through me.

“So what?”

The demon shrugged and slid onto a barstool at my side as Dahlia joined the conversation. I noticed the shadow over her face, but she wisely held her tongue and studied Ash.

“I’m surprised you’re making your girlfriends work, Oliver. That’s not really your style, is it?”

Dahlia bristled, and I swallowed a groan.

“Excuse me,” she interjected. “I’m my own being. I don’t need anyone taking care of me.”

Ash snorted. “Okay.”

“What are you drinking, Ash?” I asked quickly, eager to diffuse the situation.

“Just a beer. Whatever’s on tap,” Ash replied, turning his attention back to me.

Abruptly, Dahlia pivoted to get his drink, her annoyance lingering.

“She’s a handful, huh?” Ash snickered, laying out the sheet in his hand.

I found myself peering at it covertly.

“She’s something, all right,” I agreed, half-listening. I wanted to know what was on that page. “Is that the itinerary?”

He nodded. “Obviously, it’s the same one as Zeus and Fabiana have. There are no gimmicks or tricks. It’s a straight competition, right?”

He looked at me meaningfully, and I bristled slightly.

“You’re telling me that?” I asked coldly. “I’m not the one who’s apt to play dirty.”

“I’m telling you the same thing I told Zeus,” Ash retorted evenly, nonplussed by my tone.

He was not easily fazed by anything, which was what made him such a perfect candidate for this job.

“Do you need me to walk you through this?”

“Is it in English?” I replied dryly.

Ash rolled his eyes. “It’s a standard itinerary. It’s laid out so even Zeus can understand it.”

He grinned wickedly at me, and I couldn’t help but laugh. As neutral as Ash tried to be, I knew he was on my side.

“If you have any questions, you know where to find me.”

Dahlia returned with the beer, and Ash rose, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans for his wallet.

“Don’t be dumb,” I told him. “The beer’s on me.”

“I can’t have that,” he joked. “Someone might misconstrue it as a bribe.”

He dropped a bill on the counter and left the beer, untouched on the countertop.

“You’re leaving already?” Dahlia asked, sounding worried. “Did you...?”

She looked at me, and I nodded, pointing to the page on the surface in front of me, but before she could look at it, I scooped it up and tucked it into my breast pocket.

“Why did he order the beer if he wasn’t going to drink it?” Dahlia muttered, watching Ash disappear without saying goodbye.

I chuckled. “That’s Ash for you. Forever keeping you guessing, I suppose.”

Dahlia nodded at the full beer, losing its head as it sat neglected.

“What should I do with it?”

I shrugged.

“Bring it with you to my office,” I suggested. “You’re going to need a drink when we go over this itinerary.”

Her chocolate eyes popped.

“What?”

I rose and gestured for her to follow me, calling out to Brigid.

“You need to handle the bar by yourself for a bit,” I told the head bartender. “I’m borrowing Dahlia for a while.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do... Oh, wait, never mind,” Brigid sang, wagging a finger.

Several of the dancers overheard her and cast Dahlia a dirty look, but that was sincerely the least of my worries in that moment.

“Come on,” I urged her. “Let’s go read this thing and see what we’re getting ourselves into.”



SECURED IN MY OFFICE, the endless bass from the club's speakers rumbling the floor only slightly in this area of the building, I caught Dahlia looking at the cameras facing the bar.

"Do you spend a lot of time in here watching the staff?" she asked, a note of disdain in her words. My brow raised as I eyed her.

What does she think of me?

"No. I trust my staff. Or I wouldn't hire them in the first place," I replied, flopping down into my swivel chair and pulling the page from my breast pocket, not showing her how much her accusation bothered me.

Slowly, Dahlia inched forward, and I peeked at her through my sidelong vision, taking in the slender curves of her figure through the thinness of her black tank top. It was dangerous having her here, so close, so alone. If I were a lesser man, I wouldn't be able to contain myself. And if she was anyone else, I wouldn't have held back, either. But it was important that Dahlia not have the wrong impression of me. I needed her, after all, and I couldn't afford to ruin that... no matter how much I envisioned myself sidling up behind her and spreading her over the desk where she stood.

"What does it say?" she asked, snapping me out of my wayward fantasy.

I cleared my throat and unfolded the paper, scanning it through properly for the first time. It was just like Ash had said—pretty standard stuff. Nothing was overly shocking.

Except...

"Can I see it?"

Dahlia leaned over the desk, and I caught a whiff of her, warm sweat mixed with those wolf pheromones. My cock felt like it was in an endless round of push-ups since I'd met her.

"Come over here, and I'll explain it to you," I said.

"I can read," she said haughtily.

I inhaled.

“Yes. But you probably don’t understand what it all means.” I steeled myself from snapping at her, knowing she was acting out because her own nerves were frayed.

“Fine.”

She sidled up beside me, and I hardened myself against the wave of desire I felt at her nearness. The pull I had toward her was far beyond what was in my loins. Gritting my teeth, I smoothed out the page, forcing my hands somewhere other than her succulent ass that perched right at my shoulder.

“We’ll head to the island and get settled in for a day,” I explained, pointing at the head point, jumping right into the plan. “After we’re all acquainted and comfortable, we’ll do the first task, which is the maze.”

“What maze?” Dahlia demanded.

“I imagine we’ll see when we get there,” I sighed.

“There’s no maze set up on the island?”

I snickered. “No. There’s no maze there day to day.”

“What will happen in the maze?”

I cocked my head to the side and peered at her.

“That’s what we’ll have to find out while we’re in it, Dahlia,” I told her patiently. “That’s not something we’ll know ahead of time.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay... then what?”

I pointed at the next item on the list. “After that, I’m assuming on the third day, there is an obstacle course... but it has to be done under the influence of Caramine.”

Dahlia’s eyes bugged, and she started to shake her head.

“No!” she objected with more vehemence than I’d ever seen in her. “No, absolutely not!”

“It’s harmless, Dahlia,” I countered. “It’s a fae concoction ___”

“I know what it is,” she cut me off. “I’ve had my fair share of it already.”

I blinked, stunned by the admission.

“Really?”

She paled and looked down, biting her lip.

“I... I was injured, and the fae healers kept me on it for the pain,” she admitted, sounding defeated. “It’s awful stuff. It distorts your reality.”

“Yes... that’s kind of the point,” I sighed. “This was never going to be easy, Little Flower.”

She raised her head slowly.

“And you kind of have an advantage if you’ve already had experience with it,” I prompted brightly. “I have a feeling Fabiana won’t be able to function on it at all.”

She tried to smile but failed.

“Then what?” she whispered. I glanced back down at the page.

“Then it’s a surprise quest.”

“That sounds horrific.”

“Not necessarily. If we survive the two obstacle courses, we should be fine.”

“You and Zeus will survive just fine. You’re immortal Originals. It’s Fabiana and I who aren’t immortal,” she reminded me flatly.

I balked at her bluntness.

“No one is going to die,” I said confidently. “The entire point of this is to avoid violence, remember? Otherwise, Zeus and I would have just fought it out.”

She looked utterly unconvinced, her dark eyes shadowing to a near blackness, causing my heart to sink. Why had I dragged her into this?

“You know what?” I said, pushing back my chair. “Let’s just call this whole thing off. It was a terrible idea, and I should have never agreed to it in the first place. I’ll call Zeus in the morning—”

“You know you can’t do that, Oliver,” she mumbled. “You took a blood oath. That’s not something that can be recanted with a grin and giggle.”

She bowed her head, and my chest tightened.

“What’s after the surprise?” she asked, her words barely audible.

“The winner is declared. And that’s it. There are no more contests.”

I tried to sound optimistic, but Dahlia’s quivering breaths did not fill me with any hope. The closer we got to this thing happening, the less sure I was about it.

But Dahlia was right—it was far too late to back out of it now. All four of us were going to Jasnia Island, and only one of us was coming back with the ownership to the land.

CHAPTER 16

OLIVER

Dahlia suddenly seemed unable to support herself on her own two feet and slid back around the desk toward the chairs on the opposite side. Guilt fired in my gut, and I leaned over to her, reaching for her hands, but she withdrew her palms from the tabletop to fold them in her lap instead, carefully avoiding my gaze.

“Forget it,” I said firmly, making up my mind then and there. “This isn’t going to happen.”

That got her attention, and she raised her head.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m calling it off.”

She shook her head.

“No. No way.”

“You’re clearly not comfortable with it.”

“It’s literally a matter of life and death,” she reminded me. “For both of us. You can’t back out, or you know what it means for you. And if I go through with it...”

She trailed off and exhaled.

“Which is why I’m saying we just put an end to it. Zeus can be dealt with.”

Dahlia’s eyebrows shot up warily.

“How? What will you do?”

I smirked, my eyes darkening.

“Do you really want to hear the details?” I asked.

She shook her head quickly, visibly swallowing as she looked away.

“I’m not worried about Zeus,” I informed her flatly, and in that moment, I truly wasn’t. For as much as the demon was a thorn in my side, he wasn’t a threat to me. But he could be one to Dahlia.

“No. I don’t want to back out. I want to do this.”

“You don’t look like you want to do this.”

She sighed. “I’m processing,” she admitted. “It’s a lot to take in.”

I had to give her that. It was a lot to throw at anyone. Even I was having a hard time absorbing everything in front of me, and Dahlia was right—I had a lot less to lose than she did.

But she barely knew me, and she was risking so much. I had to make this worth her while.

“If you decide to go through with this, I will set you up for life,” I vowed, thinking quickly. Her eyebrows rose, and I immediately thought of her protests about taking care of herself. “You will have earned it.” Her shoulders relaxed. “You’ll be able to take some time and figure out what you want to do instead of slinging drinks in here.”

“I don’t mind working.”

“Yes,” I remarked dryly. “I get that, but that’s not the point. You’ll have the freedom to do what your heart desires.”

Her eyes brightened slowly. “And I can go anywhere with that money? Start over again?”

My heart sank at the prospect that she might leave Montshire, but I swallowed my reservations.

“Of course. It’s your life, Dahlia. I have no say in where you go or what you do.”

She eyed me skeptically, and again, I found myself wondering about her past and what she’d endured to have such a poor sentiment about males.

“Assuming I make it off Jasnica Island alive in the first place,” she muttered.

I extended my hands toward her once more, and this time, she allowed me to take one of her pale palms. A fission of power smoldered between us, the shock of it startling me. My senses were more acute than ever, her succulence flooding my nostrils, rushing through my veins to give me a perpetual hard-on.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I swore. “If I thought there was even a slight chance I would fail, I wouldn’t do this.”

Our gazes locked, and she bit on her lower lip, gauging the earnestness on my face. Whatever she saw must have convinced her.

“Okay,” she agreed, withdrawing her hand. “I’ll do it.”

Relief overwhelmed me, and I sat back in my chair.

“We’re due to leave in two weeks,” I explained. “I can’t stress the importance of training in that time.”

“What kind of training?”

I laughed mirthlessly.

“The kind that’s going to consume you morning, noon, and night,” I told her honestly. “You’re not going to have time for work. I’m not just saying that—you really need to focus on the task at hand now.”

Once more, her body stiffened, but she didn’t argue. She was beginning to understand the seriousness of what I was telling her now.

“We’ll need to train every day,” I added, in case I hadn’t been clear enough. “Do you think you can manage that?”

“It sounds like I don’t have much of a choice.” She stood, drawing in a breath. “I should go help Brigid with closing.”

I didn’t protest, my eyes trained on her sculpted ass as she walked toward the door.

“It’s going to be okay, Dahlia.”

She didn't turn back to acknowledge me, leaving me wondering if I'd made the right choice by not calling it all off—or better yet, kidnapping the unkillable demon and banishing him into some underground cavern for eternity.

I turned toward the cameras, eager to watch Dahlia work, but as I pivoted in my seat, I heard the door open again.

“Did you forget something?” I asked hopefully, whipping my body back around.

To my disappointment, it was Linnie in the doorway, clad in a transparent teddy that left nothing to the imagination.

“What are you doing here?” I asked coldly.

“What is going on with you lately?” the dancer demanded, slamming the door behind her.

I scowled and waved a hand at her dismissively.

“This isn't a good time, Linnie.”

“Funny, you never say that when my mouth is around your cock, do you?” she barked back, stalking toward me. Instantly, she dropped the anger and flashed me a coquettish smile. “Don't you miss me?”

My frown deepened when she dropped her hands on my neck and started to massage.

“I'm busy,” I growled, annoyed at her nearness. I brushed her off like she was a fly.

“Too busy for a quickie?” she purred, her breath hot in my ear. “Come on, Oliver. It's been a hot minute.”

Everything about the stripper was so wrong in the wake of Dahlia's presence. Linnie was tainting the afterglow, and I resented her for it.

“Didn't you hear me?” I hissed. “Get out!”

Stunned, Linnie dropped her hands and glared at me.

“Come on, Oliver. You don't even need to do anything! I'll do all the work!” she begged, sounding hurt.

I bared my teeth at her, disgusted at her pleading.

“Don’t ever come in here without knocking again,” I barked. “Get out. I won’t tell you again. You know what happens when I get angry.”

Whimpering like a kicked puppy, she backed out of the office, and I rolled my eyes.

“Close the door behind you!” I yelled after her.

When she obliged, I turned myself back toward Dahlia and watched her counting the cash with Brigid behind the bar, mentally comparing her to every other female I’d ever known.

But there was no comparison.

Dahlia was in a league of her own.

CHAPTER 17

DAHLIA

I didn't like the idea of giving up the job I felt I had worked hard to get, but I did understand Oliver's point. The severity of the situation was not lost on me, and I recognized that we would have to train—even if I didn't know what that meant.

Yet.

I was soon to discover the terms and conditions attached to the fine print of the agenda the following morning when a car arrived at my apartment almost as soon as I rolled out of bed. I'd worked until the wee hours of the morning, but my nerves had kept me from sleeping well, anyway. But I hadn't expected a knock on my front door at six a.m., startling me over my coffee.

I stared blankly at the liveried chauffeur, who returned my look with just as much disinterest.

"Ms. Barrett, Mr. Charles requests your presence at the farmhouse this morning," he informed me in a dead tone.

"The farmhouse?" I repeated.

"This way, ma'am." It didn't occur to him that I would refuse, and to be honest, I didn't even consider it.

An ebony armored SUV blocked the width of the boulevard, catching the attention of an old human man who was walking his dog. His eyebrows rose as I ambled from the house, still in the tracksuit I'd slept in. I barely noticed what I was wearing until I was tucked into the backseat, the door closing firmly in my wake.

Oh, no! I should ask him to wait while I change! I groaned, but I didn't stop him. Oliver was expecting me, and the vehicle was already pulling away from the curb, the old guy still gawking at the fully unexpected sight so early in the morning.

A tingle of excitement fused with apprehension snaked through me as we drove. I hadn't had much of an opportunity to really see Montshire since arriving. I didn't have a car, and the few places within walking distance all looked the same to me now. It wasn't like I had a big social network, encouraging me to come out to various areas and learn new neighborhoods.

I valued the small chance to take in the sights from the back of the too-large vehicle, taking in the wild, high trees that only grew in this area as we drove deeper into the interior of the region.

It was already shaping up to be a beautiful day, but that wasn't surprising. I hadn't seen a crappy day once since I'd arrived. It almost made me wonder if there was such a thing in Montshire.

I couldn't deny that the area had mystical properties that didn't exist in Forny or Covale City, a fact that I had just chalked up to me being out of there and away from my haunted roots.

But now, as we neared an expanse of countryside, I realized that there was more to it than that.

The vehicle turned down a desolate road, and my brow knitted in confusion. This wasn't where I would have expected Oliver to own a house, but when the building appeared, I swallowed my skepticism.

It wasn't a house at all but a massive estate that spanned against the lolling hills over acres. To the left of the home itself was a barn which had been converted into a modern garage, large enough to fit a dozen cars. The white metal doors all remained down, but I suspected that Oliver's Ferrari sat behind one of those portals.

No sooner had the car come to a halt than the front door opened, and Oliver ambled out, lounging against one of the

two Roman-style pillars holding up the overhang.

“Here you are, ma’am,” the driver intoned unnecessarily.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, accepting his gloved hand.

“Morning,” Oliver called out, pushing himself off the pillar. “I probably should have texted you, but I thought if I gave you a chance to think about it, you might refuse.”

I wanted to be annoyed with him, but he looked so damn attractive, his face freshly shaved, the spring scent of soap radiating from his smooth jawline. My teeth tugged at the gumline, like I wanted to bite him—albeit gently.

He looked edible, and my breaths escaped unevenly just at the first glance. The realization made me blush, and I looked away, sure that he would notice.

“I wouldn’t have refused,” I said, stopping in front of him. Through my peripheral vision, I saw the driver climb back into the SUV without a word and drive off, leaving me alone with my boss. “I know we have business to discuss.”

His face shadowed slightly, but he hid it well.

“We’re not here for a discussion,” he informed me crisply, pivoting toward the still-open entrance way. “You’re here to train.”

Heat rushed through me, and I quickened my steps to follow him through the massive entranceway, elegantly but simply decorated in marble and silver accents. Long, abstract pieces of art lined each wall, a single chrome chandelier dangling from the dome skylight three stories overhead.

I barely knew where to feast my eyes. It was understated but still giving me sensory overload, particularly when a maid appeared out of nowhere and shut the front door behind me.

I jumped to see her, and she flashed me a quick smile before disappearing as if she’d never been there.

Oliver was already halfway down the west wing corridor, and I almost had to run to keep up with him. I worried I might lose him in this shopping mall of a house otherwise.

“What training are we going to do today?” I asked, not liking the silence as we walked.

“A little bit of everything.”

Abruptly, Oliver stopped before a set of closed double doors and threw them open unceremoniously. I gasped at the sight of the library. It belonged in a major city, not in this remote house in Montshire.

Volumes of books lined the walls, floor to ceiling, where another glass dome protruded to show the bright sky above. I counted two fireplaces, each on opposite ends of the enormous room, but there might have been another. There was so much space, I could have fit all of Jesse’s compound in that room alone.

The unbidden thought of my former captor made me shudder. Why was I thinking about him?

“Pick your weapon,” Oliver told me, nodding toward a small arsenal, laid neatly out on the desk. It was the first I was seeing of it, and I balked slightly. Weapons gave me more bad memories, and I subconsciously touched my hip. To my relief, however, there were no firearms.

“No guns?” I asked softly.

Oliver grunted. “Guns are for inept humans without skills,” he replied haughtily, and I couldn’t help but smile.

I wondered what my father would say about that. He had accidentally shot me while murdering my mother. But he was also dead now—thank the gods—so I didn’t need to bother myself with what he might think.

“Let’s start with a sword,” he offered when I didn’t move, and I gulped back the fear in my throat, allowing him to pick up a medium-sized blade with a serrated edge. “Let’s see how you hold it.”

My gut recoiled at the feel of it in my hands, palms growing sweaty on impact.

Get it together! I hissed at myself. *You need to do this.*

“What’s wrong?” Oliver asked suspiciously. “Don’t you know how to hold a weapon?”

“I do.” I exhaled and steeled my nerves, curling my fingers tightly around the bone of the handle and closing my eyes.

I’m Dahlia. Dahlia is a fighter. She knows how to handle weapons and fend off attacks. None of that was true, but maybe if I told myself that enough times, I might start to believe it.

“Relax your shoulders,” Oliver growled, stepping up behind me, dropping his hands on my upper back.

His movements and the gruffness of his voice only served to further increase my tension, and my nipples hardened unexpectedly. My reaction was visceral, primal, weakening my knees.

“Keep your elbows loose but your palm tight,” he went on, his breath passing by my ear as he guided my hand.

Conflicting emotions rushed through me. The only weapons I knew were at the hands of my oppressors. No one had ever shown me how to protect myself, but here was this man, wanting me to understand the importance of defense.

It was all so overwhelming.

His hand slipped lower, resting on my hip, but he did nothing untoward.

Why doesn’t he touch me?

Oliver Charles was not the kind of man who held back, but he was deliberately and tersely stopping himself from making his move on me. It confused the hell out of me.

I need to focus on this training.

“Follow my movements,” he instructed, guiding my arm. “Focus on the tip of the blade and where you want it to go.”

Together, we moved, slowly but in sync, my shoulders relaxing reluctantly under Oliver’s lead.

What if I’d had a sword when Jesse took us? Or when Dad came to take me and Bianca? What if I’d known how to use it

back then? Would it have made a difference?

Suddenly, I lunged forward, jabbing the blade into the empty air in front of us, pretending it was Jesse or my father.

“Woah!” Oliver chuckled, driving me back into the library. Embarrassment overcame me, and I dropped my arm, the sword falling limp at my side.

“No!” Oliver growled, curling his fingers tightly around mine. “Don’t stop. Hold on to that—whatever it was. Use that passion if you ever need it and cling to it.”

The burn of his skin on mine flustered me, the bore of his eyes on mine making my breaths uneven.

“Fighting is half precision, a quarter luck, and a quarter passion. If you lack any of those things, you’ll lose. It’s that simple.”

I swallowed again and dropped my eyes, but Oliver tucked his thumb under my chin, luring my gaze back toward his.

“This competition will be fierce, Dahlia. You could be fighting for your life. Those stakes will do something to you that you never realized before.”

I grimaced and turned away, goosebumps exploding over my whole body.

I already know all about that, I thought bitterly. I just never thought I’d have to do it again.

CHAPTER 18

OLIVER

Slowly but steadily, Dahlia loosened up under my tutelage. She followed my lead, allowing me to move her shoulders, her hips, her legs into proper stances as we moved from the sword to smaller blades, using a dummy I had Elixir bring in from the cellar. The butler had been in my service for longer than I could remember, and usually, I forgot he was even there with his silent presence. But today, I noticed him more than ever.

The ancient bull shifter dropped the faceless mannequin in the center of the library floor before shuffling back into the shadows, waiting for further instructions. Dahlia barely seemed to notice him. She was far too caught up in the flow of the blood and fight that I had roused in her.

In turn, she was arousing me, her movements graceful if not slightly awkward, but there was a fire in her eyes that I hadn't seen before. She fixated on that dummy like it was a living, breathing being who had wronged her, and it made me want to ask her about it, but I didn't dare break her groove. She needed this training—I hadn't been kidding about that. This was the drive I needed to see, and she was showing me that she had it in her.

It was as though she wasn't there in the room with me but lost in a distant past, fighting a demon from her yesteryears. I wanted to slay every single one of those demons for her, even without knowing what they were. I would have murdered every single villain in her past if Dahlia merely nodded in their

direction. The possessiveness, the need to protect and keep her safe was overwhelming... and a bit daunting.

If she brings this to Jasnica Island, we'll take it for sure.

The thought excited me almost as much as Dahlia herself.

Sweat beaded at her hairline, and she stopped to pin her long tresses up in a loose, messy bun atop her head, but as quickly as she placed it, it fell out again, slipping over her shoulders.

“Hang on,” I chuckled, striding toward my desk to find an elastic.

“No,” she said with stunning determination.

A foot shot out, and she kicked at the mannequin with so much force, it fell back. I blinked, impressed.

“That’s very good,” I told her slowly, careful with my words. I didn’t want to discourage her, but I wanted her to understand that we were only at the beginning of this training. “But that mannequin can’t move.”

She spun around, panting slightly.

“I can see that,” she retorted sharply. “So?”

“So...” I inhaled and glanced at Elixir, who maintained his stoic expression. “Try those moves on Elixir.”

She paled, her fisted hands falling to her side.

“Him?” she demanded, nodding toward the costumed butler. “I’m not attacking your staff.”

“He’s tougher than he looks,” I reassured her. “Elixir? Are you up for a little sparring?”

“Very good, sir,” Elixir agreed, his thick, British accent flat, almost bored.

Dahlia started to shake her head, but I nodded subtly at the butler, and he lurched for her. Yelping, Dahlia drew back, stumbling over her feet, and I leapt forward, alarmed.

“Hey!” I said quickly, guilt flooding me. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. This is just training. We’re

sparring.”

Inhaling shakily, Dahlia righted herself, eyeing Elixir warily. The butler remained a fair distance away, not venturing any closer as he stared straight ahead, expressionless.

“But you need to know how to react to real dangers,” I added slowly. “Which means fighting against real people.”

Her complexion waned more. “Like Zeus?” she whispered.

I tensed, my eyes falling to her heaving bosom. The strain of her nipples against the velour of her track suit was doing unexplained things to my head. The ivory of the material was streaked with dirt and sweat. It clung to her slender curves, showing off the lines I saw every time I closed my eyes lately.

“Elixir, go find Ms. Barrett something fresh to wear.”

“At once, sir.”

“I don’t need—” Dahlia started to say, but Elixir was already gone, leaving us alone in the vast library, staring at one another. “I’m fine.”

“You’re exhausted and frazzled,” I commented dryly, giving her space.

She blinked, her defenses lowering slightly at my observation.

“I’m training. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “But now it’s time to take a break.”

A small smirk formed on her lips. “And you just happen to have women’s clothes kicking around here, do you?”

I bristled but contained my irritation. “I have a lot of things, Dahlia, things I’m happy to share with you, if you’re willing to share with me, too.”

Her gaze clouded, and I realized how I sounded instantly. I shook my head.

“You clearly have some baggage,” I remarked, turning to sit by one of the fireplaces. It was unlit, and thankfully so. I hadn’t been working half as hard as Dahlia, and I was hot.

Although, I suspected that had more to do with her than the workout.

A gentle rap on the door interrupted our conversation, Elixir returning in relatively short order with a neatly folded t-shirt and pair of track pants.

“I trust these will suffice, miss,” he offered, laying the pile on the desk before retreating back into the hall.

It was one of the things I always liked about the butler. He never needed to be told when to disappear. He intuitively knew.

Dahlia lifted the plain, black t-shirt warily. “Dare I ask who these belong to?”

“You now,” I replied smoothly, turning away as she did the same, her hands looping under the hem of her sweater to pull it over her head. As I turned, though, I caught sight of something on her otherwise perfect skin that made me spin back around.

“What is that?” I demanded before I could stop myself.

Gasping, Dahlia crossed her arms over her bra and gaped at me, whipping her head around to glare. I didn’t have the sense to be embarrassed as I peered more intently at the mark on her hip, my eyes narrowing.

“Oh...” she muttered, quickly sliding the t-shirt over her head. “It’s... nothing.”

“It’s a scar!” I insisted, confused. “Aren’t you a shifter?”

She nodded, visibly swallowing as she turned back toward me.

“Why aren’t you healed?”

Suddenly, I remembered her confession about the Caramine.

“I was shot,” she admitted stiffly. “It almost killed me.”

“Shot?!” Aghast, I sprung up and stalked toward her. “By whom? When?”

She drew in a shaky breath and folded her arms over her chest, rubbing her hands over her arms.

“By my father,” she blurted out.

I recoiled, dumbfounded by the confession.

“What?!”

“It was an accident. Well... I mean, he didn’t mean to shoot me,” she went on, the words racing out faster now. “In fact, shooting me almost ruined his sale.”

Utterly perplexed, I dropped my ass against the surface of the desk and stared at her.

“What are you talking about, Dahlia?”

She snickered bitterly and hung her head, her cheeks crimson with humiliation.

“You know I’m from Covale City,” she said. “Things are different there.”

“I’ve heard,” I agreed. “But that still doesn’t explain anything.”

Slowly, she walked toward me and found a chair at the hearth, and I ambled back toward her from the desk, shaking my head.

“My father, Eugene, was not a good soul. Our mother did her best to shield us from his gambling and drinking, but she always knew that, eventually, he would come for me and my sister.”

My eyes popped more.

“You have a sister!”

She nodded and peeked at me shyly. “A twin. Identical.”

I was so shocked, I had to sit. I’d never heard of such a thing.

“Really?!”

“Bianca. We’re rare, I’m told. Here, too, apparently?”

“Siblings are rare, Dahlia. Twins are unheard of,” I replied, wracking my mind to think of a time when I’d ever heard of such a phenomenon.

“That’s why our father was sure he could get a small fortune for us.”

Anger surged through me. I wasn’t naïve. I knew how the world worked outside of Montshire, but it didn’t make me any less disgusted.

“Your father sold you to whom?”

“A tiger shifter named Jesse.”

“Yes. I heard what became of him,” I said, nodding approvingly. “Atlas gave him exactly what he deserved.”

“Well... not Atlas, not exactly,” she corrected me. “My sister. She’s mated to him, you see.”

I couldn’t believe this was the first I was hearing of the Barrett twins. “Your twin sister is mated to Atlas?”

Dahlia nodded.

“And your father?” I spat the word, not liking it as it fell from my lips.

“He’s gone, too,” Dahlia answered quickly.

My head spun as I tried to understand.

“Why didn’t you stay in Covale City then?” I asked. “You were safe, weren’t you?”

Dahlia grimaced and sat forward, burying her blonde tresses in her fingers.

“Yes, but I was still being taken care of,” she explained. “I’ve never had a chance to be me. I’m not even sure I know who I am without Bianca or someone else taking care of me.”

The words were a gut punch. I wanted nothing more than to protect this fierce but vulnerable Little Flower, but all she wanted was to make her own way in the world.

I couldn’t touch her, not now that I knew her history, her truth.

“Dahlia,” I said softly. She raised her head and met my eyes. “I meant what I said before. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She offered me a weak smile, but I sensed her uneasiness.

“I believe you,” she whispered. “Or I wouldn’t be here.”

CHAPTER 19

DAHLIA

The next two weeks were grueling, and not just from a training standpoint. I spent every waking moment at Oliver's place, fighting, meditating, discussing potential tactics. By the time the sun sunk, and it was time for me to return to my apartment, I was bone-tired, and it wasn't until the second last day that I realized why.

I'm getting feelings for him.

That was a gross understatement. I wasn't "getting" feelings. Every time his hand brushed against mine during a sparring match, electricity shattered my entire existence. When I went home, my broken body refused to sleep as I tossed and turned on my lumpy twin bed, thinking about Oliver and his incredible house, alone in a bed that was probably ten times as big.

Did he think about me, too?

Not once did he let himself get out of line, his fingers never touching the curve of my ass no matter how subtly I put it next to him. I caught him watching me with naked lust in his eyes several times, but when we sparred, he was always careful to keep a respectful distance, even though that urge to bite his lower lip was growing on me in insurmountable ways.

"I'll have Ryder pick you up at four tomorrow," he informed me as I grabbed my bag on my way out that final day. From the foyer door, I glanced at him over my shoulder.

"Ryder?"

"The driver," he explained.

I laughed.

“Your chauffeur’s name is Ryder?”

He grinned.

“I never realized that before,” he admitted. “It’s fitting, though.”

I drew in a breath, ignoring the creeping nervousness as it swept through me. Maybe all this attraction I was feeling toward Oliver was merely a distraction from the real matter at hand. Tomorrow, we’d go to the island.

“Four o’clock,” I echoed. “All right.”

“He’ll bring you to the helipad.”

“The helipad!” I felt like an idiot, repeating after him, but he chuckled.

“And the helicopter will bring us to the boat.”

I hesitated.

“Are we going with Fabiana and Zeus?”

“Hell no,” he growled. “They can find their own way to Jasnia.”

My shoulders sagged with relief, and I noticed how he hesitated.

Is he going to ask me to stay tonight? Should I ask if I can stay tonight? Wouldn’t that make more sense?

But as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t bring myself to beg the question aloud. If he wanted me to stay, he would have asked.

“Get some rest,” he offered, disappointment filling my heart.

“I’ll try,” I replied lightly. “See you tomorrow.”

I opened the front door and paused.

“Hey... what should I pack?” I asked, feeling foolish that I hadn’t thought to prepare a bag before.

Oliver tittered.

“The island is tropical,” he offered, shrugging. “I don’t recommend a parka.”

I parted my lips to ask him if we would have a chance to do anything other than fight for the island, but I stopped myself.

This isn’t your honeymoon, stupid. Get over yourself.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I hurried out into the night, inhaling the fresh, country air. A chill had overtaken the evening in the wake of the sun’s disappearance, but I relished the coolness against my skin. Ryder waited by the armored SUV, the door wide open as I walked over the cobblestone walkway, the chirp of crickets whistling in my ears.

“Home, ma’am?” Ryder asked.

I snuck a look at the house, silently willing Oliver to come out after me and ask me to stay, but the door remained closed.

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, Ryder. Home,” I sighed.

Where else was I going to go? I was more alone here than I had been in Covale City.



AT THREE FIFTY-EIGHT, Ryder pulled up to the boulevard, this time with a much bigger audience than usual. Most of the time, the SUV arrived at the break of dawn, returning me well after dark, but today, half the neighborhood saw me as I struggled with my suitcase.

Ryder immediately sprang into action, taking the overfull bag from me, and opened the car door first before settling my suitcase in the trunk. I’d packed enough for three weeks, although we were only going for a few days. After all, how does one dress for a competition that might result in death?

There were casual clothes, of course, workout outfits that were formfitting and allowed for movement in the maze. But I had also crammed in a couple of elegant dresses and a skimpy white bikini... just in case. Never mind the lacy lingerie I buried underneath the cotton hip huggers.

What is wrong with you?

I was ashamed of myself, but it was too late to do anything about my wardrobe choices now. Ryder was already on the road.

The helipad was closer to the center of the city, not far from Cooters, in fact. It made me wonder if more of Oliver's businesses weren't central as well. I realized how little I knew about the man and his activities.

He knew all about me now, and I still knew nothing about him, but hadn't I wanted it that way?

Suddenly, I didn't know what I wanted.

Oliver was on the helipad when the SUV arrived, and he ambled over to greet me, two massive, suited men in tow. He opened the door for me while Ryder retrieved my bag, his security team standing back to stare at the horizon through mirrored glasses. I got the sense that they were there more for show than necessity, but admittedly, they made me feel safer. I had no doubt that there was nothing they could do that Oliver couldn't do just as well.

Inadvertently, my eyes darted toward his crotch, and I blushed when I realized what I was doing, whipping my head away.

"Perfect timing," he said. "The pilot informed me that the weather is going to be clear all the way through."

"Is the weather ever anything but clear?" I asked, only half-joking. The security team remained on the platform as we headed into the helicopter, Oliver barely acknowledging them the entire time.

He helped me into the chopper, and the pilot nodded at me, his mouthpiece pressed to his lips.

“Welcome aboard, Ms. Barrett. I’m Leroy. Please let me know if you need anything at all.”

“Thank you,” I squeaked.

It was still daunting to be waited on as I was, but it was also really nice. In Covale City, I’d been treated much the same, though that had been because I was Bianca’s sister. This was different, and it made me feel special.

“Buckle up. We’re taking off right away,” Oliver told me, patting my knee.

A thrill shot through my body, and his fingers lingered a moment longer than they needed. My stomach dropped as the helicopter rose into the bright afternoon sky, Montshire fading beneath us.

“Have you ever ridden in a helicopter before?”

I laughed.

“No,” I replied. “When would I?”

Oliver shrugged.

“I thought maybe Atlas would have taken you and your sister.”

I shook my head, eyes still trained on the remarkable scenery below. I had taken a plane to Montshire, but this was an entirely different experience.

“Atlas prefers to stay close to home,” I mumbled, nervousness taking me over. “How long is this ride?”

His hand reached to touch mine comfortingly.

“Twenty minutes to the yacht,” he promised.

I gawked at him. “We’re going to the island on a yacht?”

Oliver chuckled. “Did you think we were going by rowboat?”

Of course. How stupid of me.

“Just enjoy the view,” he said, squeezing my fingers gently. He immediately put me at ease, the open space no longer unnerving as I remembered something important.

“You could have flown us to the yacht. I’ve never ridden on a dragon before,” I called out over the whirl of the blades.

I cringed after realizing what I’d just said. Was it really proper to ask an Original for a ride on his back?

Oliver laughed again. “I’m trying to conserve my energy,” he replied. “But yes, I could have.”

I wasn’t going to fall out. We were safe. He was going to keep me safe, just like he’d promised.

I inched closer to him without being obvious, but I caught the small smile on his lips when I did. Admittedly, I was disappointed when the outline of an enormous yacht appeared in the crystalline waters below. I had been enjoying the nearness of his body.

“That’s the Lizzie Anne,” he informed me as the helicopter descended. “She’s named after my mother.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. The sentimentality shocked me.

“It’s beautiful,” I told him honestly.

He glanced at me, and even without speaking, I knew what he was thinking.

He thinks I’m beautiful. It’s written all over his face.

It turned my cheeks crimson, and I looked away, pretending to check out the vessel. In minutes, we landed, and I was glad to be away from the endless roar of the chopper.

“Would you like a tour?” he asked, leading the way inside. The crew greeted him professionally, nodding politely to me. I did a double take when I recognized the same two security guards from the helipad on the boat, still in the same suits, wearing the same mirrored glasses. I sniffed the air lightly, gauging their breed.

Bull and bear.

Good security to have. Even better that they were armed, the butts of their weapons shining from their waistbands as they turned away.

“Sure...” I agreed, again overwhelmed with the opulence of my surroundings.

No amount of time with Atlas could prepare me for these endless displays of wealth. We were on a floating mansion with all its bedrooms and bathrooms. There were two pools, a hot tub, and a sauna, which Oliver invited me to try.

“How long will we be on the boat?” I asked, not wanting to sound ungrateful.

“It’s five hours to the island from here,” he explained. “You might as well enjoy yourself. Have a drink, go for a swim. If there’s anything you want, the crew will get it for you.”

I believed him, but all I wanted was to sit by the pool and relax. Someone put a mimosa in my hand, and the drink hit the spot better than I could have imagined.

“I could live out here,” Oliver admitted, joining me at the railing.

He had a tumbler of his own in his hand, a dreamy expression on his face.

“Why don’t you?”

He cast me a wry, sidelong look.

“Life gets in the way of living sometimes,” he replied enigmatically.

I turned, propping my elbows against the railing to stare at him curiously.

“You have everything. You can do anything you want.”

His eyes clouded, and he took a long sip of his drink. “I don’t have everything,” he said, winking at me. “At least not yet.”

My chest fluttered.

He’s talking about the island, I told myself, but as we fell back into a comfortable silence, the last of twilight slipping away into complete darkness, I couldn’t help but hope he was talking about more than just that.

CHAPTER 20

DAHLIA

“Dahlia?”

I moaned softly, eyes fluttering open. Oliver’s face was inches from mine, and I gasped, springing up to look around. Fairy lights gleamed around the railing of the boat, but I realized we weren’t moving anymore.

“Oh, I fell asleep!” I muttered, humiliated.

I didn’t even remember sitting down on the too-comfortable deck chair when the lull of the sea had cradled me into submission.

“It’s all right,” Oliver replied, extending a hand toward me, which I took, and I allowed him to lift me easily from the chair as if I weighed nothing.

A blanket fell away from me, one I hadn’t put on myself. I wondered if Oliver had placed it on my body when I’d passed out, but I didn’t ask. My eyes focused on the land in front of me, night vision kicking in, although torches lit the dock as we descended.

Gone was the chill from the open water. A tropical humidity laced the air, comingling with a succulent scent that stole my breath. A dozen blooming flowers lined the pathway on either side of the pier as we stepped down the gangplank, my eyes unsure of where to rest. There was just so much to take in.

“My bag,” I said weakly.

Oliver hadn’t released my hand.

“Everything is taken care of,” he reassured me, urging me forward. “It’s late, and we should get to the hotel.”

The hotel. I hadn’t even thought to ask where we’d be staying. I assumed Oliver had a house on the island, but before I could ask him about it, he continued.

“In the interest of fairness, Ash suggested that we all remain under one roof for the duration of the competition. We’ll stay at the Dockside. It’s a quaint little place in which neither Zeus nor I have stakes.”

I eyed him through my peripheral vision.

“There’s something on this island that neither of you own?”

“For now,” he said slyly, tugging me along. “There’s a car waiting.”

I glanced back toward the yacht, the ship appearing even larger in the darkness, the row of lights making it pop in the ebony backdrop of the stars.

I’ll be back on that thing in a couple of days, I reassured myself.

As Oliver promised, there was a sleek black town car waiting for us at the curb, but I again found myself wondering about my bag. I swallowed the question, however. I was beginning to find that Oliver was a man of his word. If he said the luggage would be there, the luggage would be there. I just suddenly had the urge to change out of the same outfit I’d been in all day and into something more comfortable.

Oliver released my hand once we were inside the car, and I felt a pang. Instead of showing him my disappointment, I turned my head to look out the window, engrossed in the lush greenery. They had not lied about the beauty of the island. Even in the almost pitch blackness, I could sense the mysticism that accompanied the land.

“It’s ancient here,” Oliver explained. “That’s the feeling you’re experiencing right now.”

I nodded, peeking at him through a curtain of hair.

“It’s magical.”

“You can see why I want it so badly.”

I turned fully to him. “It must be more than just sentimentality,” I said bravely. “You don’t strike me as the type to act based on emotion.”

Oliver snickered. “Jasnia Island is a gateway between several other ports,” he said without hesitation. “It’s a shipping dream, and a tourist hotspot. Financially speaking, it’s a goldmine as well.”

I respected his honest answer.

The vehicle turned right, and immediately in front of us was a gorgeous little inn of three stories, painted in white with navy shutters. The calligraphy on the signage read “The Dockside Inn”, and I saw that we had arrived.

Ash stood outside on his cell phone, his brow knitted in annoyance. As soon as his eyes rested on us, he disconnected the call.

“Business never sleeps,” he grumbled at Oliver by the way of greeting.

“You’re preaching to the converted,” Oliver replied dryly, shaking the demon’s hand.

I still didn’t know what to make of Ash, but he hadn’t been rude to me, and truthfully, he wasn’t what I expected of a demon. Zeus was certainly way worse, in my opinion.

“Your room is ready,” Ash told us, gesturing for us to follow him into the lobby. “Zeus and Fabiana arrived hours ago, and frankly, I was expecting you earlier, too.”

I tensed at his tone.

“You were?” I quipped.

The demon didn’t slow his stride. “It makes no difference to me,” Ash added, throwing open the door leading to the stairwell. “It just means that you won’t have a day to settle in.”

“Wait, what?” I stopped in my tracks, forcing the males to do the same.

Ash gave Oliver a reproofing look.

“You didn’t go over the itinerary with her?”

“Of course I did,” Oliver answered. “We run the maze tomorrow, Dahlia.”

I paled. I’d hoped we’d have a full day to settle in.

“O-okay,” I sputtered, knowing that my objections would not change the schedule.

We continued up the stairs to the third floor, and Ash stopped in front of a set of double doors.

“Zeus and Fabiana are in the Presidential Suite,” he explained, pointing to the far end of the hall. “You two are in the Honeymoon.”

My heart felt funny, but I wisely gulped back my innermost thoughts, even when Oliver looked at me.

Ash produced a key card, and when the light flashed green, he pressed the device into Oliver’s hand. “Your bags are already inside. See you tomorrow at breakfast.”

He spun around without acknowledging me, disappearing down the stairwell again as Oliver pushed open the door. I hesitated at the threshold, drawing in a breath.

“Dammit,” Oliver muttered from inside the room. I already knew what he was going to say. “There’s only one bed.”

I stepped inside, allowing the door to close behind me, and took in the lovely, spacious suite. A small, modern sitting room sat where I stood, with a block couch and wing chair, facing a mounted television. To the right, a king-sized canopied bed took up half the space.

Our luggage lay at the foot of the bed on a decorative bench.

“No big deal,” Oliver added before I could speak. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Don’t be crazy,” I blurted out even before my brain processed the words. “No one can sleep on that thing.”

Oliver slowly turned and looked at me.

“Then I’ll sleep on the floor.”

Heat stained my cheeks scarlet, and I looked down, clearing my throat.

“It’s a king bed, Oliver. There’s plenty of room for both of us,” I insisted. “No one needs to sleep on the floor, and we both need as much rest as we can get.”

I lifted my chin and met his eyes.

“It’s not a big deal. I trust you.”

He appeared stunned by my confession.

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” he growled, spinning away toward the bathroom. “You don’t know the first damn thing about me.”



HE WAS in the bathroom so long that I eventually opened my bag and changed, not into one of the slinky teddies I had packed “just in case” but into a pair of silk pajamas. I slid under the plush duvet, and before I realized it, I had again fallen asleep, the comfort of the bed overtaking me.

Sometime later, movement in the bed stirred me awake. I gasped, temporarily forgetting where I was, but when my eyes opened, I found Oliver staring at me from the far side of the bed.

“You’re back,” I mumbled, turning to face him on my side.

His hand gently moved to brush a stray strand of hair out of my face, his touch doing exactly what it always did to me. Shivers caressed my body as I peered at him.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” he muttered, and I shook my head.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” I admitted.

“You should sleep.”

Our gazes locked, and his words didn't match his expression one bit. Sleep was the last thing on his mind.

I can't be sure who moved first, but weeks of built-up tension, the exhaustion, and the emotional toil finally took over, and we were in one another's arms, lips pressed together. A shock brushed through my mouth, rushing down my spine and through my soul, sparking back into Oliver. Gods, he tasted as good as he looked—not that it surprised me in the least. The anticipation of this moment, the need to have him in my arms, his breath heating my flushed cheeks—it made me so dizzy, I could barely keep it together.

He pulled back slightly, giving me a chance to change my mind, but there was no second guessing this. I wanted this, him, and I had probably from the first moment I'd seen him—whether I realized it or not.

This time, it was me who pressed my mouth to his, my tongue jutting out to sample the ridge of his teeth. A soft sigh escaped him, the weight of his upper body pressing me down against the softness of the mattress as he straddled me. My breath caught, his hands pinning mine over my head.

Unlike Bianca, I had much less experience with men. My sister had always been the more adventurous one, while I had been happy to live vicariously through her, but in this moment, I channeled her daring, willing it out. I needed her secrets, even as Oliver took the lead.

His hot lips fell over my chin, locking onto the curve of my throat. Moaning softly, I arched upward, urging him to find all my hidden spots, his breaths firing with more heat, more urgency.

Teeth ripped at the buttons of my pajamas, the plastic popping to the hardwood, exposing my naked breasts beneath. Instincts overtook my sensibilities, and my inherent primal gauges kicked in. The pull of my teeth coaxed a low growl from inside me, Oliver latching to the left breast, nuzzling against the rippled skin with a groan, inhaling my scent like he was trying to commit it to memory. I stared at him, watching

his eyes blacken, the nictitating membrane overtaking his pupils.

The whole thing was surreal, rendering me there but not there, my thoughts jumbled and conflicted.

Was this wrong? Wasn't he still my boss? Was this smart on the eve of the competition?

All those stupid questions bubbled to my mind in a tsunami, and as they did, Oliver tensed, lifting his head like he could hear them.

Did I just say them out loud?

I was sure I hadn't, and yet the look on his face was just like I had.

He withdrew as abruptly as our connection had begun, rolling off me to his side of the bed.

With his back to me, he muttered, "We really should get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day."

I lay, frozen and humiliated for a moment, breasts exposed as I gaped at him.

What had just happened there?

"Oliver, I—"

"Good night, Dahlia."

His tone left no room for conversation, and I swallowed the lump of shame in my throat as I closed the front of my shirt, yanking the covers back over my body. I didn't want to feel used, but that was exactly how I felt, even though I understood logically that this was for the best.

"Good night," I rasped, also turning my back, sliding myself to the very edge of the king bed.

Nothing good could come of this, anyway. There was no point in starting something we couldn't finish.

CHAPTER 21

OLIVER

I hated myself for letting things get that far. I had promised not to touch her and gone back on that the very first chance we'd been alone. I had no resolve, no self-control. Dahlia deserved better than that after all she'd endured.

I wouldn't allow it to happen again. I cared about her too much to see her hurt more than she already was.

Am I in love with her?

The question surfaced in my mind more than once throughout that sleepless night. For all my talk of sleep with Dahlia, I didn't follow my own advice well. I was just as tired as she was, and while she eventually drifted back off into a fitful slumber, I remained awake all night, watching her chest rise and fall, marveling over her beauty.

I had an inherent need to keep her safe, to vindicate and protect her. Even now, in the darkness, I wanted to sweep her in my arms and squirrel her away back to my yacht, forsaking this whole competition.

But we couldn't. There would be repercussions for that kind of action.

Dawn eventually broke through the majestic horizon of Jasnica Island, and I reluctantly roused Dahlia from her sleep. This time, she didn't look so startled to see me. She was getting used to seeing me when she woke up, and that gave me more pleasure than it should have.

I couldn't help but remember her desire to leave Montshire when the competition was over. Would she still feel that way if

she believed we were mates? Or would that make her run farther and faster, seeing as she always wanted to be her own person?

“We have to meet the others for breakfast before heading to the maze,” I reminded her.

She nodded, rubbing her chocolate eyes tiredly.

“Do I have time for a quick shower?”

I nodded, and she threw the duvet back, her ripped shirt falling away to show off those luscious, ripe breasts I could still taste on my tongue. Embarrassed, she covered herself and hurried into the bathroom, closing the door as I dressed in a pair of jeans and a blue t-shirt. A honey-scented breeze floated in through the balcony doors where I stood when Dahlia found me a few minutes later.

“I’m ready,” she informed me curtly. She was still upset about the previous night, and I wracked my brain for the appropriate thing to say but came up blank.

“Let’s go then.”

“Do I need to bring anything?” she asked worriedly, lingering in the sitting room, looking around blankly. “I mean... what will I need in the maze?”

“I have no idea,” I answered honestly. “Bring your wits. I have a knife. We’ll be fine.”

I flashed her a smile, but she didn’t return it, and I stifled a sigh. It was going to be a rough day.

Ash was in the dining room, but Fabiana and Zeus hadn’t arrived yet when we got there. He checked his gold watch when we sat down and rolled his eyes.

“I guess you’ll get a head start then,” he mused, unperturbed by their lateness. “It’s not my fault they can’t follow simple instructions.”

“We’re here!” Fabiana called out from across the dining room, attracting attention from all the other tables as she sashayed across the floor in a tight skirt and low-cut blouse.

Ash guffawed but covered his mouth with his hand as Zeus entered behind her, wearing a suit.

I caught Dahlia's confused look when the couple joined us.

"Did you order already?" Fabiana asked, flashing us a warm smile. "I'm starving!"

"No, we just got here, too," I replied, my eyebrows at my hairline.

What did they think was going to happen in the maze? A cocktail party?

Fabiana patted Dahlia's hand across the table.

"I was hoping you would come earlier last night! We were so looking forward to spending some time with you."

"After I win the island, you can invite your little friend here any time you want, honey," Zeus purred.

I laughed loudly.

"Right," I snorted. "And you think you're going to win the island in four-thousand-dollar shoes, do you?"

"Okay, let's cut the animosity," Ash interjected with a scowl. "I haven't even had an espresso yet."

"Zeus is going to need more than an espresso to get through the challenge in those shoes," I retorted, but I rolled my eyes and settled back to set my gaze on Dahlia, who seemed entranced by Fabiana's dress.

Her rosebud mouth parted in question, but no words came out. She met my glance, shaking her head, dumbfounded.

"Let them squabble," Fabiana said sweetly, winking at Dahlia. "You and I can still be friends."

I wondered if Fabiana was truly as clueless as she let on, or if it was all an act. I wasn't sure which one was really worse. I found it difficult to believe that she could be married to someone as cruel as Zeus without some sense of his capabilities, but everything about her reeked of the same innocence that Dahlia seemed to bear in some ways.

Fabiana isn't my problem. My only concern is Dahlia and winning my island.

“I’d rather skip breakfast and get right to the maze,” Zeus declared, sitting back to fold his hands cockily over his chest, like he’d already swallowed a canary. “I’ll eat when I’ve won.”

I snorted, but Ash dissuaded him of that idea.

“You can be an idiot if you want,” he agreed. “And gaging by your outfit choice, you’re already going in drowning, but if you want to lower your chances more, have at it. We’re still going to eat.”

With that, he signaled the nearest server and ignored Zeus’ petulant look.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” the demon complained.

“We’re going through a maze, you moron,” I barked back. “What do you think is going to be in there? A hopscotch?”

Fabiana paled slightly and looked at her outfit before turning her attention to her husband.

“You said this would be fine.”

“We’ll go change after we eat,” Zeus muttered, abashed by Ash’s lecture.

I choked back a grin and fixated on the menu. Ash fired off his coffee order as Dahlia did the same. I ordered a cup for myself and tuned out the competition as I shared a quick glance with my companion. Her nervousness was palpable, her thoughts transparent.

“You’ll enter at opposite ends of the maze,” Ash told us, drawing our eyes to him when the server departed. “I’ve arranged it that way.”

I grimaced but made no comment. It was smart. It ensured that neither one of us could sabotage the other going through. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Zeus’ face fall.

“That’s not fair,” he grumbled. “We won’t have the same course.”

Ash offered him a deadpan look.

“Of course you will,” he snapped. “Just in reverse.”

Zeus clamped his lips together and looked at his wife, who hung off Ash’s every word.

“You’ll face the same obstacles, the same layout, but going the opposite way. It should take you all day if you do it properly.”

“And if we don’t?” Dahlia asked.

Ash eyed her, a small sneer displaying his brilliant white teeth.

“If you take any longer, you’ll probably be dead,” he replied flatly.

I bristled, but he went on.

“Once you’ve made your way out of the maze—”

“If you make your way out,” Zeus chortled.

“Shh, Zooey!” Fabiana chided him. He snorted, but shut his trap.

“Once you’ve made your way out of the maze,” Ash began again, glaring at Zeus, “we will regroup here for scoring.”

“Scoring?” Dahlia repeated. “What does that mean?”

I cocked my head to the side, equally curious by Ash’s newfound grin. Oh, I wasn’t sure I liked the look of that.

“You’ll be scored according to your performance within the maze,” he told her.

The server returned with the tray of drinks, but when Dahlia’s drink was set before her, she didn’t touch it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I have a terrible feeling about this,” she whispered back, her chocolate eyes darting around the table. “This maze... it’s not just a maze, is it?”

I had no answer for her.

“I guess we’ll see,” I offered brightly. “Together.”

She met my eyes, and I read the need for reassurance.

“Get a room,” Zeus barked, shattering the moment between us. “Some of us are trying to eat.”

Dahlia’s face hardened, and she shot the demon a furious look before turning back to me.

“It’s still not too late to get out of this,” I told her, my voice low enough that only she could hear. “We could get up and go back to my boat right now.”

“No,” she growled, stealing another angry look at Zeus. “Let’s do this.”

Pride and arousal spiked through me at her passion. As afraid as she was, Dahlia’s fury reigned hot and strong.

I would keep her safe.

But first, I needed my coffee.



I’D BEEN to this part of the island dozens, if not hundreds, of times before, but never had I seen it like this.

“How did you even manage this?” I asked in awe, eyeing the magnificent labyrinth that Ash had concocted.

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” he replied lightly.

I watched for his smile to indicate he was joking. The smile never came.

We stood at the entrance, peering through the empty corridor. I could already smell the danger lurking beyond.

“You remember the rules, right?” Ash asked again. “You cannot fly out of the maze. You may shift, but you can’t fly away.”

“Can we run in form?” Dahlia asked.

“You can do anything else in your animal forms, but he can’t fly away. You must complete the maze on foot. If he flies, even from one corridor to another, you will forfeit this competition. Do you understand?”

We both nodded.

“I won’t need to fly,” I told Dahlia. “We’ll be in and through in no time.”

Ash snorted in a way that told me I was dreaming, but I didn’t let Dahlia dwell on it.

“Come on,” I told her. “Let’s get through this. Those two are probably still going through their closets, trying to figure out what to wear.”

Dahlia inhaled deeply and nodded, casting Ash a quick glance over her shoulder before wandering after me into the morning sunlight and deep into the maze beyond.

CHAPTER 22

DAHLIA

I lagged behind Oliver by a few steps, but I could tell he was waiting for me, despite the fact that clear danger was in the air. I sensed it even before we walked into the maze, my wolf instincts kicking into high gear. What was waiting for us inside? What had Ash planned?

“We just need to keep a steady pace—”

Abruptly, winged creatures flew between us, throwing me back from Oliver as a gash appeared on my arm.

“Bats!” I choked, my heart in my throat.

Oliver chuckled mirthlessly as the animals flew away harmlessly but for the minor cuts on my skin.

“I guess they’re allowed to fly away,” he remarked dryly. I wasn’t amused, my shoulders almost at my ears. “Are you hurt?”

His eyes darkened when he saw the spots of blood on me, but I pulled away, hiding the small flesh wounds from him.

“It’s fine. Let’s get this over with.”

He stayed closer now, the chirp of nearby birds contrasting with the heaviness in my soul. Something lurked beyond my eye view, and my lack of navigational sense unnerved me.

“Dead end,” Oliver declared, turning a corner. “We need to backtrack.”

We stepped back the way we’d come, but when we re-entered the corridor, something felt different.

“This isn’t the way we came,” I muttered just as Oliver spun around.

Suddenly, he leapt up, his weight crushing down onto me, taking me to the ground.

“What the hell?!” I gasped, but the words died on my lips as the branch of a tree fell from nowhere, crashing toward our heads and landing inches from our faces. I gasped, tremors rocking through my body.

“Is Ash trying to kill us?” I demanded, barely catching my breath.

“No, of course not,” Oliver replied. “He’s testing our reflexes.”

And he can’t kill you, anyway, I added silently.

Not for the first time, I considered that maybe Ash was just trying to get me out of the picture. He didn’t seem to care for me—or any other mortal. Maybe this was just his way of ensuring that there were fewer of us around.

I rushed to keep up with Oliver, my head swiveling in all directions.

“Where’s the sun?” I demanded, realizing that the rays were weakening already. “It’s morning, and the skyline looks like late afternoon.”

“It’s sorcery,” Oliver guessed, stopping in place, his face twisting as he looked behind him. “Weren’t we just here?”

Goosebumps broke out over my arms, a blast of icy air snaking down my spine.

“A cold snap,” Oliver growled. “He thought of everything.”

“What?” I rasped. “What does that mean?”

My teeth chattered as the temperatures turned frigid in less than ten seconds. Snow swirled from the sky, and I gaped at the gray storm clouds closing in.

“W-what’s going on?”

“Wait here a second,” he told me, moving to the left. “I want to check on something—”

“No!” I cried out, stopping him. “You can’t leave me here!”

Oliver smiled patiently. “I’m not going anywhere,” he promised. “I just want to look around that corner.”

He pointed to exactly where he stood. “You’ll see me the whole time.”

I headed toward him as he stepped around the corner—and disappeared completely from sight.

“Oliver?”

Silence met my call, and dread flooded my stomach.

“OLIVER!”

Whispers flooded my ears, the noise increasing as I stood, paralyzed in fear. The incessant batting of wings washed over me, and I realized too late what it was until the colony overtook me, this time flocking me to peck at my skin with their fangs.

“OLIVER!” I cried out again, anguish overtaking my terror.

Where had he gone? He had just been in my sight! What kind of place was this maze?

My instincts kicked in, and my body shifted by rote, my inner wolf unhinging. Gnashing my own teeth, I fended off the bats, who shrieked angrily but flew away again, leaving me in complete darkness now.

It was impossible. It had been morning half an hour ago.

Or had it been? My sense of time was as skewed as the twisted maze aisles.

“Oliver?” I tried again, but even as his name left my lips now, I could sense that he was gone. The labyrinth had claimed him.

I was on my own.



FOR SEVERAL MINUTES, I remained exactly where I was, too afraid to take a step lest I get swallowed up by the black hole that had taken Oliver. He hadn't been concerned about Ash, but I didn't believe for a second that the demon in charge was a friend of anyone's.

I can't just stand here all night... or day... or whatever this is.

But a part of me wanted to do just that, to wait and see if Oliver would come back for me. Surely, he would look the second he realized I wasn't with him. He had promised not to let anything happen to me.

Yet the longer I remained in place, the deeper the sense of apprehension grew on me, the sense that eyes followed my every move. I had to keep moving.

Tentatively, I took a step but instantly backtracked, remembering that was exactly where Oliver had gone when he had vanished. I didn't want to suffer the same fate—assuming that this wasn't all some trick of smoke and mirrors to begin with.

Slowly, I backed away, trying to retrace my steps to the start of the maze, but every footfall brought me somewhere else. I recognized nothing, although whether that was because of the darkness or because I genuinely had no idea where I was, I couldn't say.

Dizziness threatened to consume me, but I forced myself to keep my focus, eyes trained straight ahead, preparing for any sudden surprises. There were more coming. I felt it in my bones, even if I couldn't see anything, even with my night vision.

Then, as quickly as the night had fallen, the birdsong returned, and the icy cold melted away to the tropical breeze of Jasnia Island again. I had exited whatever zone I'd entered and found myself back in surer territory.

The sun's positioning told me that several real hours had passed between the time we'd started the maze and when I'd lost Oliver to find myself wherever I was. Here, the corridors were wider, but sand seeped along the cracks of the golden walls whereas grass had led our earlier journey. I raised my nose toward the sky, smelling for the sea, but as I did, a low growl garnered my attention. Whirling, I screamed, my gut twisting at the sight before me.

This isn't real. This is just a product of Ash's imagination, I tried to convince myself.

But the rancid smell of rot and silver glint of razor-teeth on a hideous, half-formed face seemed awfully tangible in that moment.

The beast lunged at me, its lumbering body at least three feet on my five-foot-four inches. I barely managed to dodge it, its claws scraping into the partition behind me and toppling the solid wall down.

The amount of brute strength required for such an action boggled my mind, but I didn't have time to think about it. Rolling away again, I morphed, paws extending to run as the creature gave chase. It was nothing I'd ever seen before, and I was sure it had been specially created just to kill me.

But I wouldn't give it the satisfaction.

Roaring in anger, the beast turned, its movements laborious as its sheer mass gave it no grace with which to work. It was my only advantage against its brute strength and undefined rage.

I bounced back, my tongue lolling out as I scanned the thing for a point of weakness. There had to be some way of taking it down, but I couldn't see how while it charged. Claws swiped at me again, this attack narrowly escaping me, and the creature caught a fistful of my fur.

Yelping, I drew back onto my haunches, baring my teeth, searching my mind for all those hours of training I'd done with Oliver. My mind was blank, but my body moved by rote. I

avoided another lunge, my fangs extending more, and I leapt toward the monster instead of back, surprising it.

The heel of its hooved foot was in my mouth, and I clenched down with all my might, silently praying that its physiology was the same as most living creatures, even if it didn't resemble any that I knew.

A scream of anguish ricocheted through the skies, a fluttering of bird wings nearby telling me that the howl had alarmed the wildlife. Warm blood flooded my mouth, but this time, I couldn't avoid the smack that fell from the beast's claw.

I was sent flying ten feet back—and into another corridor.

Trembling but alive, I bounced back up, whipping my sleek, furry neck around to look for my next attack, but the beast didn't materialize. Panting and on guard, I padded back toward it, ready to flee or fight—depending on its condition.

But when I turned the corner, I found the creature crumpled to the ground, groaning in pain, blood pouring from the deep wound I'd inflicted on its ankle. It was bleeding out and unable to stand.

I kept my distance, watching it die, a fusion of sheer terror and relief overtaking me in tandem, coupled with an element of shame. I didn't want to kill. That wasn't me. But this had been self-defense, and this thing, it wasn't real. Was it?

The creature released one final moan of agony and closed its hideous eyes for the last time. Only then did I allow myself to exhale the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding since this entire affair had begun. And a sob fell from my lupine mouth, but tears didn't roll from my eyes. Still, I stayed in my wolf form long after I was sure the varmint was gone, padding away from the disturbing form back into the afternoon sun and into the conflicting maze that I was sure I would never escape.

Evening would be on me soon, and then night. I needed to find a way out or risk being stuck in here forever. Who knew how many more of these monsters lurked along the walls of the labyrinth?

Sniffing, I rounded yet another corner and stopped dead in my tracks as a figure loomed before me.

My jaw slacked, exposing my sharp wolf fangs, claws curling into the sand as I readied myself to pounce.

“Dahlia!” Oliver cried, rushing toward me. “Is that you?”

CHAPTER 23

OLIVER

The sight of Dahlia's gray-white fur covered in red streaks made my heart stop, and I sprung toward her, arms outstretched as she ambled unsteadily toward me. As she moved, she shifted back into her human form, her huge eyes larger than I'd ever seen them.

"What happened to you?" Dahlia cried, falling naked into my arms.

I couldn't find my voice for a moment, the relief I felt at seeing her overwhelming everything else inside me. I had truly and genuinely believed she was gone, those hours we were separated the longest of my life.

Truthfully, I had no idea how to explain what had occurred. One moment, I'd been there, and the next, I was in a separate corridor, nowhere near anything I recognized. I wasn't even sure I was still on Jasnica Island; the smells and sounds differed completely from the place I had known for centuries. Several times when I was lost in the thickening maze, trees reaching out their gnarly branches to grab at me with lifelike properties, I'd been tempted to forsake the rules of the game and fly the hell out of there.

But something logical had held me in place.

Ash was a friend. He wouldn't endanger me, not really. This was purely psychological, and I could withstand it—if I wanted to win.

However, not knowing where Dahlia had gone brought me to the brink.

Until now.

Her nude form shook in my arms, and I pulled her toward me, eager to settle her in any way possible, but she couldn't be calmed.

"You're all right," I told her, drawing her against me, clinging to her tightly. Her whimpers wouldn't stop, her hysteria peaking. My fingers trailed over the hot, prickled flesh of her skin, drawing my mouth to hers and stealing her quivering breaths, desperate to ease her suffering.

You're okay, Little Flower, I told her silently, wrapping my hands through her tangled tresses. I wanted to suck all her panic away and cast it from her forever, my kiss growing more urgent as I tried to do exactly that. After a long moment, her pulse slowed, and she finally calmed down, pulling back to look at me. She was far from calm, but she was more coherent than before, her dark eyes blinking and teary.

"Where did you go?" she mewled again, falling back and shivering slightly to fold her arms over her chest. My eyes raked over her perfect, naked figure, the conflict of desire and concern rushing through me to confuse and arouse me in tandem.

She folded her legs to hide the perfect triangle between her perfectly crafted thighs. Desire for her was overpowered by my concern. I slipped out of my t-shirt and handed it to her, permitting her to hastily dress before answering. The thing was a dress on her slender form, falling halfway down her legs to hide her nudity, but it left nothing to the imagination. I knew exactly what sat beneath it.

"I don't know where I was," I admitted. "I was there, and then I was gone. Why are you covered in blood?"

"Why are you?" she fired back.

I looked down at myself and realized she was right.

"Those damned bats kept coming for me," I muttered, glancing back at the darkening sky as if I expected yet another round of them to come for me. Although I would probably

heal just fine from a bout of rabies, I didn't really want to endure the illness in the first place.

"There are awful things out here," Dahlia moaned. "There was this creature, this terrible beast..."

She drew in a shuddering breath, and I yanked her toward me, keeping her close to my side.

"It's okay," I reassured her. "You're safe now. There's no beast here."

"I killed it," she moaned sadly. "I've never killed anything before."

The anguish in her voice made me love her more than ever. For all the training we had done, all the combat and weapons handling, she had never thought she would have to use them.

"You'll never have to again," I promised her. "I won't let you go."

A rustling behind us forced us both to whirl, and suddenly, we were surrounded by thousands of teeth-gnashing rodents.

"What the hell are those?" Dahlia squeaked.

I didn't have a chance to respond as the herd swarmed, biting with vermin-soaked fangs, red eyes glowing.

"Don't let them touch you!" I howled, transforming myself into my dragon body.

Dahlia yelped as my massive tail touched her, curling around her protectively, my wings protruding from the heavy scales of my back.

"You can't fly!" she warned me, but that wasn't my intention.

I unleashed a spray of fire upon the imposing rats, singeing each one of them to a burnt crisp until all that remained was a pile of ashy bones where they had just stood.

My head whipped back to check on Dahlia, but as I turned, the maze fell away around us.

"What the...?" Dahlia whispered.

We stood on a beach; twilight faded into pure darkness now. In the distance, I could see where my yacht was docked. I knew exactly where I was on the island.

“Congrats,” Ash called out, appearing through the blackness. “You made it out.”

He tossed a robe at me, and I allowed myself to shift back into my human form, shaking my head before draping the terrycloth over my body. “I figured you both would need some clothes by this point.”

He chuckled at Dahlia’s attire, but she didn’t return his smile.

“You really went all out, huh?” I grumbled, sliding my shoulders into the robe and cinching the waist. Ash snorted.

“You thought this was going to be a cakewalk?”

“I could have died!” Dahlia yelled indignantly. “What was that thing in there?”

“Which one?” he replied innocently. His dark eyes narrowed as they rested on her. “You knew the risks when you came. I made them perfectly clear.”

Anger spiked through me, and I found myself examining my long-time friend with distinctly different eyes suddenly.

“Was that your intention?” I hissed at Ash. “To harm Dahlia?”

“Dahlia and Fabiana are not Originals, Oliver, and therefore, are not immortal. I didn’t think I had to explain this to you,” he said, his tone vaguely condescending.

I bared my teeth and advanced on him, but Ash held his ground, his clear blue eyes even with mine.

“If the women are smart, they won’t get hurt,” Ash continued, shrugging in his nonchalant way. Enraged, I flew toward him, but Dahlia strategically placed herself between us.

“I-I just want to go back to the room.”

My fists curled at my sides, eyes narrowed, and Ash looked away, a flash of guilt coloring his face fleetingly.

“So, we’re done?” I asked through clenched teeth. “Can we go back to our room?”

“Sure,” he said brightly. “I still have to wait for the Wonder Twins.”

Hope rushed through me as I glanced at Dahlia, but she didn’t seem to understand the implication of his words.

“Zeus and Fabiana aren’t out?”

“Not yet.”

“Can we go?” Dahlia demanded, heading up the beach. She didn’t wait for a response.

I followed after her, Ash on our trail. We made our way through the stair path toward the main road, with him offering amusing quips, but neither me nor Dahlia were in the mood.

When we arrived back at the hotel, however, Ash’s face brightened.

“Ah. They’re out,” he declared, disappearing in front of us.

“I hate it when he does that,” I muttered. “Come on.”

We barely took two steps when both demons reappeared in the lobby with Fabiana, the couple screaming at one another.

“I told you we went the wrong way, from the start!” Fabiana barked at her husband. “But you just can’t listen to a female, can you?”

“I can’t listen to your shrill tone for another minute!” Zeus fired back. The words died on his lips when he saw us, a wry but weak smile forming on his lips.

“Oh. I’m surprised to see you two made it out.”

“We made it out first,” I replied shortly. “Come on, Dahlia. The smell is getting unbearable down here.”

“That’s because Zeus got into a fight with a Yara-ma-yha-who, and it spat up all over him,” Fabiana declared.

“It wasn’t a fight,” Zeus snapped. “I killed it.”

“You barely wounded it,” Fabiana hissed. “*I* killed it.”

I couldn't listen to those two going on anymore, and I led Dahlia toward the staircase, far away from the squabbles of the married couple.

"We'll see you for dinner?" Fabiana cried out after us, but I had already forgotten about Zeus and her.

My eyes were fixated on the flex of Dahlia's calf muscles as she hurried up the stairs, her ass cheeks peeking out from beneath my t-shirt.

We would definitely not be down for dinner.

CHAPTER 24

DAHLIA

Exhausted but elated, relieved but concerned, exhilarated but terrified, I was grateful for the sanctuary of the Honeymoon Suite.

I moved toward the bed to sit down, but I instantly reconsidered when I caught sight of my reflection in the full-length mirror by the dresser. I was covered in muck and blood, my blonde tresses a tangled mop. I didn't want to sully the freshly laid linens with my filth.

"We need to shower," I breathed, straightening my body.

"Go," Oliver told me.

I shook my head, noting that he was in just as rough a shape as me.

"I can wait. You go first."

He shook his head and advanced on me, snaking his arm around my waist.

"You don't get it. I'm going with you."

His mouth fell to mine again, and despite half-expecting it, the kiss still knocked the wind out of me. His effect was unlike anything I'd ever known in any capacity.

Bodies pressed together, the flimsy material of his shirt and the hotel robe left nothing to the imagination. I could feel every line and vibration of his lean but muscled form. He towered over me, but his lips didn't break from mine once as we danced toward the bathroom, choreographed like we'd

practiced this before. Maybe we had—I knew I’d had these thoughts over and over again.

We made it into the bathroom, and Oliver released my lips for half a second, just long enough to get the water going before finding my mouth again, his hands snaking up to lift the shirt away from my body. I pushed harder against him, relishing the heat that burst through his groin, the incredible hardness both alarming and arousing me. He was so big, so unlike anything I was prepared to take. And yet I was so ready to take it all. I felt both powerful and defenseless, pinned against the wall of the bathroom, steam forming around us as his robe fell away, revealing that naked form I’d pictured far too many times for a virgin girl.

“Get in,” he growled at me, slapping my ass firmly but gently as he opened the glass doors of the shower. The motion sent a gush of heat through me, the water comingling with my own wetness.

He stepped in behind me, securing the door, but as I turned, he held me in place, cupping my breast, his scruff rubbing against the base of my neck, sending gooseflesh from head to toe. Panting softly, I craned my neck back, allowing him freer rein on my nipples, my hands sliding over his to guide him, one hand over the curve of my chest, the other slipping lower against the flatness of my stomach. A low moan escaped my lips. I knew what was coming. His tongue lashed out to capture my earlobe, teeth nibbling gently. My knees buckled, and his finger trailed into the cleft between my legs. The other hand firmed around my breast, the waterfall cascading around us to wash away the horrors of the day and create a fresh, new experience that would make it all worthwhile.

“You’re wet,” he rasped at me.

I tittered breathlessly. “How can you tell?” I teased.

He pried me open more, and I moaned.

“I can tell.”

He wasn’t wrong.

He wedged me deeper against the shower, my hips flush with the marble wall, the coolness of the tile delicious, one hand massaging my breast, the other teasing the slippery button at my core.

“Fuck,” I mumbled, and his head jerked back, amusement coloring Oliver’s eyes through my peripheral vision.

“Why, I do believe that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you cuss, Miss Barrett,” he rasped, dipping deeper into me.

I cried out softly, closing my eyes. In and out, he worked me with his index finger slowly until I felt like I couldn’t hold myself up without his help. I was dizzy and floating, heady.

Instinctively, my arms reached out to splay against the wall, and he took the opportunity to spread me wider, his shaft propped neatly between my butt cheeks. It was all so slick, and it would be so easy to replace his fingers with his rock-hard rod.

But was I ready for him?

We fell into a slow, intoxicating rhythm, his mouth exploring my neck and shoulder as his hands grew wetter with each jab of his finger.

“Oh, gods,” I moaned, unable to take any more. “I can’t...”

“Then don’t,” Oliver instructed me. “Let it out, Little Flower. Let it all out.”

I did exactly what he suggested, allowing myself to let go, his even, skilled movements coaxing me through. As he explored every crevice of my core, I closed my eyes, losing myself in the sensation, the electric shocks tingling up and down my nerves to fill every part of my body.

“There it is, Little Flower,” he murmured. “I feel you letting go. Give it to me.”

I moaned, my legs tightening, and my back arching as my insides tensed. My first orgasm was beginning, but it wouldn’t be my last that night.

Rush upon rush sent spasms through my body, whimpers escaping me, and when Oliver added his middle finger, I almost fully collapsed.

“I’ve got you,” he said. “Let go.”

I swiveled my head around to stare at him, my eyes wide with desire. “Please...”

“What, Little Flower? What do you want?”

He was teasing me, making me beg for it, but I wasn’t too proud, not now, not in this heat, at this point.

“Take me,” I pleaded. “I need you inside me.”

He raised his head and grinned, pure elation lighting his face at my unadulterated confession.

“Of course, Little Flower,” Oliver growled. “I’ll do anything you like.”

I thought I was going to climax again, the way his fingers continued to fill me, long and deep, but it wasn’t the same as it had been before. He had agreed to do what I asked, but that didn’t slow his actions. He wanted me to keep coming, to keep releasing, but I needed him inside me, his hot breath against my skin.

I tried to wriggle myself out of his pinioned stance, though truth be told, I wasn’t making much of an effort. I was enjoying every second of what he was giving me. Oliver had much more experience in the pleasure department than I could ever hope to gain.

Still, I tried again.

“Please,” I moaned. “I need you—”

My sentence did not get finished. He spun me around, my arms falling from the slippery shower walls to my side as I gasped. Suddenly, my body was pinned up against the wall, leg raised to sit around his waist, and I inhaled expectantly.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, genuinely.

He wasn’t taunting me. He was giving me a chance to change my mind, to backtrack and scurry out of the shower

and into my virginal hole.

I threw my head back, wet hair plastered to my face as I met his eyes.

“More than anything I’ve ever wanted,” I confessed.

Light flooded his eyes, and with a smooth, slippery thrust, he pushed into me, and I yelped once, the sensation painful. Immediately, he stopped and withdrew, but I splayed my hands over him to keep him in place.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered. “Please.”

I turned my eyes on him imploringly, and he locked his gaze with mine, re-entering me. My fingertips dug into him deeply, my teeth gnawing into my lower lip, a deep breath filling my lungs as I prepared again for the jerk that would claim my virginity. The pressure tensed me at first, but Oliver’s skilled fingers found their way to my most sensitive areas, and the pleasure I sought was mine again.

I called out, digging my fingers into his neck, pulling him toward me as he filled me, my breath stolen for a moment.

“My Little Flower,” he groaned, passion igniting his words.

His hand tightened around my ass cheek, clenching me closer, and I clung to him as he dove into me. Heart pounding, I tried to turn and look at him, but his face was pressed to mine, his mouth against my ears.

In one fluid motion, he had filled me, and I cried out, my muscles contracting against him. Oliver groaned again at the feeling, my opening sucking him in deeper as my hands splayed across his rippled shoulders.

“Oh, you’re so fucking tight,” he hissed, pushing my back down to leverage my hips against his.

The fusion of pain and pleasure was daunting, the knowledge that this was the way it was meant to feel, and yet it felt so dangerously wrong.

Was it because he was Oliver Charles? My boss? The ruler of Montshire and an Original?

Or because I knew I had real, true feelings for him?

I shoved all the questions out of my head, the moment too intoxicating to pass up. He was everything I could have wanted for my first time, and I wouldn't ruin it with regret.

We melded together, a gasping chorus as he began to plunge into me, deliberately and deep, hard and strong. I found it difficult to breathe as his motions increased and I was filled with his massive cock, somehow wanting more. Every climax lasted longer than the last, every release a shock.

There would be nothing left of me at this rate. But I never wanted it to end.

Again, I pushed against him, my clitoris rubbing against his shaft as he slid in and out. *Just one more.*

"Just one more," Oliver whispered, and I pulled back to stare at him, amazed. This was the second time I felt like he had been reading my mind. "One more for me, Little Flower."

I would have given him ten if he'd asked.

CHAPTER 25

OLIVER

I could have made Dahlia come all night and would have if the water hadn't begun to turn cold in the shower. It was one of the problems with a remote island: the utilities just weren't the same as the big city.

But there would be more time in the bedroom after Dahlia and I were fed and relaxed.

"One more," I pleaded directly in her ear, eyes boring into her as I drew back, pushing deeply to rub my shaft against her.

A haze befell Dahlia's face, and she moaned as though she was possessed, her muscles clenching around me again. I dropped my mouth to hers, capturing her tongue in my teeth as she climaxed.

"There's my Little Flower," I murmured, thrusting harder, pushing my own release toward the surface. "Are you ready for me?"

"Oh, yes!" Dahlia gasped. "Please!"

I liked her begging, and it did more to me than I would tell her, but as the surge coursed through my body, I didn't fight it off this time, permitting the explosion that forced her eyes to pop.

"Holy gods!" Dahlia screamed as I shuddered, falling forward slightly.

She caught me, both hands securely around my waist as we collected ourselves for a moment, but the water turned from lukewarm to icy in a matter of moments.

It was time to get out now, ready or not.

I turned to shut off the valve of the shower, and Dahlia shivered as I opened the door. The steam had long ago dissipated in the heat of our passion, but the towel warmers kept the fluffy linens heated and comfortable.

I wrapped Dahlia tightly before making a skirt of my own and helping her out of the bathroom. I swallowed a grin as I saw how wobbly her legs were. She could barely hold herself up, but I wisely made no comment.

“Are you all right?” I asked, tucking her into the canopied bed.

She looked so small among the luxurious pillows and oversized mattress. She nodded, still bleary eyed.

“Yeah,” she answered, dazed. “I mean, it’s been quite a day, hasn’t it?”

I nodded and slipped into bed beside her.

“It has been,” I agreed. “Do you want to talk about what happened in the maze?”

She paled slightly, turning on her side to look at me passionately.

“I thought you were gone,” she declared, sadness filling her face. “I-I just couldn’t understand where you went. I thought the worst—”

I held up a hand and gently laid it on her cheek.

“I’m fine. You see? Nothing happened to me or you.”

Dahlia sighed. “Not for Ash’s lack of trying.”

I exhaled. “You’re wrong about Ash. He’s not trying to hurt anyone,” I promised. “I suppose it’s hard for you to see, but this maze, this competition, it’s all psychological. It’s not meant to actually harm you.”

Dahlia did not look remotely convinced.

“I don’t think you understand the damage that psychological scars can do,” she told me staunchly.

I instantly regretted my wording, remembering that her past had affected her deeply.

“You’re right. But this is going to be over in a couple of days, and then...”

I pursed my lips, realizing that I was again speaking out of turn. Who knew what Dahlia would want to do after that? Just because I had deflowered her didn’t mean that she would want to stay in Montshire. I had no right to make any assumptions based on what we’d just done, and I didn’t want her to think I was. Instead, I changed the subject.

“Have you spoken with your sister lately?”

She blinked, surprised by the question.

“No. Why? Should I?”

I shook my head. “No—yes... I’m not sure. I don’t know much about sibling relationships, least of all twins,” I replied dryly. “But I imagine they’re complex.”

Dahlia chuckled and flopped back on the pillows.

“They can be,” she agreed. “But it’s also incredible having someone who is closer to you than anyone else in the whole world.”

A strange, bittersweet feeling crossed through me.

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” I remarked.

She propped herself up on her hand and looked at me curiously.

“That’s sad. Aren’t you close to your parents?”

I thought of my mother and father.

“No closer than anyone else, I suppose.”

“You named your boat after your mother,” she reminded me. “You must have some closeness between you.”

I grinned at her, impressed that she had been paying attention.

“You listened.”

“I have two ears and one mouth for a reason, as my mom used to say,” Dahlia said dryly.

I settled back on my own pile of pillows and stared at the ceiling for a moment, considering the question.

“I loved her very much,” I admitted, surprising myself with the confession. “But I didn’t approve of her choices.”

“Her choices?”

“My father. He was a weak man who never provided well. She could have done much better for herself.”

“Ah.”

I glanced at Dahlia and saw her stifling a yawn. She stared at me in embarrassment.

“I’m not bored!” she protested before I could say anything, and I laughed.

“No. You’re exhausted, and you need to rest. We have that obstacle course tomorrow.”

She groaned lightly. “Don’t remind me. Caramine.”

“On that note, we should probably find something to eat before then,” I added, realizing that we hadn’t eaten a bite since breakfast. But when I looked back over at Dahlia, I saw she was struggling to keep her eyes open.

“Yes,” she murmured, her answer muffled. “That sounds like a good idea.”

This time, she was unable to smother the yawn, and she grinned dreamily at me as her lids fell closed. I stared at her for a long moment, fingers trailing toward her face to brush away a golden strand of hair from her long eyelashes.

“Sweet dreams, Little Flower,” I whispered. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

CHAPTER 26

DAHLIA

The sound of the door closing woke me from an otherwise dreamless sleep. My eyes popped open, and I instantly realized that Oliver wasn't at my side. Darkness fell around the whole room, indicating that it wasn't yet morning, but I couldn't understand why Oliver would be getting up and leaving the room otherwise.

Against my better judgement, I also rose, the towel that Oliver had wrapped me in so snugly falling to the floor to reveal my nudity in the moonlight dappling in from the balcony windows.

I found my luggage and located a simple white sundress, slipping it over my nude form without any underwear before padding toward the hallway in bare feet.

Maybe he just went to get ice.

Although ice for what, I couldn't say. We didn't have much in the room, and the mini fridge was cold enough. A small warning in my mind told me to go back to bed and wait for him to return, but I couldn't.

Creaking open the door, I peered into the soft lighting of the hallway. It was unsurprisingly silent.

Go back to the room!

I ignored the warning bells in my head, wandering forward as I looked for signs of where my companion had gone. Was that what he was now? My companion? My boyfriend?

I grimaced, wondering if I'd gotten enough sleep. Sex didn't make him anything. I wasn't stupid. I was old enough not to conflate emotions with desire. I wanted Oliver, and he had wanted me. We were both adults.

Then why was I chasing him through this hotel in the middle of the night like some jealous housewife?

"...luck, that's all. I hear she's an anomaly, a twin," a dauntingly familiar voice growled. "No shock that you ended up winning that one."

"Get over yourself, Zeus," Oliver shot back, and I stopped in my tracks. My heart pounded as I ducked back behind the wall, craning my neck out to see Oliver standing in front of the stairwell with Zeus. "You would have lost no matter who was with you. You're just not going to win the island."

The demon's eyes were clouded with fury, but he maintained his trademark smirk, baring his teeth.

"Then why don't you give me Dahlia, and you take Fabiana? If you're so convinced you'll win anyway," Zeus taunted.

"I wonder what Fabiana would have to say about you trading her in," Oliver snorted, folding his arms over his chest.

He was dressed in a pair of pajama bottoms and no shirt, an ice bucket in his arms. He had only been going out to get ice, after all, and clearly been blindsided by Zeus. I considered stepping forward and making my presence known, but something stopped me.

"I'm not trading my wife. I'm suggesting that you're cheating with that freak twin," Zeus replied. "Siblings are bad enough, but a twin? She's a mutant, Ollie. Clearly, she has special abilities."

Oliver's back was to me, but I saw his shoulders stiffen.

"You truly do have the worst case of sour grapes I've ever seen, my dear Zooey," he replied, starting to turn away, but Zeus stopped him.

“Oh! You have genuine feelings for this one!” he chortled. “You truly are a fool!”

Heat washed through my face, and my fingers tensed into a fist. I couldn't tell if Zeus honestly thought my sister and I were mutants or just trying to aggravate Oliver. Whichever was the case, I did not like this conversation one bit.

“You don't know what you're talking about, Zeus,” Oliver said coldly. My blood turned to ice chips. “The girl is just a means to an end.”

Suddenly, Zeus looked past Oliver and set his gaze directly on me, his grin widening to touch each ear.

He had seen me! He was doing this for my benefit!

“Really?” Zeus drawled. “You don't care about the girl at all?”

“Isn't that what I just said?”

“It's what you said, but I'm not sure I believe you. After all, you did set fire to my house.”

“Due to your lack of respect,” Oliver countered, adjusting the ice bucket. “She was my date, and you blatantly ignored that. You have no honor whatsoever.”

“Hmm. We'll see.”

I backed away, my chest tight and upset as I headed down the hall the way I'd come. I had no reason to be upset. Oliver and I had come here to get Jasnica Island, and for that, I'd be paid well. Everything else had been... a bonus.

But if I had no right to be upset, why was I?



I ENSURED that I was up and downstairs even before Oliver rolled out of bed. I heard him come back in after his discussion with Zeus but pretended to be asleep until he fixed himself a drink and eventually went back to bed himself.

At the first hint of dawn, I was up and gone, eager to put as much space and distance between us as possible over the next few days. We wouldn't be able to avoid one another during the competition, but I didn't have to make small talk with the guy pretending to be my friend, either.

Ash was already seated at the same spot he had been the previous day, stirring a coffee. He eyed me with a vaguely interested expression on his face when I appeared.

"Someone's eager to try the Caramine this morning," he joked.

I wasn't amused and sat at the breakfast table, unfolding a napkin into my lap. A moment later, Zeus appeared, causing Ash's eyebrows to rise again.

"Is this backwards day or something? Where are your better halves?"

"I think we are the better halves," Zeus purred, sliding into the seat next to me and sitting far too close for my liking.

I shied away from him and pretended to read the menu instead.

"There's something different about you today, Dahlia," he said sweetly, sniffing around me.

I smothered a shudder and looked at Ash, but he had found more interest in his cell phone than our conversation.

"Hmm, what could it be?"

"I don't know, Zeus. Maybe you forget what a showered person smells like," I retorted sharply, irked by his closeness.

"No, that's not it. You smell like..."

He snapped his fingers as if he had just had an epiphany.

"You smell like... hormones," he intoned loudly. I blushed beet red and looked around the quiet dining room before darting my eyes back toward the laminated sheet in my hand. "Yes, definitely raging hormones. I wonder why."

"Won't Fabiana wonder where you are?" I demanded, slapping the menu back onto the table.

“Won’t Oliver wonder where you are?” He laughed and shook his head. “Oh, no, that’s right. He doesn’t care as long as you help him win this little crown jewel on the sea, does he?”

My complexion waned, and I turned away, remembering their conversation. I swallowed, determined to ignore Zeus, but he could see he was getting under my skin.

“Don’t look so devastated, Dahlia. Oliver Charles isn’t the type to settle down—particularly not with a regular mortal shifter from the wrong side of the tracks.”

My teeth clenched beneath my lips, and I inhaled, determined not to show my bubbling upset.

“I mean, you can’t fault him for that,” Zeus went on in that smug, coy tone that made me uncharacteristically violent. “Why would anyone want to waste their time watching a beautiful flower wither and age and eventually die when they can live forever?”

I whipped my head around and smiled warmly.

“Does Fabiana know you feel this way?”

His smirk weaned.

“I’m sure she would be very interested in hearing your views on mortals and how we lose our beauty as we age. In fact, I think I might go discuss it with her right now. Maybe she and I can come up with a plan to keep all the males we know happy forever!”

My sarcasm and contempt almost fully dissipated his smile, but when he realized I wasn’t actually going to find his wife and rat him out, he grinned again.

“That’s the problem with mortals. You’re all so thin skinned, you know?”

“No. I don’t know,” I retorted, standing. “Excuse me. I need to use the washroom.”

I didn’t offer him a chance to reply and instead stalked out of the dining room toward the closest restroom, trembling on

the inside. For as despicable as he was, every word that Zeus had said was true. I had heard it out of Oliver's mouth myself.

Now I had to put on my big girl pants and accept the reality of the fact that I had given myself to a man who had been using me all along.

CHAPTER 27

OLIVER

Waking to find Dahlia gone was startling, at minimum. “Dahlia?” I called out, noticing the bathroom door was wide open.

She was clearly not in the room. I considered that she had tried to wake me or just let me sleep, thinking that I needed it, but I couldn’t shake the feeling from the second that I woke that there was trouble rising. Perhaps it had something to do with the conversation I’d had in the middle of the night with Zeus, the one that had caught me off guard and left an acrid taste in my mouth even in the pale light of morning.

Unable to sleep, I thought a drink would calm my nerves after the day we’d had and sought ice at three a.m., only to find the demon roaming the halls like he was on the prowl. Knowing Zeus, he’d probably been on his way back from the room of a prostitute he’d hired, right under his wife’s nose, but I didn’t ask. I didn’t care enough.

My only concern was finding Dahlia, completing that day’s challenge, and getting her back to our room and into my arms again.

I found her easily in the first place I looked outside the suite. To my annoyance, she sat next to Zeus, one spot from the end of the table, Ash at the head.

“Move,” I instructed Zeus, who was sandwiched between the two females and halfway through his breakfast. He barely looked up from his bacon strip.

“You snooze, you lose,” he taunted, not flinching.

Dahlia didn't even acknowledge me.

"Good morning," I offered, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

She stiffened under my embrace. Frowning, I backed up and reluctantly took the spot in front of her.

"You look well rested," Ash commented, dropping his elbows on the table and peering at me curiously.

"I am," I agreed and meant it.

For the first time in weeks, my body was at ease. My relaxed state was the result of what Dahlia and I had shared the previous night. I peeked across the table, hoping to steal a glance, but she kept her eyes trained on the plate in front of her. She still hadn't said a single word to me.

What is going on with her this morning? Is she regretting last night?

The thought pained me, but I didn't really have a chance to dwell on it.

"I trust everyone is prepared for today's challenge?" Ash asked.

I hadn't even had my coffee yet.

"I am," Dahlia said with a determination that lit fire in her eyes.

She looked at me for the first time since sitting down, and I was slightly stunned by the animus I read there.

She's irritated. Is she regretting last night? Maybe I shouldn't have touched her...

But that seemed unreasonable. She wasn't irrational. She was a fully functioning adult woman, in control of her body and choices. This was some school-age drama that didn't fit with the image of Dahlia that I knew. I would have a chance to get her alone in the obstacle course.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Ash said, smiling. He turned his attention toward me. "I took the liberty of ordering your breakfast."

No sooner had he spoken than the same server as yesterday appeared with a plate of sizzling bacon, fried eggs, and hash browns. My stomach growled at the sight of the food. I really was starving, and I dug in almost as soon as the plate touched the table.

It wasn't until I'd finished the whole thing that Ash cackled lightly and sat back, folding his hands over his chest.

"Perfect!" he declared. "Now that you've all eaten, let's get to it!"

"What are the rules?" Fabiana asked, sitting forward.

"Oh, I don't think they'll much matter," Ash snickered, watching us with too much interest. "Once the Caramine kicks in, you'll have to do everything in your power to keep control of yourselves."

"We haven't taken the Caramine," Zeus said, rolling his eyes.

"Sure you have," Ash replied gleefully. "I had the chef add it to your food."

Dahlia choked and sputtered at the declaration, but I was woefully unimpressed by his sneakiness. I should have foreseen him doing something like that, but I had been too distracted by Dahlia's behavior to pay close attention.

"You drugged us?" Fabiana cried, anger coloring her face for the first time since I'd known her.

She did not take well to the information, but Zeus put a hand on her arm to calm his wife.

"We had to take it, anyway," he reminded her. "It doesn't matter when."

"It does matter!" she cried, casting Ash a furious glare. "I didn't sign on for this."

"Neither of us did," Dahlia agreed tersely.

Ash rolled his eyes, unmoved by their annoyance.

"I suggest you get to the obstacle course before the drugs kick in. I wouldn't want to be trying to orient myself on

Caramine. It's not pleasant.”

“Yeah. I know,” Dahlia muttered, rising fast from the table. She barely looked at me and stalked toward the door, tossing her napkin onto the table as she did.

“Hey!” I called out after her. “Wait a second.”

I gave Ash a reproving look, and he grinned wickedly at me.

“Don't give me that look,” he said. “You knew this wouldn't be easy.”

“I'm not giving you any look. Where are we going?”

“The obstacle course is set up by the old Felted Forest.”

I inhaled deeply but swallowed my reservations. Ash really had thought of everything.

Instead of responding, I rushed to catch up with Dahlia, who was already outside in the warm sunlight, taking deep breaths.

“Is it hitting you already?” I asked worriedly.

She shook her head, avoiding my eyes.

“No. It won't work that fast. Where are we going?”

I nodded toward the far end of the island as Zeus and Fabiana trailed out behind us, the wolf female still ranting about Ash's nerve.

“How can you just sit there and let him get away with that?” Fabiana fumed at Zeus. “He drugged us!”

“Get over yourself,” he replied gruffly. “We have a competition to win. I'm not losing this island.”

I reached for Dahlia's hand, but she pulled away from me, marching forward even though she didn't know where she was going.

“What is going on with you?” I demanded, catching up to her as she headed away from the bickering couple. “Why did you leave so early this morning?”

“I thought you could use the extra sleep.” Her tone was tense, and she refused to look at me.

“I wanted to wake up with you,” I told her, catching her stride, but she didn’t slow down or acknowledge me in any way.

Something was definitely wrong, and no matter how much I tried to coax it out of her, her guard increased around her.

We got to the lip of the Felted Forest, and a wave of apprehension flooded through me. As well acquainted as I was with this island, I avoided this area like the plague when I was there.

“What is this place?” Dahlia asked, finally speaking to me directly as she stopped dead at the mouth of the entrance.

It was impossible not to feel the darkness that emanated from the interior, the unknown creatures who lurked inside best left untouched.

“The Felted Forest,” I explained. “It’s older than any other part of the island and can’t be developed upon.”

She eyed me warily.

“Are we doing this, or what?” Zeus demanded, striding up behind us.

Fabiana lagged back, sulking and annoyed, but he didn’t seem to notice. “You won’t make it out of this one first.”

Dahlia didn’t take well to the challenge and raced forward as I tried to stop and warn her about what lurked beyond. Zeus paused as she shot past, offering me an evil grin.

“The girl knows not what she does,” he snickered.

“Fuck off, Zeus,” I snarled, charging after Dahlia.

I found her by a massive boulder, staring at the course that Ash had taken special care to enable. I don’t know how he had managed to do it unscathed, but even looking at it, I wanted to turn back.

“What are we supposed to do?” she asked, fear creeping into her voice.

“Let’s just walk. There will be clues and challenges along the way, I’m sure,” I sighed, reaching for her hand.

Reluctantly, she allowed me to take it now, but I could tell she didn’t want me to hold it.

Through the wave of crested trees, we ventured, the gnarled branches reaching out to caress us, chittering voices reaching my ears and causing Dahlia to whip her own head around in alarm.

“What lives out here?” she asked, but I didn’t get a chance to answer the question before she started to sink beneath me.

Terror colored her face.

“Quicksand!” I breathed, trying to pull her back before her feet could be fully consumed by the slowly devouring ground.

“Stop!” Dahlia yelled, smacking me away, her own terror palpable. “The harder you fight it, the faster it takes you!”

I didn’t know where she’d learned that, but the moment we stopped struggling, the ground appeared more forgiving, and slowly, she pulled her legs back onto surer ground, and I yanked her fully off the quicksand. Panting, she shoved me away, her doe eyes growing larger, pupils dilating.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “You’re okay. You’re safe.”

She scoffed and stomped forward, leaving me gawking after her.

“Dahlia!”

She ignored me, heading onward until, abruptly, a root shot up from the floor of the forest, reeling her backward. Yelping, Dahlia cowered as the unexpected plant erupted from the ground to tower over her, but I was prepared for it and unhinged a breath of fire to burn it even before it was fully formed—or I fully shifted.

Joining Dahlia’s side, still in my human body, the offending ash smoldered around us as she whimpered.

“There are a lot of these unexpected surprises in this forest,” I explained. “You don’t need to worry.”

She ripped herself out of my hold and scowled at me.

“Stop saying that!” she barked, her cheeks ashen. “I have everything to worry about! You are the one who has nothing to worry about. I’m the one who can die! You have nothing to lose but this stupid fucking island!”

Alarmed and confused, I could only stare at her.

“I don’t give a shit about the island,” I told her honestly. “I only care about you, Dahlia.”

She scoffed, jumping to her feet to brush the dirt off her dress.

“You’re a terrible liar, Oliver.”

A fission of anger sparked through me. “Don’t call me a liar,” I growled. “I’ve never lied to you.”

She spun back toward me, her eyes stormy.

“You just lied to me now,” she snapped. “I heard you talking to Zeus last night in the hallway. I heard what you said to him.”

Understanding slapped me in the face. Suddenly, I fully realized why she was behaving the way she was. I moved toward her, but she threw up her arms defensively, glowering at the soft smile touching my lips.

“Am I a joke to you?” she hissed. “I’m glad.”

She started to move farther down the path, but I grabbed her arm, yanking her toward me. My eyes bored into hers, thumb propping her face toward mine.

“I had to tell him that, Little Flower. If Zeus thinks I care about you as much as I do, he’ll do everything in his power to destroy that. Can’t you see it? You’re bait to him.”

Her jaw slacked at my confession, face softening.

“The truth is that I love you, Dahlia. I’m overwhelmed with the feelings I have for you, and I can’t bear the idea of anything happening to you.”

She stared at me, and her breath caught as her eyes popped more. I could barely see the browns of her eyes anymore; her pupils were so dilated.

“You love me?” she breathed.

I waited for the moment of regret to follow my heartfelt proclamation, but it didn't. I meant every word I'd said to her, even if she didn't return the sentiment.

“Yes, Little Flower. I love you.”

Our noses brushed, and she exhaled, shoulders sagging with so much relief, I thought she might sob.

“I love you, too, Oliver,” she whispered, embracing me. She clung to my waist, and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her firmly against my body.

“Stopping for a sex break?” Zeus yelled from the bushes.

Dahlia untangled herself from me to cast the demon a scathing look, just as a wave of headiness struck my head. The Caramine was kicking in alongside the feeling of euphoria that accompanied Dahlia's words.

“Let's go beat that bastard,” Dahlia muttered, tugging on my hand.

I grinned, high as a cloud now.

“Yes, ma'am,” I said.

CHAPTER 28

DAHLIA

If not for the Caramine and the unexpected mishmash of unpredictable creatures, the obstacle course wouldn't have been so bad. But they were endless, the weird little gnomes, the plants that grew suddenly to wrap around our ankles and bite at my exposed skin.

It didn't help that the fae drugs were impairing our judgement, and despite the fact that Oliver knew the island and the forest, he was too high to fully figure out how to get us out without getting us lost. I was holding up much better than he was.

It took us four hours to complete the course, and this time, we did come out last, but I didn't care—and neither did Oliver, apparently.

“Let's go back to the room,” he told me the moment we stepped out of the forest.

He paid no mind to Zeus' taunting.

“Didn't get ahead on this one, did you, buddy?”

I also ignored Zeus, even when Fabiana tried to get my attention. My only focus was on Oliver and getting him alone in the room where I wanted to honestly and fully consummate our feelings for one another. If he meant what he'd said, if his feelings were true, this could change everything for us, and I wanted to see where it would go.

Between the Caramine and the intoxication of the moment, I hardly remembered getting back to the hotel. We encountered Ash at some moment, he and Oliver exchanging words about

dinner or the like, but I was fully fixated on Oliver's hands on mine, the nearness of his fingers to my crotch. I replayed the first time we'd been together over and over in my mind, hotness soaking my panties at the memory.

"Can we go?" I urged him, unable to stand in the lobby a second longer.

"Yes," Oliver answered, tugging on my hand.

Ash smirked at me, but I was already making my way to the stairwell and leading the way back toward the honeymoon suite.

The door didn't close behind us when I turned to Oliver, catching his mouth as he began to speak. Words were for later. Now, I needed something else from him. His eyes grew wider—he hadn't been expecting such a move—although how he could have missed my naked desire was beyond me.

However, the mere friction of our tongues meshing together was enough to silence whatever he had on his mind, and he pounced, pinning me down against the sofa. I landed on my back, the hem of my dirty dress falling over my hips.

My fingers twined through strands of his thick mane of hair, and his kiss grew gentler, although just as hot. There was no rush tonight. The competition was almost over, and we could enjoy one another properly for once. I intended to savor every minute to its fullest.

"I've been wanting this all day," Oliver whispered, and I smiled, wondering if he was again in my head.

This is what mates do, isn't it? Read each other's minds?

The thought made me gasp, but Oliver stole it with his kiss, silencing me from exploring the explosive thought that had just popped into my head. We were mates. It was the only explanation for everything that had happened, and I truly felt it now. I didn't know how I could have missed it before. I was willing to sacrifice everything for this man, this virtual stranger, because he wasn't a stranger at all. We were connected well beyond any sense of reason.

Goosebumps exploded over me, and I felt every line of his hard body against mine, our forms fitting together like we were once a part of the same form but had been broken apart into two separate entities.

Yes. This was how it was supposed to feel.

The stubble of his face against my skin only escalated the sensation of desire overwhelming me, overriding my common sense as his mouth worked over the curve of my throat.

“I want to be with you every moment, Little Flower,” Oliver mumbled, his words half muffled in the folds of my skin.

My hold tightened on him. The buttons of my dress popped away, revealing hard, taunt nipples, ready for Oliver’s tongue. Strong hands clutched at me, drawing us closer together, and my legs moved up along his hips to bring him nearer. A slow, deep moan filled the quaint little sitting room. Anyone passing in the hallway was sure to have heard me, but discretion was the least of my concerns at that moment.

I wanted everyone to know that Oliver was mine.

His face dropped along my flat stomach, fingers curling around the waist of my underwear, sweat and heat sticking them to me as he pulled them along the slender flesh of my thighs. I tensed then, nervous at what was to come. I had never experienced this before with anyone, and as much as I trusted Oliver, I still didn’t know what to expect.

“Shh, Little Flower. Just relax,” he rasped, splaying a hand over the center of my chest. “Just relax.”

Biting my lip, I stared down at him from my elbows, my heart racing, but I didn’t call out for him to stop. His nose moving farther down, his gleaming eyes peered up at me to lock on my gaze before raising his head.

“Are you okay?” His face gleamed with all of me.

A nod was the best I could manage in that situation, but it was all the response Oliver needed. His mouth found the cleft between my legs, and with a long, pointed lap, he delved into my core. The sensation shocked me at first, the stunning

newness taking me aback, but again, he applied pressure at the breastbone, easing me downward, and I relaxed against his sure skill set.

It was like he'd been there before, and my body jerked upward as his movements grew more intense. My legs locked in place around his ears, but that didn't slow him down in the least.

"Oh, gods!" I groaned.

His hand cupped around my naked ass, and I fell back onto the couch, unable to hold myself up any longer. My hand clutched at the soft cushions, seeking an anchor in the pleasure driving me up over my own head.

Harder Oliver's tongue moved, the strokes even but fast, his mouth closing around the nub of my center, and when his finger slid inside my soaked middle, I couldn't take any more. I remembered this all too well. It was the beginning.

I cried out, and he sighed, lapping at me like a hungry dog, tasting me like he would die if he didn't.

My body quivered, and I knew I needed him in me—that this time, I wanted to climax with him.

"Take me," I whimpered, but as I spoke, my eyes popped in shock.

Another swell rose in the pit of my abdomen, and I realized that I was going to come again.

Twice. In a row.

That had never happened to me in my life. Not even when I'd done it to myself. But I didn't fight it, and I succumbed fully to him, my nails almost cracking as my hands gripped the couch. I may have made holes in the fabric.

I locked my ankles around Oliver, and he moved back up my body, his weight crushing into me. His cock pressed against me, sliding up and down in the same overly sensitive spot that made me jump with the very movement.

Our mouths met again, my calves locking over his naked buttocks. Once more, I was the instigator, guiding him inside

me without a thought. I tried to cry out, the walls of my center closed around him. He was huge, dripping and ready for me, but was I ready for him? It seemed that I'd already managed to forget how big he was in such a short time.

“Are you ready, Dahlia?” he murmured before plunging into me, not waiting for me to respond.

He filled me, taking my breath fully away, our mouths still interlocking. His solid body fell into a deep, penetrating rhythm that I met easily, my slender frame bucking upward to meet him until I no longer jumped at his thrusts. I was just as slick as him, my core made for his cock, our bodies part of the same whole.

We locked together, lips, groins, hands, our passion reaching new heights. Oliver murmured to me, his words jumbled but the tone of his mellifluous voice bringing me further into the almost trance-like position I'd taken. He told me he loved me again, the high of the drug wearing off to make way for the elation of his feelings for me. I had never felt so good, so right.

I was in ecstasy, spilling over him as I came again and again, my pussy locking his cock into me. I could have kept him there forever if I'd been given a choice, forsaking the next day's challenge and all of Jasnica Island and everything else, if I could.

Oliver grunted, and impossibly, I felt him grow bigger, causing me to gasp, but when his sack slapped against me, tight and ready, I knew he was at the point of no return.

Streams filled me, almost burning me as he exploded. Oliver buried his face into my neck, sending yet another round of shivers through my body, and I thought I was going to lose myself in the sensory overload. I could still feel him spurting into me for what felt like hours, and I waited for the heady feeling to fade away.

But it never did. It stayed with me all night long.

CHAPTER 29

OLIVER

I didn't think I would sleep after the obstacle course challenge, but one of the effects of Caramine was fatigue, and both me and Dahlia crashed hard after our lovemaking. We both woke just before dawn on the morning of the final challenge at almost exactly the same time.

She eyed me from her pillow, and a small shadow crossed over her beautiful face in the gray darkness.

"Good morning," I whispered, reaching out to brush a strand of blonde hair from her cheek. "Did you sleep well?"

She nodded slowly. "You?"

I nodded, too, and inched closer to her, rubbing my naked leg against hers under the covers.

"What's wrong?"

"It's the final challenge today," she mumbled. "What do you think Ash has planned?"

That was a question no one in the world could answer—probably not even Ash himself.

"I can't even begin to imagine," I admitted. "But whatever it is, you can bet it'll be... interesting."

"And dangerous," she sighed. "Always dangerous, right?"

My bemused smirk faded, and I shook my head vehemently.

"No. No, I don't care what it is, Dahlia. If it puts you at risk, I'm going to forfeit the challenge and let Zeus have the

island.”

“No! You can’t—”

I pulled her into my arms before she could fight me on it.

“It’s not up for discussion,” I told her earnestly, stroking her hair tenderly. “You’ve already risked too much, and I won’t endanger you again, not for something as stupid and trivial as the island.”

Dahlia pulled back slightly to look at me.

“It’s not just about the island, though,” she protested. “It’s Zeus, it’s—”

“It’s not as important as you,” I interjected, silencing her protests with a long, deep kiss. I didn’t let go until I felt her release slightly in my arms, but her guard was still up. “I’m not endangering you again, for anything. No matter what it is, if it shows a hint of putting you in harm’s way, I’m out. That’s final.”

Her lips parted, but I shook my head.

“It’s not up for discussion, Dahlia. You’re too important to me. You’re my mate; can’t you see that?”

She drew in a sharp breath, long eyelashes batting nervously as she tried to look away.

“Don’t do that,” I pleaded. “Talk to me.”

She raised her head and met my eyes obediently. “I’m just a mortal,” she reminded me in a small voice. “You’ll never die, and I’ll eventually grow old and ugly—”

“You’ll never be ugly,” I corrected her, cupping her cheeks. “But this is more the reason that I can’t endanger you anymore. We need to spend the time we have together with one another. Enough of these stupid games for a worthless island.”

Her eyebrows shot up.

“It’s not exactly worthless,” she replied.

“Its value is nothing compared to you. You’re priceless.”

Our lips met again, and she sighed into me, the matter resolved, although I could tell that she didn't necessarily agree with my solution. But there would be no arguing this one. Yes, it would be a shame to let Zeus have a prize like Jasnica Island, but compared to losing Dahlia, it was a very small price to pay.

Her kiss grew hotter on my lips, her body rising to pin me down on the bed.

"Mm, it is a good morning after all, isn't it?" I purred, her mouth falling over the curve of my chin.

"Uh-huh," she mumbled, nose trailing over my chest.

Heat burst through my groin as I realized what she was doing, the silken tresses of her hair ticking at my bare flesh as she snaked along the lines of my torso.

Instinctively, I reached out to scoop her hair back into a tight, forceful ponytail, freeing it from her face as her tongue teased around the bones of my hip, doe eyes peering up at me. She seemed unsure but daring, and I pressed my lips together, eager to see what she could do with hers.

Arching upward, I spread my legs, allowing her lower between my thighs, a small sigh of pleasure escaping my lips as her breath wafted over my rigid cock.

"Oh, yes," I muttered, closing my eyes.

Her rosebud mouth inched tentatively over the rock hardness, causing my shaft to flinch. She gasped and giggled, but just as quickly, she took me fully into the wetness of her mouth.

"Oh, gods!" I groaned, savoring the hotness of her throat.

She started slowly, a hand closing at the base of my cock, stroking in tandem as she wrapped herself around me. Up and down, deeper and deeper, until I felt completely lost inside her again.

"Come here," I urged, sensing my brink was being neared.

I tried to pull her upward by the hair, but Dahlia was shockingly strong, holding fast to me, her movements

increasing in speed and pressure, hand working just as fast to coax me into the climax building with shocking speed inside me.

“Oh, you little devil,” I rasped, struggling to sit upward, but my actions were futile against her. I was at my end, and Dahlia knew it.

Moaning, I let myself go, body spasming as Dahlia’s sweet, tickling tongue twirled around the ridges of my rod. My back jerked up, releasing as she lapped up every drop of my essence, her soft moans driving me until there was not a single dab remaining, and Dahlia lay at my side again, curled up against me. She nuzzled her nose into my neck, the pair of us silent, our breathing slowing until we both, inadvertently, fell back asleep.

CHAPTER 30

DAHLIA

“Wake up, my succulent twin,” Jesse purred in my ear, fueling me with a fear I thought I’d long forgotten.

My heart leapt into my throat, and I scrambled upward in the bed, but I couldn’t move. Bianca hissed beside me, pouncing toward our captor. I could barely believe what I was seeing around me. The same compound, the same trailer in which we had been held for all those weeks before Atlas had finally set us free.

This isn’t real, a logical voice told me from somewhere sane inside my head. *Jesse is gone*.

But it sure felt real in that moment.

“Stay away from us!” Bianca barked at the tiger shifter as I lay, still unconscious but hearing every word around me. “You leave me and my sister alone!”

Jesse was unperturbed by her outburst, but I noticed he wasn’t enshrouded by his guards, further confirming my suspicions that this was just a nightmare.

But why now? I was safe with Oliver.

“We’ll be married soon,” Jesse informed Bianca, a pleased smirk on his face. “And you’ll be mine officially, just like your father promised me.”

“Not if I kill you first!” she cried.

In my hazy dream, Bianca lunged at him as I tried to scream, but only a muffled cry escaped my lips and

reverberated in my own head. I couldn't move my arms or legs, but the sound had permeated my comatose state, stopping the commotion between Jesse and my twin.

"B-Bianca!" I rasped.

Both she and Jesse turned to look at me, pleasure lighting both their faces.

"Dahlia!"

"She's awake!" Jesse squealed. "She's alive! Set the wedding! Get the plans going at once! I'll get my threesome after all!"

He disappeared from the trailer and left me alone with my twin, presumably to make wedding arrangements that would never come to be. Bianca rushed to my side, pulling aside the filthy, stinking blankets.

"You have to get up!" she urged me. "You have to run."

"Jesse's gone," I sputtered, confusion clouding my dream state. "This isn't real."

Bianca cupped my face between her palms and stared into my eyes.

"It's real, and you need to run!" she shouted. "Get up and run, Dahlia! Now! Before it's too late!"

"I can't run," I mumbled, confusion distorting my line of sight. "I'm shot. I can't go..."

"Dahlia. *You* need to go. Now!"

The bed moved, and my eyes opened for real now, the full light of dawn overtaking the honeymoon suite. I was awake and back in reality, far from Forny and Jesse's now defunct compound that couldn't harm me.

But the dream lingered and troubled me. Bianca's warning stuck. I turned to face Oliver in bed, sensing his movement behind me.

"We fell asleep," I said to him as I turned. "I hope we're not too late—"

It was the last word I spoke before a needle plunged into my neck. Oliver's sleeping back faced me as the world around me went black, and panic suffocated me to what I was sure was my certain death.

So much for surviving this competition.

CHAPTER 31

OLIVER

The sound of the door closing opened my eyes, and I sat up, looking around bewildered. I hadn't even realized that we'd fallen back asleep after waking earlier, but now, it was clearly morning, and Dahlia wasn't in bed at my side.

"Dahlia?" I called out, alarm instantly spiking through my body. This wasn't like the last time she hadn't been in the room. I could smell something amiss, like someone else had been in there recently. "Dahl?"

I looked toward the bathroom door and saw it sitting wide open. Throwing the covers aside, I jumped up and found the nearest pair of pants. I didn't even notice that they were on backward until I tried to zip them. Irritated, I slipped out of them and put them on again, noting that I was wasting precious time with every move I made.

"Dahlia?" I opened the door to the hallway, calling out in futility.

If she had been there, she wasn't anymore. Zeus opened the door to his room and looked at me from the opposite end of the hallway. He offered me a quick smirk.

"Trouble in paradise?" he asked sarcastically.

I scowled at him furiously.

"If you've done anything to her—" I threatened.

His face darkened, and I realized instantly that I was off my mark.

“What the hell are you going on about?” he growled, spinning around to slam the door so loudly, it reverberated through the walls.

Uneasily, I looked down the hall again before backtracking into my suite to dress properly. Maybe she had just gone down for breakfast and didn’t want to wake me.

But my gut screamed out a warning so loudly, I couldn’t ignore it.

To add to my chagrin, Ash wasn’t downstairs at our breakfast table when I arrived in the dining room.

What the hell is going on? Where is everyone?

I circled back up to our floor and pounded on Zeus’ door, but the demon didn’t answer, nor did Fabiana. With growing apprehension, I went in search of Ash, calling his phone as I searched. The cell rang and rang, but my friend never answered. I’d pored through the entire hotel, asking anyone I saw if they’d seen Ash or Dahlia. The answer was always “no,” and my anxiety was through the roof by the time I found myself back in the lobby, dialing Ash for the dozenth time.

This time, he responded.

“Where the fuck are you?” I blurted out. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“Come out to the beach, near the dockside,” Ash replied pleasantly. “That’s where the final competition will be held.”

“We can’t do a competition. I can’t find Dahlia.”

“Dahlia is here. With me.”

I froze, not liking the sound of that.

“Let me talk to her.”

“When you get here. Hurry up, Oliver. We’re almost at the end of this godsforsaken test. I’ve had enough of you and Zeus for a lifetime.”

The call disconnected in my ear, and I hurried out of the hotel, dialing out again. Of course, Ash didn’t answer. I

glanced back toward the hotel, expecting to see Zeus and Fabiana, but neither of them materialized behind me.

Dahlia wouldn't have gone with Ash just like that, not without telling me. Something's not right.

But I couldn't reconcile that the Ash I knew would deliberately harm Dahlia, despite his deadpan exterior. I had known him for an eternity, and he had never struck me as a malicious sort.

On the other hand, there had been several instances over the past few days that made me wonder if my instincts had been wrong about him all along.

Oh, gods. What did I get Dahlia into?

I sprinted the rest of the way to the docks, the urge to shift and fly bubbling to the surface, but I didn't want to be faced with the conundrum of being without clothing when I arrived. I settled for breaking into a full run.

At first, I didn't find Ash, the gulls squawking indignantly at me as I neared the beach, annoyed that I was interrupting their breakfast. But my senses heightened, and I felt not only him but also Dahlia close by.

Near the boats was an abandoned workhouse, one that had sat there for as long as I could remember. At one time, it was likely a boat repair shop, but for years, it had remained untouched, prime land unclaimed, the aging building rotting from the inside out.

"Ash?" I yelled, stalking purposefully toward it. "Dahlia?"

"It took you long enough." The demon stepped from the interior before I could enter, a lazy smile on his face. "I was starting to think you went back to bed."

"Where's Dahlia?" I demanded.

"I'll show her to you in a minute," Ash answered. My neck stiffened at his phrasing.

"Show her to me?" I echoed, apprehension snaking down my spine. "Where the hell is she, Ash?"

“She’s fine. Relax,” he grunted, rolling his eyes. “Let’s wait for Zeus, shall we?”

“No,” I snarled through clenched teeth. “We shall not. I demand to see Dahlia. Now!”

Ash wriggled his eyebrows reprovingly. “I don’t like your tone, Oliver,” he said flatly. “You’ll wait. It’s part of the competition.”

I inhaled deeply, steeling my temper. I wanted to believe him, but my gut was flipping, warning me that Dahlia was unaccounted for.

“I just want to see her and make sure she’s okay,” I insisted. “That’s all.”

“And I’m telling you that she is.” Ash met my stare evenly. “Do you think I’m lying?”

“I think I’d feel better if I saw her,” I growled, baring my teeth.

He began to chuckle, but before he could counter my unspoken threat, Zeus’ voice called out.

“Where the hell are you?”

“Back here, Zeus!” Ash yelled back. “By the warehouse.”

I honed my ears for sounds inside the building, but I heard nothing except the lap of waves against the shore and the birds twittering at one another.

“Good, you’re both here,” Ash declared. “This way, gentlemen.”

“Where’s Fabiana?” I asked Zeus, scanning behind him for signs of his wife.

“Hell if I know,” he grunted. “She was gone when I got up this morning.”

I remembered how he had looked at me in the hall earlier, just when I had been looking for Dahlia.

“You have Fabiana, too?” I asked Ash.

“I don’t have anyone,” he answered caustically, sounding annoyed by the suggestion. “But they are both here, yes.”

He gestured for us to follow him, and I hurried after him as Zeus grunted and lagged behind.

“What’s in there?” he grumbled. “Do you know how much these shoes cost?”

I was too concerned about Dahlia to comment on his lack of learning comprehension. If he hadn’t figured out how to dress for the competition by now, there was no point in trying to teach him.

“You’ll have to see for yourself,” Ash said, sounding a little too gleeful for my liking.

I almost threw him aside when he opened the door, stepping over the threshold to look into the dank, dark interior.

Blinking, my eyes adjusted to the dimness, cracks of light pouring through the planks of broken wood and spilling onto the rotten floor.

“Oh, gods!” I choked, stumbling forward.

“Don’t touch them!” Ash boomed out, but I didn’t stop moving toward Dahlia’s unconscious form, splayed on the floor next to Fabiana’s.

“What’s wrong with them?” Zeus asked, a note of uncertainty in his voice.

As I neared their collapsed bodies, I abruptly froze, Ash holding me in place with his hands.

“Nothing is wrong with them,” he reassured me. “They’re unharmed, but you can’t touch them. Do I make myself clear?”

“No!” I barked back. “Let me go!”

I struggled against his holding power, but Ash was far too strong.

“It’s pointless to fight me, as much as I hate to use my demon strength on you, old chum.”

“Just leave them,” Zeus snorted, suddenly unperturbed by the sight of his wife’s limp body. “They’re getting more rest than we are, lucky bitches.”

I stared at him, aghast, before turning my attention back to Ash.

“I’m going to release you, but you can’t go for her. Is that understood?”

“No!” I spat. “What did you do to her?”

He groaned. “Why do you both always have to make everything so fucking difficult?” he demanded. “This is what you wanted. You asked for this competition, and I gave it to you. This is your final challenge. Are you ready for it or not?”

I could only stare at him. No answer was the right answer. I wasn’t ready for it, no. I only wanted to collect Dahlia and get the hell out of there, Jasnica and the whole competition be damned.

But would Ash accept that as an answer, or would I just make things worse for all of us?

“Come on, Ollie,” Zeus jeered. “Let’s hear him out. We came this far, didn’t we?”

I chewed on the insides of my cheeks and managed a curt nod, only to ensure my release from Ash’s hold.

“Good,” Ash proclaimed, releasing me. “Now, let’s discuss the terms of the last competition.”

CHAPTER 32

DAHLIA

“Run! You have to run, Dahlia!” Bianca told me again, but it wasn’t her voice. It was Oliver’s, and when I looked at her face, it was Fabiana’s.

My eyes opened fully, my head cloudy and disoriented. Slowly, I lifted my chin.

“Dahlia!”

Moaning softly, I turned to look at Oliver, but I realized I was bound, tied at the hands and feet, laying on a filthy, mildewed floor.

“W-where am I?” I mumbled, cotton balls in my mouth as I again looked toward Fabiana, realizing that she, too, was confined like me.

Slowly, I attempted to put the scene together, but the harder I tried, the less sense it made to me.

Zeus stood back with his arms folded over his chest, deliberately avoiding his wife’s small, pained moans. Oliver stared dutifully at me, but appeared frozen in place.

“Dahlia, are you all right?” he called to me. “Little Flower, look at me.”

Confounded and dizzy, I managed to meet his eyes.

“It’s going to be okay. I’m coming to get you out of there,” he reassured me before whiplashing his head back toward Ash. “I’m getting her out of there.”

“Not until you hear the terms of the competition.”

“I don’t care about the damn terms!” Oliver hissed. “Harming Dahlia was never part of the fine print.”

“I already told you; she’s not harmed. Are you, Dahlia? Are you hurt?”

The demon referee looked at me meaningfully, and I swallowed, terror gripping my stomach.

“Well? Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. It was the truth. Physically, I was fine save for a headache that was getting worse by the moment.

“Fabiana?” Ash pressed. “How are you feeling?”

“Ugh!” Fabiana cried out, struggling to sit up and fight her constraints. “Ash, you untie me right this instant!”

“I’m sorry, Fabby. I can’t do that.”

“This isn’t funny! This place is riddled with vermin! I demand to be let out!” Fabiana screeched.

I envied her indignation over her clear and present fear. I wished I could muster as much, but I was quivering inside. I looked helplessly at Oliver, trying desperately to understand what was happening. I thought of the dream and how Bianca had tried to warn me. This was what she was trying to warn me about.

Ash cast us both what I imagined was supposed to be a sympathetic look, but it only chilled my blood.

“That will depend on your lovers,” he declared, fixing his eyes back on the players as I fought against my bonds. They were too secure, and while they weren’t hurting me, I definitely wasn’t going anywhere, that was for certain.

Ash really had planned it all down to the last second.

“For the final challenge, it’s a winner take all. The choice is very, very simple, really,” he told the men. “And that’s all it is. A choice.”

He paused for effect, but Oliver yelled at him, his worried gaze still locked on me.

“Get on with it, Ash!”

The demon clucked his tongue like Oliver was ruining his dramatic scene.

“All you have to do is choose between your love of the girl or your love of the island,” Ash explained. “If you choose the island, your partner will die—painlessly and quickly, I promise—and the island will be reverted to you directly. But if you choose the girl, you will have absolutely no claim to the island, and it will automatically go to the favor of your competitor—”

“I choose Dahlia. Zeus can have the fucking island,” Oliver barked, striding forward, this time unstoppable. “I don’t give a shit about it.”

He reached my side and ripped at my bonds, scooping me up in his arms.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he hissed at Ash. I clung to his neck as he backed away from the warehouse. “I thought you were better than this.”

“It’s a competition, Oliver. You can’t take it personally,” Ash sighed, unrepentant.

He really means that.

“You and I will have words later,” Oliver promised him, but for now, he was eager to get me out of there, and I was grateful for that.

“Hahaha!” Zeus howled, slapping his leg with such perverse glee, I wanted to leap out of Oliver’s arm to *slap him* in the face. “That was easy enough. You could have just saved us all the trouble and started with this challenge, couldn’t you, Ash? Jasnica Island is mine! It’s finally mine!”

He snorted again, cackling like some intoxicated swamp witch.

“I hope it gets swallowed by a tsunami,” Oliver muttered in parting, but before he could kick his way out of the warehouse, Ash stopped us.

“Wait!” he yelled, slowing Oliver in his tracks. “It’s not over yet.”

Zeus snorted. “Of course it is. We just saw him forfeit the island. What else is there?”

“Not exactly,” Ash said. “If you had let me finish, you would have heard it all.”

“Oh, Ash, come on,” Zeus grumbled.

“Let me up from here!” Fabiana shrieked, kicking her bound feet to the floor. “Screw this damned competition!”

Zeus ignored her, his attention on Ash, but I tugged on Oliver’s neck.

“You can’t leave Fabiana there like that,” I whispered, compassion for the hapless wolf shifter twisting my gut.

It wasn’t her fault that Zeus was such an asshole. She didn’t deserve to be treated that way.

Oliver grunted and reluctantly set me down.

“No!” Ash thundered, startling Oliver. “You can’t release Fabiana.”

Oliver’s face darkened.

“The contest is over, Ash,” he hissed. “Let it go.”

“It’s not over,” Ash insisted. “Because Zeus hasn’t made his decision.”

Blood slowly drained out of my face.

“What?” Zeus laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“Oliver made his decision,” Ash explained. “He chose Dahlia over the island. Now you must do the same. Do you choose the island, or your wife?”

Zeus’ smile faded. Fabiana gaped at him.

“Why?” Zeus grouched. “Ollie already forfeited the island. I win. That’s what you said.”

“I made the rules of this competition,” Ash said firmly. “You both entrusted me to do just that. If you won’t abide by

it, I suppose that no one will get the island, and this entire affair would have been for naught.”

He shrugged and turned away.

“No! Wait!” Zeus yelled, paling. “I’ll make my choice, too.”

Ash grinned and turned back.

“It’s the only way to declare an honest winner,” he replied. “What’s your choice?”

Zeus grimaced and looked at his wife, humiliated and pleading on the filthy ground, his eyes darting maliciously toward me and then Oliver before returning his gaze to Ash.

“I choose...”

CHAPTER 33

OLIVER

I saw and felt Dahlia tense, her shoulders reaching her ears, jaw clenching in anticipation. I already knew what choice Zeus was going to make, well before he spoke the words aloud. The demon was nothing if not predictable. Perhaps Dahlia did, too, which was why she looked so stressed about it. It was difficult to know where to fix my eyes. Dahlia looked ready to collapse with concern. Fabiana was on the brink of a nervous breakdown, and Ash and Zeus faced off like two men in a boxing ring.

“I’m waiting, Zeus,” Ash told him. “Oliver made his choice in seconds. Why are you taking so long?”

Is he mocking Zeus?

“Zooney?” Fabiana whimpered. “Why are you hesitating? Pick me, you ass!”

She grimaced, again straining, and a wave of pity toward her shot through me.

“You said it will be painless, right?” Zeus asked Ash.

“What?”

“Her death? You said it would be quick and painless?” He shrugged. “Don’t let her suffer too much. She’s been a good girl.”

Even I was appalled by the callousness of Zeus’ wording, though not surprised. Still, it was bone chilling to observe. Dahlia and Fabiana gasped in horror, both wolves recoiling as Ash advanced, shaking his head.

“Sorry, Fabiana,” he sighed, raising his arms.

Now, I was shocked—baffled to see that Ash was going through with it.

“Ash!” I screamed, but when his fingers came down, flashes of light released Fabiana of her binds.

Shaking wildly, Fabiana stared at her freed wrists, then up at Ash uncomprehendingly.

“I knew he was an asshole, but I didn’t think he was that much of one,” Ash continued, reaching a hand down to help her up.

Fabiana cowered away.

“You don’t touch me!” she wheezed.

Dahlia rushed to her side to assist her, shaking her head at Ash and Zeus as she did.

“Wait, what’s this now?” Zeus asked with a smirk, but worry clouded his eyes. “I thought you were going to trade her for the island.”

He realized that he was going to have to deal with the repercussions of his irate wife now. I couldn’t muster any sympathy for him, and I privately hoped Fabiana knew his one immortal weakness, dark as that was. Every immortal had a single, rare fatal weakness, and it would be a shame if Fabiana were to take advantage of his for such a betrayal. Just as Jesse’s great-grandfather, Gabriel, had fallen victim to a rare STD despite his immortal standing, Zeus undoubtedly had a weakness of his own.

“What am I? A savage?” Ash demanded with amusement. “I don’t go around killing females for sport. It was a test. One that you failed miserably, I should add. Love or money. Unsurprisingly, you always choose money, Zooey. Oliver, congratulations. You have won Jasnica Island fair and square.”

Oliver and I looked at one another and then at Ash, who nodded encouragingly.

“Wait a second!” Zeus growled. “That’s bullshit! I won! I won the obstacle course!”

“You lost the maze,” I fired back, but honestly, I really didn’t care if he took the island.

I had the only thing I wanted.

“It’s mine!” Zeus howled. “I won it! You tricked me, Ash!”

“Unfortunately, there’s no higher court,” Ash replied sarcastically. “All decisions are final. In other words, it sucks to be you, Zeus.”

“No!” Zeus started to say, but Fabiana found her fury again and began to howl at him.

“You son of a bitch!” she screamed. “You were going to let me die over a piece of land? You would trade me, your wife, over a fucking island?!”

“It wasn’t even real, Fabiana. Keep up!” Zeus countered, holding up a hand to her face. “Obviously, I knew that, or I wouldn’t have done it.”

“You’re so full of shit! You are truly a psychopath, aren’t you? How did I never see this before?” Fabiana screamed. “I defended you when others warned me about you! I told them they were wrong about you!”

“Just stop it. You’re literally getting worked up over nothing. Absolutely nothing happened. Stop getting your panties in a knot.”

“That’s not the point, and you know it!” she howled, running toward him to beat at his chest.

His dismissal of her feelings was only fueling her rage.

Dahlia tugged on my arm. “I want to go, Oliver,” she told me, and I nodded, happy to oblige her request.

I was still not happy with Ash, but I did feel much better knowing that he had never intended to hurt Dahlia or Fabiana. I hadn’t been wrong about him.

“Thanks, Ash. Nice work putting this all together, Ash,” Ash muttered sarcastically as Dahlia and I pushed our way out into the beachfront sunshine.

I turned back and looked at him, shaking my head.

“We’ll thank you when we’ve processed this clusterfuck of emotional trauma you’ve put us through, Ash,” I replied.

He snickered and shrugged. “You can’t say I don’t come through when you ask. And that you won’t think twice before putting me in this position again.”

“Those are both facts,” I agreed begrudgingly.

Dahlia sniffed, unwilling to give him her love just yet. Ash was definitely an acquired taste.

Inside, the married couple’s shouting grew louder, and I swept Dahlia into my arms, my heart swelling with emotion as her skin pressed to mine. The relief of having her with me, safe in my arms, was insurmountable. And never had I been surer than in that moment that she was my mate, and I was hers.

“I want to go home, Oliver,” she whispered in my ear. I nodded, kissing the top of her head. “Let’s get off this island.”

“Let’s go back to the suite, and I’ll make all the arrangements,” I promised her, but I knew when I got her back upstairs to our room, the last thing on my mind would be calling the ship’s captain. That would have to wait for a few hours at least.

CHAPTER 34

DAHLIA

I wasn't sure I would ever love Jasnia Island the way that Oliver did, and I couldn't help but want to flee it and get as far away from Zeus as possible.

But once we were off that beach and back at the hotel, the connection between me and Oliver overcame all my fear and exhaustion, all the emotional turmoil and hurt I'd experienced.

Nothing else mattered except that Oliver had followed through, that he had chosen me, over the island, over everything else. The fear for my safety, the loss of money or property—it didn't matter to him. Zeus hadn't hesitated to sell out his own wife.

But Oliver was so much more to me, and I to him.

Secure in our room again, I ambled toward him, my hands outstretched.

"I'm so glad you're safe," he murmured, reaching for me, too, but I shook my head, silencing him with my lips. His arms wrapped around my waist, drawing me into him, bodies crushing together as a jolt of static whipped through our parted mouths. He tasted salty and smelled musky, the combination creating a euphoric haze over me. The naked fear he'd had for me came through his natural pheromones, arousing me more than they ever had before.

This was it, the solidification, the connection, the click.

I fell into his embrace, eagerly accepting his kisses as they grew warmer, more intense. His mouth moved deliberately down my throat, casting aside my long, blonde tresses to

expose the skin of my neck. A path of hot breath made its way toward the opening of my neckline, and suddenly, my arms were over my head as he pulled the fabric clear overtop it. Tighter I was pulled to his bear-like hold, my own hands roaming against the smooth skin of his back, fingertips roaming to memorize every curve, every line, committing it to memory now. This was not a one-off, a forgotten tryst between a boss and a girl from the wrong side of the tracks. We were mates, consummating what we had both instinctively known but effectively ignored until now. But I couldn't deny it, not anymore. I would never have a doubt again, not when Oliver had proven himself to me so openly.

The tight hardness of his cock drew me to him like a magnet, my crotch pinning to his as Oliver's face buried into my pert, ready breasts. Heaving, skin prickled, I arched toward him, urging my nipples into his mouth. I gasped at the gentle bite on my taut flesh, and in seconds, I was putty against him. Again.

Suddenly, he pulled me back, landing me onto my back, his breath coming out in short gasps, his tongue teasing my belly button. I moaned quietly, tossing my head back, raising my hips to allow him to suck on me entirely. As always, I was ready for him, but Oliver wasn't finished with his slow, erotic seduction. He wanted to take all the time in the world with me, the same way I wanted to memorize every part of him. He paused for half a second, his eyes emblazoned with desire as he licked his lips, face glistening.

"I wanted you from the moment I first saw you," he told me, his voice husky with salacity. "From that first mouthy moment in the coffee shop when I ruined your shirt... I just didn't know I would fall in love with you."

I flushed, the memory and the emotion making me heady. I didn't know what to say, but I knew what I wanted.

"Then take me," I urged, propping myself up to watch him, relishing the waves of hot and cold coursing through me. "Take me. I'm yours."

He smiled, his eyes glowing, and he shook his head.

“Not before I taste you. I want to savor every part of you.”

Without warning, he plunged his face into my center, pulling my thighs apart, his tongue delving deeply and passionately to steal my breath.

“Oh, gods!” I gasped, elbows buckling underneath me.

I sat forward, reaching for his muscled shoulders, thighs clenching around his head. His palms grasped my ass firmly, inhaling me deeply, the motion sending me higher, his laps at my most sensitive spot taking frantic proportions.

My hands curled into the sheets of the bed, fingers becoming a fist of linen and sweat as my calves tensed.

He mumbled something, but I didn’t need to hear the words to know what his instructions were. He was ordering an orgasm, and his wish was my obvious command. I couldn’t refuse him.

Faster he licked, sucking on my throbbing clit until I could take no more, exploding in a stream of ecstasy over his relentless chin.

Crying out, a second orgasm followed as quickly as the first, but before I could finish, Oliver pulled back and flipped me over as if I were made of cloth. Before I even collected my bearings, he was inside me again—this time with his throbbing, massive cock. It stunned me how surprising I found his erection filling every available inch of me.

Will it always be this way?

Intuitively, I suspected the answer.

“Oh, gods, you’re so tight,” he growled, plunging himself deeper, grabbing my hips for leverage. “I could live inside you, Dahlia.”

Oliver’s words and his probing shaft were a dangerous combination for me, and I pushed back against him, feeling him smack against my aching nub. I was sore, but the pain was so good, so painfully pleasurable.

Once more, the explosion built inside me, and I reached out for balance as he went wild behind me, his pounding

reaching a feverish speed. Grunting, his hot breath sent tingles of pleasure down my spine, my hips arching back to meet him, to draw him out to my place of euphoria.

A hard slap christened my rear, and it sent me over the edge. Again.

Screaming out among the incessant ramming, I lowered my face into the wrinkled cotton sheets, a blubbering mess, and as I trembled, Oliver lost control of himself. Scalding streaks spilled into me, and as I tried to regain my composure, I was not going anywhere. He fell onto me, pinning me to the bed in a quivering pile.

I gasped again, but he didn't lie still as he grabbed my hand, forcing me around to look at him.

"Look, Little Flower," he panted, dark blond hair plastered to his forehead as he placed his hand over his heart.

My eyes popped as I noticed a golden glow over his heart, causing me to draw back in alarm.

"What is that?" I whispered, horrified.

Oliver laughed and laid me back, pointing at my own chest. To my utter shock, I saw I had a matching glow of my own.

"Oliver, what is it?" I demanded, but his lack of concern put me at ease, if only slightly.

"It happens to all mates when they're mated," he explained. "If your sister and Atlas are really mates, she has one, too, but it's only visible when they're together."

"I didn't know that," I breathed, tracing my finger over the golden arch tenderly. Oliver sat up and peered at me.

"You know what else it means, don't you?"

I eyed him warily.

"Do I want to know?" I asked weakly, and he chuckled again.

"You're immortal now."

I released a shuttering breath.

“Is that really true?” I asked dubiously. “I mean... Bianca told me that if an immortal is truly mated to a mortal, the mortal will turn, but...”

I trailed off.

“It sounds kind of farfetched, honestly. I mean, immortals aren’t born or turned.”

Oliver shrugged.

“It’s true—or so the legend goes. Love is the most powerful spell there is, after all.”

He paused, and I continued to stare at him speculatively, suspecting that there was more he wanted to add.

“What?” I pressed.

“I’ll have to be honest with you. I don’t know many immortals who have been mated. I mean, many have been married and coupled off, but I don’t know many mates.”

That was disappointing, and it must have shown on my face. Oliver chucked me under the chin.

“But now we know two,” he added. “Maybe immortal luck is changing.”

He winked at me, and I curled into him, nuzzling my face into his sweaty chest.

“I don’t care about the other immortals,” I told him. “I only care about you.”

“And I only care about you,” he replied, kissing the top of my head.

We lay in silence for a long moment, regulating our breathing against one another, but when he spoke again, his voice was oddly quiet.

“Why don’t we stay tonight and leave tomorrow?”

A haze of sleepiness washed over me, and I nodded, even though I truly did want to leave the island.

“I’d rather just go,” I insisted, thinking of encountering Zeus or Ash in the hallways of the hotel.

“We can check out of here and stay at my house,” he reminded me. “The competition is over, and there’s no need for us to remain here.”

I wanted to see Oliver’s house on the island, and it would be a waste to have come all that way without looking at it.

“Okay,” I yawned. “I don’t care as long as we don’t have to see Zeus. Or Ash, for that matter.”

“I’m sure that Zeus has already slunk back to his den, and Ash has been itching to leave since before we got here. You don’t need to worry about them.”

I thought about Fabiana and where she had ended up, but I forced the thought out of my mind. The wolf was a fully grown woman, capable of making her own decisions. It wasn’t my place to interfere with her marital problems, but I couldn’t help but feel sorry if she ended up going home with Zeus.

Hopefully, she’ll divorce him and get a good penny for her problems, I thought cruelly.

It would be justice if Zeus ended up with a pittance after the way he had treated her.

“I’d like to see your house,” I agreed, closing my eyes.

“I’d like to show you around the island properly,” Oliver admitted. “You haven’t really had the opportunity to see it for its true value and beauty.”

I laughed mirthlessly, my lids parting again.

“I’m not sure I will ever be able to see it like that.”

“Give me a chance to show you that it can be amazing,” he said. “There’s a reason that I love Jasnja Island that has nothing to do with the income it brings.”

“It’s not the Felted Forest?”

He snorted.

“I might have that forest razed.”

I lifted my head and stared at him.

“You don’t mean that,” I said worriedly. “I mean, there’s an entire ecosystem in there.”

“It’s filled with weird, dark creatures,” he muttered.

I continued to look at him, and he shook his head vehemently under my pointed stare.

“I’m joking,” he said, darting his eyes away and making me wonder if he really was just trying to appease my sense of right. “There are still living creatures in there—whatever they are.”

“Maybe we can look into their way of life,” I suggested. “Instead of just killing them off. Just because we don’t understand them doesn’t mean that they don’t deserve to live, too.”

“You’re too good for this world, Little Flower.”

I nestled back into his arms and dropped my head against the halo on his chest. It radiated a warmth against my ear, and I savored the feeling, noting how my own golden arch seemed to pulsate in conjunction with his.

I’d found him. My mate. The island was won, and this nightmare was over. I could hardly believe I’d survived it.

CHAPTER 35

DAHLIA

Oliver was still asleep when my eyes fluttered open the next morning. We stayed in our room the rest of the day, ordering from the hotel's room service and lounging in bed, making love, allowing for Zeus and Fabiana to clear out before heading out ourselves.

The plan was to leave in the morning, heading to Oliver's house on the opposite end of Jasnja Island after breakfast, and as long as I was safe in his arms, I had no problem with that idea.

But watching his deep, rhythmic breathing so early in the morning, I couldn't wake him. The toll of the last few days had been heavy on both of us, and I wasn't about to ruin what was probably the first good sleep he'd had in weeks. Anyway, I had seen a cute shop just down the street from the inn that I wanted to check out before we left and see if I couldn't find something there to commemorate our time together, like a small keepsake or souvenir. It was silly, but I was feeling a bit sentimental. If I sat around in the suite, I was apt to wake up Oliver inadvertently by staring at him.

I dressed in a blue and white striped sundress and pair of ivory strapped sandals and scrawled a short note to him so he wouldn't worry if he woke and saw me gone again. Then I quietly let myself out of the room and down the stairs. I paused at the front desk, swallowing my nervousness, and called on the clerk, who immediately answered me.

"Yes, Ms. Barrett?"

I wasn't sure if it was a good sign or bad that he knew my name.

“Did the couple in the Presidential Suite check out?” I asked nervously.

The last thing I wanted was to run into Zeus and Fabiana.

“Oh, yes, ma'am. Last night.” He grimaced lightly, as if the memory haunted him. “It was quite a spectacle.”

Relief washed through me, and I nodded curtly.

“Thank you,” I said, again feeling bad for Fabiana.

I didn't have a phone number for her, but I vowed I would find a way to reach out to her once we were back in Montshire. She had been kind to me, regardless of how I felt about Zeus. I couldn't imagine that she would stay with him after what he'd done.

Then again, married couples put up with a lot from one another. It wasn't my place to judge what Fabiana did or didn't do, but I wanted to ensure that she was safe in the wake of Zeus' treachery.

For now, the island was ours, and I intended to put the psychotic demon out of my head, if only for a short time. I was going to enjoy myself with Oliver now.

I headed out of the double glass doors and into the humidity of the island. It was barely eight a.m., and a warm sea breeze barely took a slice out of the mounting heat building over the landscape. I paused outside the hotel for a moment to take in the teal waters in the distance, the birdsong, and bright sunshine. It really was gorgeous without the hanging threat over my head. Maybe I could learn to like it here. It was exactly what I'd always wanted, with the never-ending warmth and lush greenery.

There was no traffic on Jasnica Island, everyone opting to walk or use bicycles. The few cars that existed were subjected to too many traffic rules. It was much simpler to go on foot or use the little public transportation to the areas that were built up. But it was clear that most of the place was wild, just like the Felted Forest, untouched and untamed.

I made my way down the main street toward the shop I'd seen. Maybe it was too early for it to be open. A lot of these places didn't bother parting their shingles until noon, now that I thought about it. This island was for lulling about and relaxing, not jumping out of bed on a schedule.

But to my pleasant surprise, the proprietor was just unlocking the front door as I ambled up to the front of the stucco structure.

"Oh, good morning," she said, her thick, twangy but exotic accent filled with surprise. "I never get anyone so early in the day."

"Sorry," I offered with a smile. "I won't be here much longer, and I saw this place in my peripheral vision. I wanted to check it out before I left."

She peered at me, her ebony skin gleaming in the sunshine.

"You're with Mr. Charles, yeah?"

I blushed. Word did travel fast, but I wasn't put off by them in the least.

"Yes," I agreed, warmth washing through me at the admission. "I am."

She offered me a brilliant ivory smile and ushered me inside. It was just as quaint as I'd imagined it from the outside, an eclectic mix of antiques and odd souvenir items for all tastes.

"Take whatever you like, miss," the woman told me. "No charge."

I shook my head. "No, that's not right. I'll pay for whatever I take."

"Mr. Charles owns the island now, yeah?" she asked me. "He owns it all, anyway."

I didn't respond, my eyes trailing over the pieces as I pondered what would best remind me of our time together here, on Jasnica Island. Nothing quite fit the adventure we'd had, not in a true sense. The sandy snow globe, the tacky key

chains... It didn't justify the memory of all Oliver and I had endured as a team.

Maybe this hadn't been a good idea after all.

"What about this?"

The owner of the shop appeared before me, holding out a piece of petrified wood, a wicked smile on her face that was rife with implication.

"What is it?" I asked warily.

"It's a piece of wood from the Felted Forest—one of the few to make it out somehow."

She winked at me, and I touched it, immediately electrified by the power it possessed.

"For some reason, it's difficult to remove items from that place," she went on, and I chuckled dryly.

"That doesn't surprise me," I replied. "I'll take it."

She nodded and moved toward the counter to wrap it up.

"How much?"

She shook her head.

"I told you—no charge."

I considered arguing with her but thought better of it. I'd had enough conflict for a lifetime. If the woman wanted to give us a gift, who was I to argue? Instead, I thanked her and accepted the present, stepping back into the day to relish the sun on my face.

On a whim, I took to a back street, taking what I thought was the long way back to the hotel. It would give Oliver a chance to sleep more if he hadn't woken yet and me an opportunity to explore the island in a way I hadn't yet had an opportunity to do.

It was much quieter back here, a sprinkling of scattered houses sprawled over an expanse of land. Several goats and chickens roamed the streets, scattering as I walked by, and I laughed at the sight of them.

I was beginning to find the charm of the island as I walked.

“Hi,” I said, pausing before one sullen looking billy goat. “Can I pet you?”

He snorted and tried to head-butt me, reeling me back into a row of bushes. I giggled as I lost my footing, but before I could land in the thick of shrubbery behind me, a strong hand circled my upper arm.

I whipped my head around in surprise, my stomach turning to water as my gaze rested on the last person I wanted to see.

“Z-Zeus!” I sputtered, struggling to wrench myself free of his vice-like grip.

“I thought that was you,” he snarled, his face inches from mine. “You wasted no time prancing around this island like you own it.”

“Let go of me!”

I again tried to pull away, but his fingers closed tighter on me, and I yelped in pain.

“Jasnia Island is mine. Not yours. Not Oliver’s. It’s mine. I won it!”

“This is between you and Oliver,” I gasped, struggling to maintain my calm. “This has nothing to do with me.”

Zeus snickered mirthlessly, drawing me toward him. I could smell his breath, the stench of stale whiskey making my gut churn. It was hard to tell if he was still intoxicated or just enraged, but whatever he was, I was terrified.

My eyes darted around for a witness, for assistance, but the back road was conspicuously quiet.

“Oh, but that’s not true, is it, Dahlia?” he spat. “Ever since you came around, everything’s gone to shit, hasn’t it?”

I shook my head.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I whimpered. “Please, Zeus—”

“Shut up!” he whiplashed, fangs extending. “The only thing that will teach Oliver not to fuck with me is to get rid of you. I see that now.”

Dread consumed me, his intentions sending gooseflesh erupting down my back.

“Help!” I started to scream as his teeth came down for my jugular.

“You bastard!” a woman howled. “You really can’t help yourself, can you?”

Zeus dropped me like I was made of fire, whirling around as Fabiana stormed toward us, her face redder than the sun.

“It’s not what it looks like!” Zeus claimed, raising his arms. “We were just talking!”

“You are weak, Zeus! Pathetic, spineless... and not infallible!”

I reeled out of harm’s way, my eyes bugging as I silently pleaded with Fabiana to elaborate. Zeus balked, his arms still raised as he ambled slowly toward his wife.

“Fabby...”

“No!” she yelled. “I won’t hear it! You’re despicable!”

Zeus snarled, lunging for me again, like I somehow was responsible for all his bad choices, but a flash of movement stopped him, the whip of a dragon’s tail knocking him back to land on the ground.

“Oliver!” I choked, staring in disbelief at my mate, his towering dragon body heaving as smoke emanating from his nostrils.

“You fool!” Zeus spat at Oliver. “She’ll ruin you, just like Fabiana is trying to ruin me. Don’t let that bitch take over your life!”

I turned to Fabiana desperately.

“What can I do?” I whispered to her urgently. “How can I stop him?”

The demon and dragon faced off, Zeus fully shifting as Fabiana and I stood back, watching in horror.

“He has an allergy to pewter,” she revealed. “If he’s exposed to it for too long, it will kill him.”

I gaped at her in disbelief, and she nodded strenuously.

“It sounds strange, but I’ve seen him exposed to it before.”

I bit on my lower lip, Zeus growing larger, his eyes glowing as he froze Oliver in place.

“All this nonsense over a woman,” Zeus snapped. “I thought better of you, Ollie.”

Oliver struggled against his hold, and I made a split-second decision, turning to sprint back toward the main street again.

“Dahlia!” Fabiana screamed after me, but I ignored her, hurrying back into the gift shop, where the proprietor was waiting for me. I had sensed it earlier, perhaps, her witch-like vibes. She called me back, and I was grateful she had.

She extended her hand without a word, dropping a heavy pewter brooch into mine, and held the door for me to leave. Gratefully, I nodded at her and rushed back out, determined to end this feud once and for all.

By the time I returned, Oliver had crumbled to the ground, Zeus lumbering over him, hands extended to keep him in place.

“I can’t let you up until I know you’ll let me finish what I started,” Zeus told him. “I need to get rid of that bitch. Then, you’ll give me back my island.”

Oliver groaned, and fury overwhelmed me.

“Zeus!” I called, rushing toward him.

He looked up at me, a bemused smirk on his face.

“Don’t be stupid, girl. You’re a mere mortal—”

“Not anymore, I’m not,” I hissed, driving the brooch into his belly as I leapt at him.

His face twisted into an expression of surprise before a howl of pain ricocheted through the streets of the island. Oliver's hold was released, and my mate leapt up from the ground as I kept the pewter piece firmly at Zeus' flesh.

"NO!" he hollered. "It burns!"

He tried to slap me away, but his movements were weak, feeble. The alloy was rotting him from the inside out, and within seconds, the skin of his bones began to peel away.

Oliver pinned him down to keep him from fighting, and within two minutes, his last breath was drawn, Zeus' body now only a shell of his former self.

Panting and shaking, I fell back, dropping the brooch onto the ground at my side. I barely noticed that Oliver had shifted back into his human body until he wrapped his arms around me tenderly, rocking me into his arms.

"It's all right. You're okay now," he murmured.

I buried my head in his shoulder and sobbed for a moment, rocking in his arms. Was it really over now?

Gods, I hoped so.

CHAPTER 36

DAHLIA

The next few minutes were a blur for me. Fabiana and Oliver exchanged some words that I didn't really hear as I stared at Zeus' shell body.

"You did the only thing you could do," Fabiana told me, sitting at my side on the ground. "If you hadn't stopped him, he would have just kept coming for you, you know?"

I eyed her, wondering how she could be so nonchalant about it. I had just murdered her husband. I looked for Oliver and saw he was trying to locate the remnants of his clothing from the roadside, where he'd shifted.

"I never wanted it to come to this," I told her honestly. "I mean, I didn't like him, but this..."

Fabiana patted my shoulders, a stoic expression on her face.

"I remember my first kill," she said. "It wasn't as dramatic as all this, but they weren't as deserving of death as Zeus was, either."

I eyed her skeptically. It was difficult to imagine Fabiana as a killer, but then again, she had been married to Zeus. There was probably a lot I didn't know about her.

"Aren't you even a little upset?" I asked tentatively.

I might have felt better if she'd unleashed on me.

Fabiana shrugged. "I'm probably still in shock," she admitted. "Once I process the fact that my husband of two

hundred years was willing to kill me for a piece of land, I might have a moment to grieve his death.”

She patted my shoulder again and smiled. “You really don’t have anything to feel sorry about, Dahlia. If the roles were reversed, I would have done the same thing—in a heartbeat. And don’t forget, I’m the one who told you what his weakness was in the first place.”

She did have a point there.

We sat in silence for a moment, staring at the remains of Zeus.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked, more to fill the uneasy quiet around us than out of genuine curiosity.

I again looked back toward Oliver, who had managed to scrape together a few items of clothing, enough to cover his crotch. He’d also apparently found his cell phone and was taking a call.

Who is he speaking with now?

I reasoned that someone had to come and clean up the mess I’d made.

“That’s a good question,” Fabiana said slowly. “I suppose I won’t have to worry about a divorce now, will I?”

She laughed, the inappropriateness of her timbre stunning me slightly, but given the circumstances, I couldn’t fault her for it.

“I’m still a very wealthy woman, seeing as I have all of Zeus’ holdings, aren’t I?”

I nodded slowly. “I suppose that’s true,” I agreed. “Will you run his businesses?”

Fabiana laughed and laughed, standing as she did.

“Of course not. We have people for that,” she replied with a snort. “No... I think I’ll do something more educationally sound. Like fucking my way across the islands.”

I blushed at her brash idea and again cast a covert look at her not-quite-cold husband.

“Oh, what? Like Zeus didn’t fuck everything in sight while we were married?” she asked, rolling her eyes. “Just because I didn’t say anything, doesn’t mean I didn’t know about it.”

Fabiana was a far more complex individual than I’d realized, it seemed. A fusion of pity and admiration twined in me.

“You always have a place with us, Fabiana,” I told her softly.

She offered me a small smile. “Have you two made it official, then?” she asked. “Or are you still pretending you don’t love one another?”

I beamed and flushed a deeper shade of red. “We’re mates,” I informed her.

“I know,” she replied. “Anyone with senses could see that. I imagine that’s why Zeus was so eager to ruin it. He always did have an urge to break beautiful things.”

Her smile widened. “I’m happy for you,” she added. “You’re immortal now. You’ll live together for eternity.”

I nodded slowly, swallowing the rock of emotion building in my throat.

“Yes,” I murmured. “That’s the plan.”

“Oh... and look who joined the party.”

“I leave you alone for a few hours, and this is what you do?” Ash sighed, striding toward us, shaking his dark head of hair. He scanned the scene with his usual impassiveness before resting his gaze on me. “You did this?”

I looked at the ground, shamed and nodded.

“Yes.”

“Impressive.”

While I was stunned at the compliment, Ash backed away and joined Oliver’s side. “I’ll have this cleaned up. No one needs to know what happened here.”

Oliver nodded gratefully, and I also stood at his side. Fabiana cocked her head to look at Ash.

“How big is your cock?” Fabiana asked him.

I sputtered at the completely inappropriate question, but neither Oliver nor Ash appeared flustered in the slightest.

“You know what they say, Fabiana—if you have to ask, you probably can’t handle the answer,” Ash replied evenly.

“I’d like to test that theory. Zeus told me that all demons have small dicks,” she informed him.

“That’s because Zeus was a small dick,” Ash said sweetly. “Should I show it to you right here?”

“No. The hotel is closer, and check-out time isn’t for another couple of hours.”

With that, Fabiana looped her arm through his and scooted him away from the road, leaving me to gawk after them.

“Did that just happen?” I demanded. “Right in front of Zeus’ corpse?”

Oliver smirked lightly. “I suspect that was half the point,” he replied, turning to me, cupping my face in his palms. “Fabiana wanted Zeus to know that she’s not losing any sleep over him.”

I pursed my lips and sighed.

“I will,” I admitted.

Oliver shook his head and kissed my forehead.

“You saved me—and yourself. Zeus would never stop coming for either one of us.”

“That’s exactly what Fabiana said.”

“She’s wiser than she lets on.”

I tilted my head back and looked at him, allowing my lips to brush softly against his. Our eyes locked, and I exhaled shakily.

“Can we check out of the hotel now?” I mewled. “For real?”

He chuckled and nodded, hugging me tightly.

“Yes,” he promised. “That’s a great idea. Let’s go home and put this whole mess behind us once and for all.”

CHAPTER 37

DAHLIA

There were too many emotions running through me for anyone to keep up. I had just claimed a demon's life—the life of an immortal, no less—and was heading off into the sunset as if nothing had happened.

Oliver held my hand tenderly as he led us back toward the hotel, but I couldn't stop looking over my shoulder at Zeus, even after we had turned a corner.

"Don't worry about that. It'll be all taken care of," Oliver reassured me.

"Won't there be repercussions for this?" I asked worriedly. "Doesn't Zeus have people or—"

"No," Oliver interjected smoothly. "There's no danger to you. I promise."

I looked at him, but I saw no concern on his face. He genuinely wasn't worried about consequences. Was Zeus that insignificant in the world that no one would care if he were gone?

Apparently so.

The outline of the hotel appeared in front of us, but I stopped to take a deep breath, attempting to collect myself. It would take some time to process, just as Fabiana had said.

"What is it, Little Flower?"

"I don't know," I admitted helplessly. "I mean... where do we even go from here?"

Oliver smiled and squeezed my hand softly.

“Wherever you want, Dahlia.”

He made it sound so easy, but I knew it wasn’t, not really.

“The island, it’s yours,” he went on, causing me to blink.

“It’s yours, you mean,” I replied.

Oliver shook his head. “No. It’s yours. I’m bequeathing it to you in its entirety.”

I started to shake my head, but he stopped me.

“You earned it, rightfully. You’re the one who risked yourself for it, and it should be yours. I already have the paperwork in progress. There’s no going back on it now.”

“I don’t...” I sputtered, but Oliver stroked my cheek with his finger.

“I hope you and I will always be together as one,” he told me sincerely. “And what’s mine will always be yours, Dahlia, but if that should ever change in your mind, should you ever want to be on your own, Jasnja Island is yours alone. The income the island produces is also yours, set aside in an account in your name. I have absolutely no access to it. You can always be self-sufficient, should you choose to go that route.”

My jaw slacked, and my heart twisted in knots. The sentiment stole my breath. He had heard me all along, the need for me to know who I was as my own person. But now that I had found the other half of myself, my mate, the true second half of my soul, I would never need that safety net, and I tried to tell him as much.

“That’s fine,” Oliver insisted. “Then you don’t use it if you don’t need it. However, it’s here if you do.”

“You love this island, Oliver,” I breathed. “I can’t let you ___”

“I love you more than the island, Little Flower.”

He reached down, and I peered at him curiously as he picked up a sharp rock.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my brow furrowing.

He sliced his hand and reached for mine.

“We’re doing a blood oath on it.”

I started to shake my head. “That’s not necessary!”

“It’s necessary,” he insisted. “It’s a blood oath that dictates that the island is yours alone, and should you ever choose to come and live here alone, I will never step foot on it and bother you under the penalty of death.”

“Oliver!”

“Give me your hand.”

I winced lightly as he cut into my skin, shaking his bloodied palm to mine. The bond confirmed.

“Now come on,” he laughed, nodding toward the hotel. “I’m basically naked, remember?”

I giggled, checking out his muscled form with a bite of my lower lip.

“I kind of like you that way,” I replied.

CHAPTER 38

OLIVER

We packed up our room at the Dockside, and I whisked Dahlia to my mansion on the far side of the island within the hour. Ash and Fabiana had overtaken the Presidential Suite, a fact that we heard through the walls on our way out. The pink of Dahlia's cheeks amused me, but she made no comment about her new friend's ability to move on with such grace.

A rickshaw brought us up the hill to the house that overlooked most of Jasnia Island. The land had always been a point of jealousy for Zeus, even if he'd never admitted it aloud. The view alone was worth millions of dollars, the angle overtaking every aspect, from the sea to the forest and everything in between.

"What do you think?" I asked when we arrived.

"Oh? Is this it?" Dahlia asked dryly, spinning around the marble foyer in awe. "Why are your houses so big?"

I chuckled, dropping our bags in the entranceway.

"I have staff, too," I reminded her, but no one materialized in that moment to prove my point. It was all the better for me. I wanted Dahlia to myself for now. It seemed right to bless this house, as well as all my other properties, as soon as possible.

She looked at me, and instantly, our breaths were an identical rhythm, hearts ready to explode from our chests, but there was no shyness, no hesitation as we found ourselves entangled in a tight embrace. There was no need for words

anymore. We were automatically drawn to one another, like we'd already known each other our whole lives.

"Welcome home," I murmured anyway, before my tongue touched the silken softness of her mouth. Dahlia pulled me closer, pressing her slender frame against me, arching her curves into mine.

"Don't you want a tour?" I teased lightly.

"Do you want to give me a tour?" she taunted back.

I crushed my mouth to hers again, giving her my answer. The longing in my bones reached an almost insurmountable level. It was strange how deeply I needed her, like I hadn't been feasting upon her all this time, and yet, I just couldn't get enough. My hand twined in her hair, pulling her neck back to expose the creamy skin of her throat. It might have been my favorite spot, but there were so many others to explore. Dahlia moaned softly, fueling my urges. We couldn't just stand there in the hallway. There was no good place to prop her up.

I scooped her into my arms, relishing her small gasp of surprised pleasure, and walked her along the length of the bungalow toward the back of the house, where the main bedroom lay. I placed her onto the king-sized bed and paused to look at her, not wanting to rush the moment, but the incessant tugging in my pants was trying to guide me, my flesh prickling deliciously as our bodies met again.

Dahlia was more fevered than me, pulling the blue and white sundress over her head to expose her braless breasts, nipples taut and waiting for attention. I licked my lips, eager to taste them. I would never tire of the way she felt on my tongue.

I couldn't resist any longer, burying my face into her chest, licking and sucking as her fingers looped through my hair, tugging back gently. My teeth gnashed into her ripe breast, savoring her squeaks of pleasure.

Lower my mouth journeyed across the tight skin of her flat stomach, inhaling the scent of her. It was intoxicating enough, but coupled with her taste, I was half-drunk and heady. This

was everything I wanted: the island and Dahlia. My Little Flower.

I ripped off my shirt, Dahlia's trembling fingers helping me along. My hands encircled the firm rear of her buttocks as my teeth worked at her panties. She raised her legs to allow me access, and in seconds, I was nuzzling the wetness of her core, one palm massaging her breast, the other pushing her thighs apart. She cried out as my tongue delved into her middle, lapping up the juice of her excitement.

Upward she bucked, my lips drawing every drop of moisture as her mewls grew louder and more intense. Her back tensed, her body trembling, and suddenly, there was a whoosh of warmth against my chin. Unable to stand another second, I propped myself up, positioning myself between her legs, and met her eyes.

Her expression was almost trance-like, her doe eyes glassy with passion as she bit on her lower lip, nodding slightly as if to approve my entry. Like I didn't know her permission was always granted.

Sighing, I embraced her, kissing her full lips gently as my hardness slipped into her opening. Forward I plunged, Dahlia arching her slim hips beneath me, her calves locking over my waist as she drew me in harder and harder. Soon, we were both a gasping, grunting, sweating pile, and Dahlia began to climax again, her nails digging into the base of my back.

I could hold on no longer, and I joined her release with my own—long, hot streams of nectar filling her as I groaned. For a long moment, I could only lay in place, waiting for my heartbeat to return to normal before I could look at my mate's face. Her golden arch glowed brightly, the happiness of her orgasm apparent on her face as she lay with a small smile, her eyes closed.

"Little Flower?" I murmured, brushing the blonde strands from her face. She opened her eyes and bit on her lower lip.

"What is it?"

"I'm in love with you."

Her smile lit the room, and I kissed her sweetly on the lips.

“I’m in love with you, my mate,” she purred, snuggling into me deeply. “But we are not going to fall asleep again. Are you going to show me this island, or what?”



WE STARTED closest to my place and worked our way out toward the yacht. I’d planned to bring us home that night, although I was secretly hoping that Dahlia would find herself so enamored with the island that she might change her mind. It was honestly and truly hers now, and the best thing I could hope for was that she would fall in love with it the same way I had.

But after what she had endured on the island, I reasoned it might be an uphill battle getting her to enjoy it.

We’ll just have to make this a regular trip for us until she understands how magical this place truly is.

We shopped in the little shops and ate lunch at the marina. Every hour that passed, I noticed that Dahlia became more relaxed. Appreciation for the scenery and locals began to shine in her eyes.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, sensing that she was envisioning something.

She tittered lightly.

“I think Atlas and Bianca would like it here,” she told me honestly.

“Oh?” I asked, raising an eyebrow speculatively. “Will I get to meet them, too, or will you just sneak them onto the island without me knowing?”

I was half joking, but Dahlia took it seriously.

“Of course you’ll get to meet them,” she replied, frowning. “Maybe we can take a trip to Covale City soon.”

I leaned across the table and took her hands.

“Or maybe you can invite them here,” I suggested. “We could have a vacation. A real vacation, and you could show them your own private island.”

Dahlia grinned and nodded, closing her fingers tightly around mine.

“A family vacation,” she murmured, sitting back with her hands still clasped tightly around mine. “Look how far we’ve come.”

I eyed her curiously. “What do you mean?”

She laughed lightly and shook her blonde mane, looking bashfully at the table in front of her.

“I was just thinking of what my mom would say if she could see us right now,” she murmured. “I think she would be thrilled for Bianca and me.”

I leaned forward, raising her hands to my lips.

“The best is yet to come, Little Flower,” I promised her. “It only gets better from here.”

EPILOGUE

DAHLIA

One Year Later

Gentle jazzy music piped out of the kitchen speakers as I cut up cheese for the charcuterie board. I didn't see Oliver until he snuck up behind me and snatched a cube off the layout.

"If you keep doing that, there won't be any food left for the guests," I complained.

"If you hadn't invited the whole strip club, you wouldn't have to worry about food," my mate countered wickedly, and I rolled my eyes.

"I invited Brigid and her girlfriend," I reminded him. "Stop making such a big deal out of it."

"I'm just saying—if you play favorites, the others are going to get jealous."

"Like Linnie?" I asked sweetly.

Oliver balked and gave me a playful smack on my ass, but the doorbell rang, saving our passive-aggressive spat from getting any worse. He did have a point about me inviting the bartender to our house for the dinner party, but she and I had stayed close even after I'd left Cooters to help Oliver run his businesses. And I was eager to meet her new girlfriend.

"Ash is here," Oliver announced, ambling back into the kitchen, the demon on his heels.

Ash offered me a taut, characteristic smile, and I returned it with one of my own. While he wasn't a regular fixture at the

lake house, he came by often enough now that I recognized Ash's standoffishness to be just that. He wasn't the asshole I had mistaken him for at the start, but he also wasn't someone with whom I was going to exchange warm and fuzzy phone conversations in the middle of the night.

"I brought wine," he offered, thrusting an expensive bottle of pinot noir toward me.

I nodded for Oliver to take it before wiping my hands on the front of my apron and offering Ash a formal kiss on the cheek.

"You didn't have to go through the trouble," I told him, ushering the men into the sitting room. "I'm glad you could make it. Oliver said you've been in MacShire on business lately."

Flopping onto the white suede sofa, Ash groaned loudly.

"Not by choice," he replied curtly. "There's friction breaking out among the packs."

"Still?" Oliver asked, looking alarmed. "I thought all that was resolved."

Ash snorted again.

"You know how it goes, Oliver. Just when you think you resolve one thing, four more things pop up. It's a mess everywhere right now."

I frowned and stared at them.

"What's going on?"

"It's nothing," Oliver sighed. "I mean, nothing you need to worry about."

Ash nodded and flashed me one of his flat smiles.

"He's right. It doesn't affect you, Dahlia. This is all my problem."

I hesitated, believing them but wondering if I should press the matter. I didn't know a great deal about Ash's business, but I'd always been a little embarrassed to ask about it. Perhaps I

didn't want to know exactly what it was the demon got up to when he wasn't putting up with us at dinner parties.

"Let me get you a drink, Ash," I suggested instead.

"That's a wonderful idea," he agreed.

I wandered back toward the bar, honing my ears to their conversation, but I couldn't make out much of what they discussed. By the time I returned to Ash with his scotch, the doorbell rang again, announcing Brigid and her partner, Helga.

I set up the women in the living room with Oliver and Ash, checking my phone for word on Fabiana, but as dinner inched closer to being ready, there was still no word from my friend.

Sighing, I retreated to the other guests.

"I guess Fabiana's not back," I grumbled. "I hate it when she does this."

"She's undoubtedly still fucking her way across the world," Ash offered brightly.

I looked at him in dismay.

"Doesn't that bother you?" I heard myself ask before I could think better of it.

Ash eyed me in surprise. "No. Why would it?"

Oliver chuckled and slipped his arm around my waist, kissing my neck lightly.

"I think Dahlia's mistaken yours and Fabiana's little tryst as something more meaningful than it was," he explained.

Ash's face brightened with understanding.

"Oh, gods, no," he snickered. "It was fun for a few weeks—if that. But in the end, there was no future for us. Fabiana was with that bastard for two centuries. She wasn't about to be tied down to anyone."

"And I'm sure you were relieved to be let off the hook," Oliver remarked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

Ash snorted again but made no comment.

Of course I'd known that nothing had come of their relationship, but it baffled me that they could be so flippant about the sex.

"Dinner's ready," I said, eager to change the subject that I had broached in the first place.

"You need help, Dahlia?" Brigid asked.

"Sure. I let the staff have the night off, but I only have two hands."

"I can help, too," Helga offered, joining us in the kitchen.

"He's kind of hot," she tittered when we were alone.

"I hope you're talking about Ash and not the hostess' mate and my boss," Brigid reprimanded her girlfriend. I stared at the couple, aghast.

"Aren't you—?"

They both stared at me expectantly, but I swallowed the label. Maybe they were in an open relationship.

"Never mind," I muttered.

I was coming to terms with the fact that I would probably never catch up to everyone's free views on sexuality and relationships.

"I meant Ash," Helga reassured Brigid. "What's his deal?"

"Actually, I don't know," I admitted with embarrassment. "But feel free to ask him."

I handed them each a plate to bring to the table, and they wandered out, me in tow with a platter of roast beef piled high.

"...this and that," Ash was saying when I joined them.

"Why do I feel as though you're purposely being vague?" Helga asked coyly, sitting down at the table.

Her promise to help me was forgotten now that Ash was talking.

"It's a lot of small ventures," Ash said, shrugging. "I don't know how else to describe my business."

I set the meat in the center of the table while Helga pressed him.

“Okay, fine. Give me a workday in your life,” she insisted. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

Ash’s eyebrow rose, and he glanced at Oliver, who groaned lightly.

“What?” I asked.

“Ash...” Oliver pleaded, but it was too late.

“Tomorrow, I have to go to MacShire and collect the debt from a man who’s owed me for almost five years.”

“Oh, that sounds... messy,” Brigid tittered nervously.

She shifted her weight uncomfortably, and I darted my eyes around.

“I doubt it,” Ash replied. “He gave me his twenty-five-year-old daughter as collateral.”

Dead silence fell over the table as the women gaped at him.

“What?!” I spat, appalled by his nonchalance. “Are you kidding me?”

I looked at Oliver, who rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. But Ash was nonplussed.

“I’ll see if that’s worth the trade tomorrow,” he said, reaching for a dinner roll.

“You—you can’t take a woman as payment!” I sputtered.

“Dahlia...” Oliver muttered, but Ash raised his head to look at me.

“Collateral,” he said. “Not payment.”

“It’s the same thing!” I cried, infuriated.

Ash rolled his eyes and looked at Oliver. “I thought she was from Forny.”

“She is,” he sighed.

“Then you should know better than anyone, Dahlia, that this is the way the world works sometimes.”

A queasiness struck me, and I had to sit down, my head shaking as I stared at my mate’s good friend.

He was right, of course. There would always be men like Eugene, who sold their daughters to men like Jesse and, apparently, Ash in this world.

All I could do was be grateful that Bianca and I had managed to escape the life that came with such a heavy burden. We were free, and I had Oliver to thank for that.

I backtracked to the kitchen and paused to catch my breath a moment before Oliver joined me.

“I wish he hadn’t told you that,” he said.

“I wish he wasn’t accepting a woman as payment,” I replied tersely.

“I doubt he will,” he offered lightly. “You know Ash—things aren’t always what they appear with him. He tends to put on a rougher front.”

I eyed him, wondering if that was true or if he was just saying that to appease me.

It was a small consolation, but it was something. Gods help that poor girl, whoever she was.



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