



RUTHLESS  3  ENEMY

# HEARTLESS ENEMY

MARION BLACKWOOD

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BOOK THREE

MARION BLACKWOOD

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## CONTENT WARNINGS

The *Ruthless Enemy* series is intended for mature readers. It contains graphic violence and sexual content. If you have specific triggers, you can find the full list of content warnings at: [www.marionblackwood.com/content-warnings](http://www.marionblackwood.com/content-warnings)

*For everyone who is one more setback away from becoming a  
villain*

## CHAPTER 1



Loud pounding came from my door. I shot upright and leaped out of bed. Snatching up my sword, I darted across the room and shoved the door open.

“Are we under attack?” I demanded.

Tyler blinked at me from the other side of the threshold. “No, sir. It’s—”

“Then you’d better have one hell of an explanation for this.”

“It’s Eve.”

Dread washed through my veins like cold poison. Keeping my voice level, I asked, “What about Eve?”

“She’s here.”

I leaned out, glancing at the corridor behind him. It was empty. With furrowed brows, I slid my gaze back to Tyler. “What do you mean, *here*?”

Uncertainty swirled in Tyler’s normally so intelligent blue eyes as he glanced between me and my bedroom windows on the other side of the room. “She’s outside.”

Turning around, I cast a glance at the dark night outside the windows behind me.

Rain poured down, splattering the glass and beating against the metal roof with a steady thrumming sound. I turned back to Tyler, and my frown twisted into an annoyed scowl.



“Why haven’t you allowed her inside?” I said, my voice pulsing with barely restrained anger. “I thought I made it clear to everyone inside this Court that Eve Sterling is allowed to come and go as she wishes. So why is she still standing outside in the rain?”

Tyler, to his credit, didn’t shrink back from the anger bubbling inside me. Instead, he kept his hands down by his sides in a clear gesture that he wouldn’t stop me if I decided to punish him for it.

While holding my gaze, he replied, “We tried, sir. We told her to come inside but she’s just... standing there. She hasn’t even looked at us. Let alone spoken to us. And I assumed that...” His eyes flicked to the side for a second, as if he was uncertain whether he had made the right call about whatever he was about to say next. “That you didn’t want us to touch her.” He cleared his throat before finishing with, “So we haven’t tried to lead her inside either.”

I watched him in silence for a few seconds while suppressing the satisfying smile that tugged at my lips. I really had trained him well.

But the brief flash of satisfaction evaporated quickly when my thoughts returned to Eve, and worry took its place. Why was she just standing out there in the rain? After how we left things, or rather after what she said before *she* left yesterday, I didn’t think I would be seeing her again.

With worry still snaking through my chest, I gave Tyler a nod to acknowledge that he had indeed made the right call. “I’ll be right down.”

Tyler dipped his chin before disappearing back down the black and gold corridor.

Leaving the door open, I strode back into my room and returned my sword to the rack before quickly putting on some clothes. Then I hurried out into the hallway and down towards the front doors.

Light from the torches and oil lamps set onto the chains throughout my throne room painted the gray metallic space

with dancing firelight. Earlier today, this room had been filled with dark mages who had knelt and sworn their allegiance to me as the sole ruler of the south side. The internal war between the dark mage Houses of Malgrave was finally at an end.

That should have made me feel elated. But all I had been able to feel since Eve said goodbye and walked out of here yesterday was pulsing pain that was spreading through my heart like cracks in brittle glass.

So even though I was worried about why Eve was just standing out there in the rain, I also couldn't help the tiny flicker of hope that sprouted in my chest. She had said goodbye, but now she was here. Did that mean that she had changed her mind? But what could possibly have made her change her mind in such a fundamental way? And in such a short time?

Stepping across the threshold, I walked out into the pouring rain and then stopped when I found Eve standing a short distance from me. My guards flicked uncertain glances at me. I jerked my chin, telling them to give us some space. They dutifully moved out of earshot while still scanning the dark street around us.

Rain splashed down on me, soaking my hair and clothes, as I closed the final distance to Eve. I studied her.

She was wearing civilian clothes, those black and red leather ones that made her look fierce and powerful, rather than that awful white and gold uniform. Her light brown hair lay plastered to her skin, completely soaked from the rain, and water ran down her forehead and along her nose before dripping down to the puddles on the street.

My heart stuttered as I met her gaze. Or rather, as I looked into her eyes, because she was most certainly not meeting my gaze. She was staring unseeing at the red-painted doors behind me, looking as if she was drowning in an abyss somewhere in her mind.

Stopping right in front of her, I flicked a quick glance up and down her body to check for injuries before returning my

gaze to her emotionless eyes. “Spitfire?”

No response.

I gently placed my fingers on her chin, tilting it up so that she met my gaze. “Eve.”

She started at my touch, and then blinked several times. Rain still ran down her face and coated her lashes. I tried to keep the worry off my face as I watched her.

At last, that vacant expression on her features disappeared and her eyes focused on me.

“Levi,” she said, a hint of confusion in her tone, as if she couldn’t quite remember how she had gotten here. Then her eyes cleared completely, and fury flared up like hellfire behind them instead. “I want him dead.”

My heart stopped. Had someone hurt her?

“Who?” I demanded.

Rage roared in her eyes. “Everyone.”

“Did someone hurt you?”

“I want them all dead.”

“Spitfire,” I ground out, tightening my grip on her chin and forcing her gaze back to mine. “Did. Someone. Hurt you?”

“No.” Her gaze sharpened as she cocked her head. “Yes.”

Releasing her chin, I flexed my fingers while the urge to paint the streets with blood crashed over me. “Give me a name and I will burn the fucking world down for you.”

“Ulric Smith.”

I was halfway to summoning a blade and stalking off to hunt the guy down when the name registered fully in my mind. Stunned confusion pulsed through me as I jerked to a halt and instead turned back to Eve.

“As in, your old captain who was forced into retirement?” I asked. “The one you said took care of you after your father died?”

“My father didn’t *die!*” The words ripped out of her like a snarl. “He was killed!”

Pain spread through my chest. Indeed, he hadn’t simply died. He had been killed. By dark mages. And that was the reason why Eve would never be mine. The reason why she would never stay with me. Why there would always be a massive hole full of sharp edges and pulsing pain where my heart should be. By all hell, if I had known who the dark mages were who killed him, I would’ve torn the world apart to go back in time and slaughter their ancestors so that they would never even have been born.

But I couldn’t do that.

Instead, all I could do was to stand there uselessly and say, “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“He killed him,” Eve interrupted.

I blinked. Water streamed down my face, and I wiped the rain from my eyes so that I could focus fully on Eve. She didn’t even care about the rain crashing down over her. She just stared back at me with those eyes like pits of hellfire.

“Captain Ulric Smith,” she spat the name like the foulest of curses, “killed my father.”

Disbelief slammed into me with the force of a boulder. “What?”

“He killed him. Ulric killed my father.” She raked her hands through her hair, pushing the wet strands from her face, and then started pacing back and forth with the restlessness of a wild animal trapped in a cage. “I read the report. The real report. Dark mages didn’t attack our tavern. The constables did. My dad was a dark mage sympathizer. That’s why there were dark mages at our tavern that night. The constables attacked because they wanted to arrest them. And Ulric shot the lightning bolt that killed my father.”

She bit out each short choppy sentence as if she could barely restrain herself.

“And then he lied to me about it,” she growled while still pacing back and forth, her boots sending splashes of water

flying around her with every hard stomp of her feet. “My whole life. He lied to me. Told me that I should become a constable. Made me feel like shit about the dark impulses that sometimes broke through the careful façade I always maintained. Tried to suppress my true nature. And instead make me more like *him*.”

The acid in that final word could have seared a hole right through the stone street below our feet.

Eve abruptly whirled around and stalked a step back up the street while declaring, “I’m going to kill him. Right now.”

Lurching forward, I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to a halt. “No. Stop.”

She whipped around and shoved my arm aside. Her eyes flashed like lightning strikes as she snapped, “I am going to kill him!”

“No, listen to me—”

“No, *you* listen to me!” She gave my chest a shove before throwing her arms out in a desperate gesture. “I need to kill him. Right now.” She jabbed her hand hard against her own chest, right above her heart. “Because if I don’t do something to release this rage inside me, I’m going to fucking explode.”

“Then take it out on me.”

It looked like she had been about to snap back at me, but instead she started slightly as my words registered.

“Take it out on me,” I repeated while holding her gaze with serious eyes.

“I...” She trailed off.

Brushing my hands together, I summoned a metal wall from the ground and raised it slightly before me. Then I nodded to her. “Go ahead. Call up your magic and throw it at me until you’re satisfied. I can take it.”

She just looked back at me. I could see her fighting an internal battle to stay calm, but the wildfire in her eyes still roared furiously.

I let a sly smile lift my lips. “Besides, you’re so much weaker than me so it won’t even be difficult for me.”

Based on the spark in her eyes, she knew exactly what I was doing. That I was baiting her on purpose. But it still worked.

Magic flashed between the metal buildings and lit up the dark night as Eve did exactly what I told her to do. I raised wall after wall to block the wind and fire and lightning and water blasts that she hurled at me one after the other while the rain crashed down around us. Booms reverberated through the air as her attacks hit. But just like I promised her, I could handle whatever she threw at me.

The fury had at last drained from her eyes when she shot one final lightning bolt into my shield. Then she stopped. Standing there with her chest heaving, she just stared at me from across the wet street.

Then her knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground. Kneeling there in the middle of a puddle, she screamed up at the sky. The pain in that scream shredded my heart. I started towards her while she pressed her palms against the stones before her and then curled in on herself.

Her soaked hair fell down around her face like a curtain.

Crouching down in front of her, I drew my hands through her hair and hooked it back behind her ears. She slowly raised her head again to meet my gaze. I once more had to suppress the urge to slaughter every single person on the north side for putting such pain in Eve’s eyes.

“I want him dead, Levi,” she said, tears now streaking down her face and mixing with the rain.

Cupping her cheek, I brushed my thumb along her cheekbone, wiping the tears away. “I know.”

“I want to kill him right now.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do!”

“No.” I caressed her cheek again. “Listen to me, spitfire. Revenge is a complicated thing.”

“I don’t care! I’m going to kill him.”

She started to stand up as if she was going to march back to the north side and execute some half-assed plan to kill a former captain of the constables right at this very moment. Since I understood the all-consuming need for revenge better than anyone, I slid my hand down to her shoulder and stopped her from doing just that.

Anger flickered to life in her eyes again as she locked them on me. I just looked back at her with a steady gaze.

“I want him dead,” she pressed out. “Now.”

I heaved a deep sigh. “No, you don’t.”

She was about to argue again, so I gave her shoulder a firm squeeze while holding her gaze with serious eyes.

“Trust me.”

## CHAPTER 2



Morning sunlight fell in through the windows and warmed my face, but I didn't open my eyes. Instead, I remained lying there underneath the soft covers. Levi's warm muscular body was wrapped around mine, holding me tightly as if to make sure that I didn't fall apart. And I had needed that. By all hell, I had needed it.

Drawing in a deep breath, I at last opened my eyes and looked up at Levi's lethally handsome face. His features were smoothed by sleep, and his chest rose and fell with deep breaths.

I had been so angry last night. At Ulric. At the constable force. At the whole north side. And at Levi for trying to stop me from going back there to slit Ulric's throat in his sleep.

But now, when dawn shone its bright light over the city, a sense of calm determination had returned to me.

What Levi had told me last night made a lot of sense. I hadn't wanted to listen at first, but now I was glad that he had stopped me from doing something rash. Maybe that was why I had come here in the first place. Why I had walked across the whole city in the middle of the night while being pelted by rain. Because I knew that Levi would help me.

"See something you like?" Levi suddenly asked even though he still hadn't even opened his eyes.

A huff of amusement escaped my throat. Reaching up, I drew soft fingers along Levi's throat. "Actually, I was just thinking about how easy it would be to kill you right now."



At last, he cracked his eyes open. There was a sly smile playing over his lips as he cocked an eyebrow. “Is that what you think?”

Before I could so much as open my mouth to reply, smooth metal wrapped around my wrist as a coil from Levi’s black and golden bedframe shot through the air. The band of metal locked around my wrist and yanked my hand away from his throat before pulling back so quickly that I was forced to turn over on my back.

With a smug smirk on his face, Levi rolled over and threw his leg over my body so that he was straddling my hips. The metal from the bedframe kept my wrist trapped as Levi leaned down over me and slid his calloused hand over my collarbones.

Casually resting his hand around my throat, he leaned down and claimed my lips with a possessive kiss.

My spine tingled in response.

“Come try it, spitfire,” Levi breathed against my lips.

I chuckled.

After smiling against my mouth and then stealing one more kiss, Levi made the metal retreat back into the bedframe and then maneuvered over to the edge of the mattress before climbing out of bed. I sat up, raking my fingers through my hair and pushing it back.

My clothes had been completely soaked when Levi had carried me up to his bedroom last night, so he had helped me get them off and then handed them to one of his household staff. So I sat there naked in bed while Levi walked over to his door and opened it. After reaching outside, he returned with a neatly folded stack of very familiar black and red clothes.

With my eyebrows raised, I watched as Levi moved back to the bed and placed my now dry clothes next to me.

For a moment, it looked like he was going to say something. But then he just gave his head a quick shake as if changing his mind. I furrowed my brows as I watched him walk over to his closet and pull out some clothes for himself.

His powerful muscles rippled when he buckled his belt and then pulled a tight black shirt over his head. The sight of it made me want to pull him back to bed and spend the rest of the day fucking his brains out. But unfortunately, there were other matters to handle right now, so I forced myself to get out of bed and get dressed as well.

Once Levi was done, he turned around to face me again. And once more, he opened his mouth as if to say something before apparently thinking better of it and closing it again.

Sunlight streamed in through the windows, making his gray eyes glint like sharpened steel and causing the gold veins in the black metal around us to glimmer.

“What is it?” I asked as I pulled on my pants and then reached for my shirt.

“What do you mean?” Levi replied.

“I can clearly see that there is something you want to ask me.” I yanked my shirt over my head and then strapped on my sword belt. “And you’ve never been one to mince words. So what is it?”

Levi cleared his throat in a very uncharacteristic display of uncertainty. “It’s just... I was just wondering where this leaves us?”

“With Ulric? I thought that I already agreed that you were right last night?”

“No, I, uhm... I mean, what does this mean for us?”

For a moment, I couldn’t figure out what he was asking about. Narrowing my eyes, I studied him. Realization slammed into me. *Oh*. Us, as in... us.

Pain stabbed through my chest.

He had laid his heart at my feet last time I was in this bedroom. And I had walked all over it and right out the door.

I hated myself for walking out on him. For choosing my perceived duty over him. Over us. Over myself. Now, I knew what I wanted. But a terrified part of me was worried that I might have missed my chance. That I had hurt Levi one too

many times, and that the offer he had made me, of a home here with him, was no longer on the table.

“What does this mean?” I echoed.

Maybe the option to stay here with him was no longer there, but I knew that the option to stay on the south side always would be at least.

Striding across the floor, I grabbed Levi by the collar of his shirt and crushed my lips against his. He jerked in surprise and stiffened for a second. Then he slid his hands through my hair and kissed me back so deeply that my toes curled in my boots.

My heart lurched with hope. Did that mean that he still wanted to share a home with me? I couldn't know for sure. So I took the coward's way out and focused on the one thing that I at least knew that I would be welcomed back to.

“It means I'm in.” With a grin on my lips, I spread my arms and motioned at the area around us. “You want the south side? Then let's go get it.”

His eyes lit up in a way that made warmth spread through my chest. But then a guarded expression blew across his features.

“You're truly willing to switch sides completely? Not just for revenge, but to actually stay here with...” It sounded like he had been about to say *me*. Or maybe that was just my own wishful thinking, because what he finished with was, “Dark mages?”

“I've been fighting my own nature for far too long now. This is what my father wanted. What he believed in and secretly worked for. Freedom from suffocating rules and regulations. So yes, I'm in. Fully. Let's take the south side.”

For a moment, it looked like Levi was going to ask something else. But then he closed his mouth and cleared his throat before instead saying, “How do we do it?”

Running a hand along my jaw, I paced a few steps while considering. “We need to make the Parliament of Malgrave formally cede the south side to you.”

“I’ve been considering that for a while now, but what I can’t really figure out is if they would actually abide by that or if they would just sign something and then attack anyway.”

“They’ll abide by it.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. The parliament is many things, but they do honor official declarations. That principle is what the whole north side is built on, after all.”

He nodded. “Alright. Then how do we get them to do that? My plans have always involved threatening either them or their family members until they agree to do what I want.”

“That would probably work.” I stopped pacing. Turning back to face him fully, I met his gaze and blew out a sigh. “But there is another problem we need to solve first.”

“The planned invasion.”

“The planned invasion,” I echoed with a nod. “Since you now control the entire south side, I don’t think they will try to attack right away. But we still need eyes inside the constables’ department.”

“And you were demoted to archives duty,” he filled in, repeating what I had told him last night when I had explained everything in more detail.

“Yes. And down in the archives, I won’t know what they’re planning. I need to get back into the South Side Department.”

Regret washed over Levi’s face as he looked back at me. I had already explained everything that Captain Wright had done, so Levi knew exactly what kind of person our new captain was. I could tell from just the look in his eyes that he didn’t want me to do this.

To be fair, I didn’t particularly relish the thought of it either. But there really was no other choice. I needed to get back to the South Side Department. For multiple reasons. And there was only one way to do that.

“Which means that I need to grovel my way back into Wright’s favor,” I finished.

## CHAPTER 3



My entire throne room was packed with dark mages. Sitting atop my massive throne of metal, I swept a commanding stare over all of them. My original battle mages looked back at me with calm expressions on their faces. The ones who had only joined me after I wiped out the other gang leaders, on the other hand, looked up at me with a hint of worry. As if they feared that I might change my mind and instead decide to slaughter them all for supporting a rival House.

“According to my sources,” I began, my voice echoing between the dark metal walls, “The white boots have postponed the invasion now that the entire south side is united under my House.”

No murmur swept through the hall. They were all too well trained for that. But relief did blow across several faces.

“But make no mistake,” I continued while leveling a hard stare on them all. “They *are* still coming. We’ve bought ourselves some room to breathe, but they will still try to take back the south side. Which means that we must be ready.”

Practically all parts of the crowd nodded while determined expressions descended on their features. We might have been on different sides in the gang war earlier, but on this one thing we had always seen eye to eye. The south side should not be subjected to the laws of the parliament. We made our own rules and served our own justice when those rules were broken.

“Those of you who used to belong to the House of Lightning and the House of Stone.” Several people stiffened as the words left my mouth, and worry yet again flickered in some eyes. But all I said was, “I want you on watch along the shores of the River of Souls, since you know those areas best.”

The tension disappeared from their shoulders, and they dipped their chins in acknowledgement. “Yes, sir.”

“If the white boots start moving across the Bridge of Life, I want to know about it before they have even crossed it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. The rest of you already have your orders.”

The mass of dark mages lowered their chins again.

“Before you leave, go see Shinji, Tyler, or Chris.” Raising my arm, I motioned at the three men standing to the right of my throne. “You know the weaknesses of your former territories better than anyone. Tell them about it so that we can shore those up before the invasion happens.”

And so that I could make sure that no other House tried to rise from the ashes to challenge me again. But I refrained from saying that out loud.

When no one moved, I jerked my chin. “Get to it.”

Clothes rustled as they all bowed to me before striding away to do as I had ordered. I watched as several people who used to be high-ranking mages in the other Houses walked up to speak with my three top people about the weaknesses in their former territories. Once they were done, they all filed out the doors. Most of my original members remained, as ordered.

I was just about to stand up from my throne and start down the steps when Anna, one of my runners, appeared in the open doorway and jogged towards me.

Her brown hair was windswept and her green eyes sparkled with life as she skidded to a halt at the bottom of the steps.

“Sir,” she called up to me. “There’s a group of civilians on its way here. They said they want to make a request.”

I frowned slightly. I wasn't receiving petitioners today, and with everything going on, I didn't really have time for it either. But on the other hand, the civilians who had hidden my people were the reason why I had managed to keep so many of them safe when White had come here to slaughter them all.

"Alright," I answered. "Tell the guards to let them through."

Anna bobbed her head before darting back towards the street. I remained seated on my throne as I waited for this group she had mentioned to appear. On the floor below, the rest of my people lingered as well. As if they also wanted to find out what this was about.

Sunlight spilled in through the open doors and created a pool of light on the gray metal floor. But since there were no windows in here, the rest of the massive room was bathed in its customary foreboding gloom. Only firelight from the torches and oil lamps that were always burning illuminated the high-ceilinged space.

All the dark mages inside the room turned to glance at the doors as a group of people at last appeared on the threshold. I kept my eyes on them as well. They hesitated for a second before carefully stepping across the threshold and moving into the throne room. Some of them were wringing their hands. Others cast nervous glances at my battle mages.

The moment they came into view, I knew exactly who they were.

A heavy weight settled in my stomach.

These people were the family members of the men and women who had died by Christian White's hand when he was trying to force me to hand over Gemma. Or at least some of them. Once things had calmed down, I had planned to acknowledge their sacrifice and compensate the civilian families that they left behind, but I simply hadn't had the time. I had barely even had time to breathe lately.

They came to a halt a short distance from the metal steps up to my throne. Then a woman at the front drew in a bracing



breath.

“Mr. Arden,” she began, her voice surprisingly steady. “We are—”

“I know who you are, Mrs. Fern,” I said.

She jerked back a little and blinked at me in shock.

“I know who all of you are,” I continued, sweeping my gaze over the equally surprised group. “And I’m sorry for your loss.”

Mrs. Fern just stared back at me, stunned that I knew her name. But the man next to her, Thomas Grayson, recovered faster. Pain, and a hint of anger, pulsed in his eyes as he met my gaze.

“With all due respect, we don’t want your condolences,” he said. “We want revenge.”

Mrs. Fern quickly shook herself out of her stupor and grabbed his arm. Shaking her head, she cut him a sharp look before flicking her gaze back to me.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out, apologizing on Grayson’s behalf. “It’s just... emotions are raw right now.”

“I understand,” I simply replied.

Relief blew across her features. After swallowing, she drew in another bracing breath and then pressed on. “This Christian White killed our sons. Our daughters. Our husbands. Wives. Siblings. And based on what we have heard, he was able to just return to his home in the north.”

Yes. Because he was so dangerous and so fucking difficult to kill that the only thing I could do was to make a deal with him.

But I couldn’t admit that to Mrs. Fern, so instead I simply confirmed, “Yes.”

Another wave of pain washed over their features as they looked up at me helplessly. Then, as one, they all lowered themselves to their knees.

I wanted to snap at them to get up, but I still had an image to maintain so I just remained sitting on my throne, watching them.

“Please, Mr. Arden,” Mrs. Fern said while all of them stared up at me with pleading eyes. “We want Christian White dead for what he did to our loved ones. So please, we’re begging you to help us get revenge.”

A sharp jab speared through my chest. Their family members had died while they were under my protection. I was supposed to keep them safe. That was my end of the bargain. They gave me their loyalty and their lives, and I was supposed to make sure that no one messed with them in return. But I had failed. And I hadn’t even avenged them afterwards either. Instead, I had just let their killer go back to his damn castle.

Rage burned through me. I wanted revenge too for everything that White had done. No one came into my city and killed my people and abducted my spitfire and got away with it. But the problem was that White was too fucking dangerous. If I tried to get revenge, I might just draw his attention back to Malgrave, and then everyone would suffer.

But still...

“As you no doubt know, the white boots are planning an invasion to reclaim the south side,” I said. “First, I need to deal with that threat. Then I will see what can be done about Christian White.”

It wasn’t a promise that I would journey to the north and kill him. It was just an acknowledgement of the problem, and a confirmation that I shared their feelings on the subject, but also a reminder that I couldn’t divert attention to it right now since we were still in the middle of a war.

They seemed to understand that, because they all nodded before climbing to their feet again.

“Thank you for hearing us out,” Mrs. Fern said.

I nodded in acknowledgement.

A whole slew of emotions twisted inside my chest as I watched the group turn around and make their way back out. I

had finally wiped out all the other Houses and taken control of the entire south side, but things were far from over.

The white boots were planning another invasion, Eve had been betrayed by the person she had considered her uncle for years, the people I should have protected had not even been avenged, and that slimy fucker Christian White had gotten everything he wanted.

Raking a hand through my hair, I forced out a deep sigh.

There had to be a way to settle all of those scores without getting everyone killed in the process.

## CHAPTER 4



My former colleagues cast uncertain glances at me as I walked past their shared space and continued down the corridor towards Captain Wright's office. I gave them a little wave. They started and then hurriedly returned it before snapping their gazes back to their own desks.

It had been a week since I was demoted to archives duty. And while my soul was slowly dying down there in that dusty and gloomy room full of stale air and unorganized files, I had been forced to wait and bide my time since it would have raised suspicion if I tried to grovel my way back too soon. A week was still a bit on the short side, but it was the quickest reasonably acceptable time frame. While Levi and I had used this week to plot out the rest of our plan fully, we really needed to get started now before it was too late.

Stopping in front of the closed door, I took a moment to compose myself. I used to be angry whenever I saw Wright in Ulric's office. But now, I just hated this entire office altogether. There were too many memories in it. Memories of late nights spent working on various cases with Ulric while we chatted and drank coffee to stay awake. Memories of his fatherly talks as he tried to help me through whatever problem I had run into.

Now, all those memories were polluted. Ruined. Tainted by the truth. That Ulric had killed my father and then lied to me about it for the past sixteen years while he tried to force me to become the person he wanted me to be.

I wanted to burn this whole room to the ground, and I had to flex my fingers and shake out my hand to stop myself from doing just that.

Drawing in a deep breath, I pushed all of that rage aside. I had another mission now. One that I would require all of my restraint to get through.

Captain Wright was exactly the kind of person that I loathed. Petty. Spiteful. And the kind who loved to lord his power over people when the only reason he had any power at all was because someone else had written that on a piece of paper.

Power wasn't handed out like confectionary. It was taken.

Amusement pulled at my lips as I imagined putting Wright in a room with Levi. Then that pompous fool would learn very quickly what *real* power was.

Feeling more in control of myself again, I drew in a deep breath and then schooled my features into a mask of submission. Then I raised my fist and knocked.

“Come,” Captain Wright barked from inside the room.

This was truly going to suck. But it needed to be done.

Opening the door, I slipped into Wright's office and then closed it behind me again. But I didn't straighten fully. Instead, I kept my shoulders slightly hunched as I moved towards the middle of the room with steps full of calculated uncertainty.

Captain Wright raised his eyebrows in genuine surprise when his gaze landed on me.

He looked the way he always did. Brown hair cropped close to his scalp, stern blue eyes that never seem satisfied with anything, and an air of looking down at people even though he was technically shorter than me.

Resting his elbows on the neat desk before him, he steepled his fingers and gave me a dismissive once-over. “Sterling.”

All I wanted to do was to punch his teeth down his throat, but instead, I replied with the honorific that I knew he preferred even more than *Captain*. “Sir.”

As expected, a hint of satisfaction flickered briefly in his eyes. I had never called him sir before. Only ever *Captain*.

“I thought I made it clear that you are no longer a part of the South Side Department,” he said, smugness lacing his voice. “So why are you here?”

Biting my lip, I made a show of wringing my hands and looking as desperate as possible. “I’ve come to ask you to please let me come back.”

“Let you come back?” He arched an eyebrow. “This is not a temporary punishment, Sterling. You have been *demoted*. And besides, the archives is an important cog in the great machine that is the constable force.”

“I know. Of course, it is. But please...”

“Please what?”

“Please take me back. I will suffocate if I spend one more week down there. I need to be up here, out on the street, actually helping people.”

Wright slammed his palms down on the desk and then slowly pushed to his feet in a way I think was supposed to have looked menacing. But after dealing with Levi these past few months, my criteria for what constituted menacing had already been irrevocably skewed.

While keeping the amusement off my face, I watched as Captain Wright stalked around his desk and prowled up to me. It took all of my willpower to remain standing with my shoulders hunched instead of straightening to remind Wright that I was taller than him.

“You do not get to decide which tasks to perform,” he declared as he drew himself up in front of me. “You will do whatever your commanding officer orders you to do.” Raising his hand, he pointed a finger towards the door. “And I am ordering you to go back to the archives where you belong.”

I wanted to grab that arrogant fucking finger of his and break it until he was screaming in pain. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't even afford to keep my pride. I needed to get back into the South Side Department for our plan to work, and there was only one thing that could make Wright change his mind. He wanted to feel powerful. So that was exactly what I would give him.

With that desperate mask still on my face, I dropped to my knees before his feet.

He started slightly in surprise. Then a smug smile briefly pulled at his lips before he quickly flattened them into a stern line again.

"Please, I'm begging you." I looked up at him with my most pleading expression. "I'll do anything."

Saying nothing, he just arched an expectant eyebrow at me.

"I'll do whatever you want," I promised. "I will obey every one of your orders without question."

"That's what a subordinate should do regardless."

"I'll spy on the others for you. I'll be your eyes and ears and report back everything they say when you're not in the room."

Interest glinted in his eyes. "A snitch, huh?"

I swallowed. "Whatever you want."

He chuckled and gave me another smug once-over. "I knew being demoted would be painful for you, Sterling. But I never expected to see you begging on your knees." Cocking his head, he sucked his teeth. "But then again, you have never had a real captain before. One who keeps tight control of his department instead of treating them like family and letting them run wild."

I suppressed a snort and barely managed to stop an eye roll.

"If I allow you to come back," he began, stressing that first word. "Your days of independence and free will are over. You

will snitch on your colleagues and do whatever I say. If I tell you to jump, the only acceptable answer is, *yes, sir.*” That hateful smirk curled his lips again. “Understood?”

My blood boiled with cold fury. I wanted to kill this pathetic little man so badly that I could barely think straight. But I couldn’t kill him. Not yet, anyway.

So I buried that hatred deep inside and instead replied, “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He let out an amused huff and then twitched his fingers at me. “Then welcome back to the South Side Department.”

I immediately got to my feet. And as I straightened to my full height, I decided that this was the last time that I would grovel before anyone. Ever.

Smug victory glittered in Wright’s blue eyes as he took a step closer.

“But never forget...” His mouth twisted in a self-satisfied smile. “You’re *my* creature now, Sterling.”



## CHAPTER 5



I pressed the edge of the sword across her throat from behind. “You really need to be more careful, spitfire. If I had been anyone else, you would be dead right now.”

Eve flashed me a smirk from over her shoulder. “You sure about that?”

Right as I was about to open my mouth to reply, I felt something sharp nudge me in the stomach. Glancing down, I found the point of a knife positioned at my kidney.

A satisfied smile spread across my lips as I looked back up and met Eve’s gaze again. “Impressive.”

She shot me a cocky grin. “I know.”

While huffing out a laugh, I lowered my sword and instead moved up beside her. She sheathed her knife too as she turned to face me. There was an unusual expression on her beautiful features.

From the day I met her, she had always had a strong sense of control around her. Even when I didn’t know that she was an undercover white boot, I had still gotten the feeling that she was always in complete control of how she reacted to things and what actions she took. But now, ever since she found out the truth about her father and Ulric, it was as if something had snapped inside her. Something huge.

It wasn’t that she had suddenly become unhinged. Just... wilder. Less restrained. Less stifled. And with far fewer fucks to give.

I remembered clearly when I had been in that state of free fall. When I had shed all the rules and restrictions that had been imposed on me. When I had realized that the world was there for my taking. It was certainly an adjustment period. Figuring out who you were. What lines you were willing to cross. And which ones you weren't. Where you drew the line. How you defined honor.

It was going to be very interesting to see what kind of person Eve developed into now.

Flashing me another smile, she moved as if to head back into her bedroom to get something. I grabbed her elbow while reaching into my pocket and pulling out a small leather-bound journal.

"From Sonia," I said as I handed it to her.

Her eyes lit up with the most magnificent light as she took it. "Perfect."

With a wink, she slipped away into her bedroom. I suppressed the urge to chuckle, or maybe shake my head, as I watched her. Eve Sterling was going to become such a menace. And I fucking loved it.

Drifting over to the shelf in her living room, I slid my gaze over the books there while Eve finished getting dressed for our mission tonight. Based on the titles on the spines, they appeared to be romance novels. I pulled one out at random and flipped through it.

A jolt shot through me when I landed on a very descriptive and very... *adventurous* sex scene. My eyebrows climbed even higher when I realized that it went on for several pages.

"If you need more pointers, I have several other books that I can recommend for you," Eve's smug voice suddenly filled the living room.

Turning towards her, I arched an eyebrow and shook the book slightly in the air. "This is what you read, spitfire?"

She lifted one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. "They're a hell of a lot more fun than the books on military strategy that you have in your study."

I chuckled and inclined my head, conceding the point. After flicking one more look down at the page, just for, uhm... research, I closed the book and put it back on the shelf.

Eve was now fully dressed in tight-fitting garments of black and dark red leather. The sight of her in that, combined with the images that her book had planted in my mind, made me want to shove her back into the bedroom and fuck her into oblivion. But unfortunately, we had a job to do.

“Ready?” she asked.

I nodded. “Is there a way to get onto the roof from here?”

Her eyebrows furrowed slightly in confusion, but she replied, “Yeah. Out the back.”

“Then lead the way.”

After some careful maneuvering, we straightened on top of her roof.

The north of Malgrave spread out around us like a dark sea. White light from the oil lamps along the streets broke up the blackness of night, and every once in a while, light flickered inside a window as well. But most of the city was fast asleep. Or at least, on *this* side of the city, people were asleep.

Brushing my palms together, I summoned a sheet of metal and used it to bridge the gap to the next building.

“Convenient,” Eve commented.

“I know.”

She huffed out an amused breath, but then started across the makeshift bridge.

Cool night winds swirled around us and ripped at our clothes as we made our way across the city and towards our target. I glanced at Eve again as we crossed the roof of yet another building.

“How did it go with Wright today?” I asked.

The starlight that had been glittering in her eyes disappeared immediately and was replaced by dark storm

clouds. She clenched her jaw for a second before answering.

“I had to kneel at his feet and beg and grovel,” she ground out. “Just as I suspected.”

Fury seared through my veins. I had never even met Captain Wright, but I still wanted to break every bone in his body and make him beg me for mercy.

“But I’m back in the South Side Department,” she finished, casting a glance at me over her shoulder as she jumped down from the narrow metal plank and onto the next roof. “So part one of the plan is in motion.”

“Good. Any news about the invasion?”

“No. I had to finish out my day in the archives today, so I haven’t been able to check. But I’ll do that first thing tomorrow.”

I nodded.

We closed the final distance to the parliament building in silence.

Once we reached the last house, we crouched down as we made our way to the edge and then lay down on the cold stone roof. Resting our elbows on the hard surface, we studied the massive structure before us.

The parliament building was made of white stone, just like most of Malgrave’s north side. Thick pillars stood proudly in two rows on both sides of the front doors, neat hedges had been planted around the property in order to form a barrier between it and the rest of the city, and the whole structure was topped by curving domes. Light from the brightly burning oil lamps set onto tall poles around the area cast shimmering reflections in the windows.

It was impressive, if a little pompous.

“Are you sure you still want to go with this approach?” Eve asked from beside me.

Keeping my eyes on the massive building ahead, I heaved a long sigh. “It’s not that I particularly *want* to go with this

approach. It's more... this is the only approach that has even the slightest chance of working."

"Which tactic would you have preferred to go with then?"

"Kidnapping their loved ones."

Flicking a glance at her from the corner of my eye, I waited for her to protest. She didn't. *Interesting*. So threatening the safety of family members, even completely innocent ones, was not one of her limits then.

Instead of telling me how evil that was, she simply asked, "So why don't you?"

"I don't have enough power on this side of the river." I sucked my teeth and then clicked my tongue in annoyance. "If they lived on the south side, where I have people on every corner who could ambush them and civilians who wouldn't dare to protest or get in the way, then I could kidnap them without any problem." I flicked my wrist to indicate the area around us. "But here? I don't have enough control over my surroundings to pull it off."

"True."

Silence descended over the roof as we just lay there for a while, watching the building and making note of the guard movements. Eve had told me that she could get more information about that once she was back on the constable force, but I had still wanted to see it with my own eyes. It was one thing to study the layout of a building on a map, and quite another to see the building in real life. Sometimes, there were opportunities and hiding places that couldn't be seen on a flat map. Though, as I watched the parliament building ahead, I couldn't actually find any of those.

I drummed my fingers on the cold edge of the roof. If I was going to force the parliament to cede the south side to me, I needed to get to them when they were all gathered in one place. And the only occasion when they were all in the same place at the same time was when they met in this building to discuss laws and current affairs. Or whatever it was that people did in a democracy.

Irritation flickered through me. I couldn't threaten them one by one, because it would give them too much time to counteract my moves. I needed to take them by surprise. One quick strike that would force them to do what I wanted. But the only question was of course how to accomplish that.

“What if we attacked and just killed the whole parliament instead?”

Shock pulsed through me. Twisting my head, I stared at Eve with eyebrows raised. She turned to meet my gaze and just shrugged.

“Then you wouldn't need to make them sign anything,” she said casually. “All of Malgrave would be yours.”

For a few seconds, all I could do was to stare at her.

A week ago, she had walked out on me when I had asked her to stay because she had said that she still believed in the justice system and the constables' mission to protect people. And now, she was casually proposing that we should slaughter the entire democratically elected parliament so that we could take control of the city.

I had always known that there was darkness lurking inside Eve's soul, because it called to the blackness in my own. But it still shocked me how ruthless she had become in such a short amount of time.

It also turned me on so fucking much that I couldn't stop a wicked grin from sliding across my lips as I looked back at her.

“While I do approve of the method in general,” I replied with that grin still on my face before turning serious again. “It wouldn't help me get what I actually want.”

She didn't look the slightest bit put out that I had shot down her suggestion. Instead, she cocked her head with genuine curiosity. “Why not?”

“Because I don't want the north side. I only want the south.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise.

I shrugged. “The north side is useless to me. People here are too used to living upstanding and proper lives, which will make them difficult to rule. And there are no economic benefits to gain from controlling this side either. Everyone on the south side already bends the knee to me, which has taken years of bloody work to accomplish. People here would fight my authority every step of the way, so this side would simply be too hard to control. And since I gain nothing from it, apart from some added landmass, it would just be a nuisance rather than an asset.”

“Huh.” She studied my face with a considering look on her features for a while before a glint of mischief sparkled in her eyes. “You know, you’re not as dumb as you look.”

Locking my hand around her jaw, I narrowed my eyes at her. “Watch it.”

She just let out a villainous laugh.

I leaned forward and stole that laugh from her wicked lips with a possessive kiss. She bit my lip before pulling back and winking at me.

“Well then,” she said as she climbed to her feet again. “Let’s see if we can find a way to get you full control of the south side then.”

## CHAPTER 6



“Y ou’re... back?”

I looked up from my desk to find Jamila and Frank and the rest of my colleagues standing frozen on the floor just inside the door and staring at me with wide eyes.

“Yeah.” I flashed them a smile before giving them a mildly questioning look. “Surprise, I guess.”

They all shook off their stupor and began moving into our shared office again.

Frank clapped me on the shoulder as he walked past towards his own desk. “Good to have you back.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “It’s—”

“How?” Jamila interrupted before I could finish the sentence. Her dark eyes were still swirling with bewilderment as she stared at me. “How? How can you possibly be back? We heard that Captain Wright had demoted you. Permanently.”

“Ulric talked some sense into him,” I lied effortlessly. “He convinced him that it wasn’t really my fault that things turned out the way they did and that a temporary punishment was more than enough.”

Behind me, Frank finished shrugging off his jacket. There was a light drizzle outside, and tiny drops of water slid down the white leather as he draped the jacket over the back of his chair.



“Ulric, huh?” he said while raking a hand through his blond hair.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “He has always known how to get the things he wanted.”

“True.” Wood creaked as he dropped down on his chair and heaved a deep sigh. “Now, we just need to get *him* back too.”

“Indeed,” Jamila said, and cut a sharp look down the corridor towards where the captain’s office was. “Wright is a bully.”

“Keep your voice down,” Frank hissed.

“This is me keeping my voice down,” Jamila snapped back. Flicking her dark curls behind her shoulder, she gave him and the rest of our colleagues a pointed look. “And I know you agree with me. All of you do.”

Several people cast worried glances towards the hallway, but no one contradicted her. So, apparently I wasn’t the only one who disliked Wright and his petty need to exert his authority.

“He’s working on it,” I said.

Stunned surprise bounced from face to face as they all turned to stare at me.

“Ulric,” I clarified. “He said that he is working on a plan to come back.”

Jamila’s eyes lit up, and a smile spread across Frank’s angular face too. But before any of them could speak, the door to the captain’s office was shoved open and Wright stuck his head out.

“Sterling,” he called. “Get in here.”

“Well,” I said in a low voice to my colleagues while pushing up from my chair. “The master calls.”

A few of my colleagues chuckled.

Leaving them behind, I strode down the hall and then walked in through the still open door. Wright was standing by

one of the bookshelves, his back to me, as I entered.

“Sir?” I said in my most pleasant tone.

“Get me a cup of coffee,” he ordered.

An overwhelming urge to set him on fire crashed into me. Flexing my fingers, I barely managed to stop myself from summoning a fireball and doing just that. Instead, I gritted my teeth and drew in a calming breath through my nose.

Then I replied, “Yes, sir.”

It took great effort not to stomp angrily as I walked back out into the corridor to follow his orders. I contemplated whether to locate some poison and put it into his coffee as I made my way down to the restaurant section of the building. But I decided against it. Poison would be a far too peaceful death for him. I wanted it to be violent and bloody.

With a cup of poison-free coffee in my hands, I walked back into Wright’s office a short time later with a composed expression plastered on my face.

“Here you go, sir,” I said as I approached him where he still stood by the bookshelves, except by another one this time.

“Put it on the desk.”

Squeezing the cup hard, I smothered the impulse to throw the coffee in his face and instead walked over to the desk. With a quick look over my shoulder, I confirmed that Wright was still busy searching for something on the shelves. Then I took my time setting the cup down while quickly scanning the documents waiting on the desk.

My heart leaped.

One of the papers detailed a plan for the invasion of the south side that I assumed Wright was going to propose to Chief Anderson. The route was as I had expected, so that was nothing new. But it did specify that Wright suggested waiting at least another two or three weeks before launching the invasion so that they could formulate a better plan to counteract the new type of resistance they would face from a united south side.

Two or three weeks.

That was great news.

If Chief Anderson approved Wright's suggestion, it would mean that we might actually be able to pull off our plan to ambush the parliament before the invasion happened.

Giddiness sparkled inside my chest as I finished setting down the cup and then drew back.

"Anything to report from your room?" Captain Wright suddenly asked.

I turned to face him. He was still searching through folders on his shelves and didn't even bother to look at me.

"No, sir," I replied.

Now, he at last turned around. Meeting my gaze, he arched an expectant eyebrow and gave me a look full of challenge.

Technically, I could have told him that Jamila had called him a bully and that the rest of them agreed with it too. But I just... couldn't. Granted, Frank and Jamila and the others hadn't exactly been all that kind to me lately. But the thought of snitching on them still soured my stomach.

"They had literally just walked through the door and only had time to say *welcome back* before you called for me," I said, meeting Wright's suspicious eyes with a steady gaze.

He stared me down for another second before grunting in acknowledgement, clearly buying my carefully constructed half-truth.

It took effort not to snort. Why did everyone in this entire building always seem to forget that I had worked undercover for months? I was obviously an incredibly talented liar. But it was as if no one here ever even considered that I might just use that skill against them too.

Without another word, I started towards the door.

Wright narrowed his eyes.

Then a paper slipped from the folder he was holding. Or rather, he let it slip.

It fluttered through the air before landing on the floor in front of his feet.

Captain Wright kept his eyes locked on mine. I had half a mind to just keep striding towards the door, but reined myself in and instead trailed to a halt.

For a moment, everything was silent and still.

Then Wright nodded towards the paper. "Pick it up."

This time, I almost didn't succeed in hiding the flash of anger that shot through me. Quickly bowing my head, I drew a hand over my face, as if to push some loose strands away, in order to stop Wright from seeing the rage that no doubt flickered in my eyes.

Still keeping my chin lowered, I worked furiously to shove that anger back deep into my soul until my features were smooth again. Then I closed the distance between us.

While contemplating what sound Wright would make if I rammed a sword through his chest cavity, I lowered myself to the floor before him and reached for the document.

I had to remind myself not to crush the paper in my hand as I picked it up and then straightened again.

"Here," I said, holding it out to him.

His blue eyes narrowed slightly.

And that's when I realized my earlier mistake that had triggered this highly unnecessary power play. He had wanted me to ask for permission before I left.

I suppressed a groan. My disregard for authority was growing by the day.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?" I asked as I stepped back and lowered my chin again.

Captain Wright was silent for a while, as if trying to make me worried. When he at last spoke, his voice was full of smug satisfaction.

"No. You may leave."

I dipped my chin and then turned around before I lost the grip on my self-restraint. The moment my back was to him, I allowed the mask to slip from my face. While striding back out of his office, I let my mind circle through several different ways to kill Wright in the most humiliating way possible.

Since I didn't trust myself to keep my cool if someone confronted me just yet, I slipped into one of the stairwells and started up towards a different floor instead of going back to my colleagues. There was something else I needed to accomplish before the end of the day.

When I reached the right floor, I stopped and edged the door open a fraction so that I could peer out into the corridor.

A group of people were standing outside one of the offices. Several of them were holding stacks of folders and documents, and it looked like they had just come from some kind of meeting. Keeping the tiny crack in the door open, I remained where I was and just watched them in silence.

We were allowed to visit other departments without issue, so I could have just walked into the corridor and moved past them. But it was better if I drew as little attention as possible. At least for now. So I stood there pressed against the door, one eye on the group ahead and one ear listening for other footsteps in the stairwell.

Thankfully, the group broke apart and drifted towards another room before anyone else could find me spying in the stairwell.

Slipping through the door, I moved quickly down the corridor and towards a room farther down.

This department handled security on the north side. Or more specifically, security around the parliament building.

After casting a quick look up and down the hall, I cracked open another door and listened for sounds of people. When everything remained silent, I snuck inside the room.

Moist air that smelled of leather, sweat, and soap met me.

I quickly scanned the changing room.

Empty.

Relief washed over me.

With my heart pattering in my chest, I hurried between the lockers and towards the board at the back of the room.

There were of course complete reports about guard positions in the captain's office. But sneaking in there and finding it would be nearly impossible. The quickest, and easiest, way of obtaining the exact same information was almost ridiculous in its simplicity. Check the schedule in the changing room.

While still casting glances around me, I closed the final distance to the board and scanned the documents that were stuck to it. The names themselves meant nothing to me. But by each name was a location, and that was the real treasure trove, because it meant that I could piece together my own map of where all the guards were stationed.

After memorizing the locations, and the number of names that was listed on each one, I turned around and started back through the room.

The door was yanked open.

My heart leaped into my chest as I dove behind a row of lockers.

"By the Current," a man's voice said in what sounded more like a groan. "Now I really need a warm shower."

"Me too," another man replied.

"Why are *you* complaining? You were stationed inside all night." Another groan. "I had to stand out there in this bloody rain all night. It feels like my very bones have been submerged in ice water."

With my pulse thrumming in my ears, I snuck along the row of lockers while tracking the two men by the sound of their voices so that I could keep the barrier between me and them.

"I did that last time," the second man retorted. "And you told me to just suck it up then. So, guess what? Suck it up,

man.”

A chuckle sounded. “Holding grudges, are we?”

While the other guy retorted, I slunk around the edge of the lockers and peeked out.

Two men in white leather uniforms were standing halfway across the room. They didn’t have their backs to me, but they weren’t looking in my direction either.

Deciding that this was as good a chance as I would get, I darted out from my hiding place and slipped out the door.

“Marcus?” the first guy called. “You already back too?”

But by the time they figured out that it was not Marcus they had seen from the corner of their eyes, I was already gone.

## CHAPTER 7



Narrowing my eyes, I studied the darkened parliament grounds before us. Next to me, Eve was tapping her fingers against the stone roof we were lying on while doing the same. The white boots below didn't move.

"They're not leaving any gaps," I said.

"No." Eve cocked her head. "Unless we create one."

"Can't. Not out here. They'll notice it right away."

"True."

With the information Eve had gotten about the guard positions, it was easier to get a full view of the security we were up against. Unfortunately though, it was not looking all that good.

I didn't want to have to fight my way into the parliament building because it would ruin the element of surprise and give those bloody parliament members time to escape. So killing any of the guards was out of the question. It would only draw attention and make the rest of them raise the alarm. What we needed was some kind of blind spot where we could sneak through.

"Are you sure we can do this alone?" Eve suddenly asked.

Tearing my gaze from the white stone building, I turned to meet her gaze head on. There was a considering look on her beautiful features as she studied my face. Fuck, I wanted to draw my fingers over her forehead and smooth out that crease



in her brows. But I managed to restrain myself and instead let a smirk descend on my mouth.

“After all this time, you still doubt my power, spitfire?”

She snorted and gave my shoulder a shove, trying to make me topple onto my back but failing miserably. I just grinned back at her.

“You’re still an arrogant domineering asshole, you know,” she huffed with mock affront.

“Oh I know. The trick is being powerful enough to get away with it.”

She rolled her eyes at me, but a smile tugged at her lips too. Then a serious expression settled on her features again. “What I meant was, wouldn’t it be better to bring more of your people for this? It’s in the heart of the north side. Inside the parliament building. You finally have the entire south side at your feet. Wouldn’t it be smarter to actually use that and bring a bunch of highly skilled battle mages for this?”

“I did consider it,” I admitted. “But we can’t afford a fight. If we’re spotted, best-case scenario, we will lose the opportunity to force them to sign away the south to me. Worst-case, we’ll lose the entire battle and end up arrested because we’re so fucking outnumbered on this side of the river. So there are only two options. Either I bring all of my battle mages or none of them. And since I don’t want a full-scale war, this is the only solution.”

Eve was silent for a few seconds, as if processing the logic behind my arguments. Apparently satisfied that I had actually thought things through, she gave me a nod. I didn’t know whether to laugh or punish her later tonight for that insolent lack of faith in my intelligence.

“Then I have an idea.” She grimaced and then shot me an apologetic look. “But you’re not going to like it.”

I just raised my eyebrows in silent question.

“If we want to hide in plain sight and just walk right through the parliament building, then we do the one thing they

would never expect.” Her eyes glittered with mischief. “We put you in a uniform.”

“A uniform? As in...?”

“A constable’s uniform, yes.”

Confusion flickered through me. While I hated that white leather uniform on Eve, I didn’t really have any qualms about putting one on in order to fool the white boots. So why did Eve think that I was going to dislike this plan?

“Alright,” I replied with a nod. “I like it. And you’re sure you can get your hands on one?”

“Yes.”

“Good. That will be useful for moving around unhindered once we’re inside the building.” I frowned at her. “But even if I’m wearing a uniform, they still won’t just let me walk through the front doors. They’ll recognize my face when they stop us.”

“Yeah,” she said, drawing out the word, while another apologetic look flashed across her features. “That’s the part you’re really going to hate.”

Before I could ask what she meant, she pushed up from the roof and jerked her chin at me to follow. I did. While I summoned metal planks one after the other, we made our way across the houses and around the edge of the parliament grounds until we reached a spot at the back of the building.

It had been raining all day today, so the roofs were more slippery than I would’ve liked. But we managed to cross the buildings without incident.

Water splashed up around our boots as we at last returned to the street and snuck the final distance to whatever it was that Eve wanted to show me. I frowned up at the unremarkable building we stopped in front of, and then turned to Eve and arched an eyebrow.

“Unlock it,” she said, and nodded towards the door.

I touched my hands together before pressing my palm against the lock. The metal lock bolt liquefied and ran

downwards. I hardened it there so that I could return it to its previous position later.

“That really is a handy trick,” Eve commented while flashing me a smile.

That *trick* had taken me almost four years of constant practice to perfect. It was more difficult than it looked. Mostly because I couldn't actually see the metal that I was trying to manipulate. But learning it had become a top priority for me very early on since the thought of being locked in with no way out made nauseating dread and searing panic pulse through my whole body.

Eve pushed down the handle and then slipped into the small building. I followed.

Actually, *building* might have been too generous a word. It was just one room.

Confusion marred my brows as I closed the door behind us and then turned in a slow circle.

There was absolutely nothing inside the room. Not even an oil lamp in the ceiling.

I turned towards the grimy window. The parliament building with its shining white lights and sprawling green lawn was visible on the other side of the street.

“I don't think I'm supposed to know about this,” Eve said from behind me. “But when I was working in the archives last week, I came across Chief Anderson's report from that day when you attacked and destroyed the Blade of Equilibrium.”

Smug satisfaction welled up inside my chest at the memory of that. They hadn't seen it coming. Hadn't even considered that someone might be bold enough to try to destroy that blade. Oh, the looks on their faces when they realized what I had done. If I could've preserved that image forever, I would have. Hands down one of my greatest achievements ever.

“And well, I was curious because,” she began. “You know, it was about you. Before we met.”

Tearing my gaze from the view outside the window, I turned back to face my little spitfire. Amusement tugged at my lips.

“Were you now?” I teased.

She huffed and narrowed her eyes at me. “Oh stop looking so fucking smug.”

I just grinned back at her.

“Anyway, I read the report,” she continued. “And when you attacked, Chief Anderson made sure that all the members of parliament escaped. Because he thought that you were there for them. Not for the blade.”

My interest sharpened.

“And this is how they escaped,” Eve finished.

There was a carefully neutral expression on her face as she pointed towards a trapdoor set into the floor in the middle of the room.

Cold dread crashed into me like a freezing black wave.

Keeping my breathing even, I forced myself to move across the room until I was standing next to Eve. She crouched down and grabbed the iron ring set into the wooden door.

There was no lock on it. Presumably since people had to lift it from down there in order to get out. And a locked escape route was worse than useless in a catastrophe because panicked people weren't able to stop and think rationally about things that prevented them from fleeing unhindered.

The hinges creaked faintly as Eve lifted the trapdoor and then gently placed it on the dusty stone floor.

I stared down at the narrow tunnel it revealed.

A dull clanging sound echoed inside my skull. I tried to bend my knees so that I could inspect the tunnel further, but my body refused to obey me. Standing there frozen on the floor, I just stared into the cramped dark space while awful memories surged up inside me.

The madness in my soul stirred in response.

I clenched my jaw while fighting down both the raging panic and the urge to slaughter everyone in sight and get the hell out of here.

“No,” I simply said.

Eve heaved a sigh. “I guessed as much. It’s why I didn’t mention it last time we were here. But I figured I would at least tell you so that we could rule it out completely.”

After one last glance into that awful fucking tunnel, she straightened and brushed her hands off on her pants. I just kept staring into the darkness for another few seconds. Then I dragged my gaze up to Eve.

Dread washed through my veins as I waited for her to ask me about it. To ask me why I was terrified of small, enclosed spaces. Or what the insanity she could no doubt see in my eyes had come from.

But she didn’t.

She just looked back at me. I could see her wondering about the reason for my strange reaction, but she didn’t comment on it.

I knew that things like this shouldn’t be a problem for someone like me. Someone who had slaughtered and threatened his way into becoming the sole dark mage ruler of Malgrave shouldn’t be bested by something as ridiculous as a small dark space. It was my greatest weakness. And the fact that Eve even knew about it was just more proof of how special she was.

The only other person who knew about my intense claustrophobia was Callan Blackwell. Ever since he faked his death and left, we hadn’t exactly been on the best of terms. But he had still never used this information against me. Given that I had spent a few years sending assassins to take him out, it said a lot about his character. Maybe I wouldn’t kill him on sight if I ever saw him again, after all.

“Alright, then,” Eve said as she moved the trapdoor back.

It closed with a thud, sending swirls of dust into the air. Eve brushed off her hands on her pants again and then

shrugged.

“We’ll just have to find another opening then.”

## CHAPTER 8



Around the table, several people stifled yawns as they tried to muster enough energy to pull through to the end of the meeting. I shifted my weight where I stood along the wall with the other Junior Constables. I might have been reinstated to the South Side Department, but the first demotion that Chief Anderson had given me was still in effect, which meant that I no longer had a seat at the table.

“Lastly,” Chief Eric Anderson said from where he sat at the head of the table. “I have approved Captain Wright’s suggestion to wait another few weeks before we launch our attack on the south side. With all the dark mages united under Arden’s banner now, we need to rework our strategy before engaging.”

A satisfied smile slid home on Wright’s mouth as he nodded in what looked to be a very self-congratulatory way. The Senior Constables at the table nodded in acknowledgement of the order as well.

“However,” Chief continued, narrowing his eyes at the smug captain. “I am missing the reports on the prisoners from this week. I know that is not a task you’re used to from your previous department, but I still expected you to have a firm understanding of your new duties here.”

Both panic and irritation flickered briefly in Wright’s blue eyes. But he smoothed his features quickly and instead cleared his throat. “Sterling will fill you in on the reason for its absence.”

“How am I supposed to know where it is now?” I said, scowling in confusion. “I handed it to you yesterday afternoon.”

If looks could kill, I would have been bleeding out on the pale floorboards of that meeting room right then. Captain Wright shot me a look of such icy fury that I forgot what I had been about to say.

“I don’t care whose fault it is,” Chief Anderson said, his voice laced with a tiny bit of annoyance. “Just make sure it’s on my desk before I get to my office tomorrow morning.”

And that’s when it finally clicked. Wright had wanted *me* to take the blame for the missing report. By the Current, I really needed to get better at sucking up to people.

“That was it,” Chief declared and placed his palms on the table before pushing to his feet. “Now, go home and get some rest.”

Chairs scraped against the floor as all the Senior Constables stood up as well. Then we all bowed our heads to Chief Anderson. He jerked his chin down in a nod before striding out of the room. The people who had been sitting at the table followed while the rest of us waited for our superiors to exit first.

However, not everyone at the table left.

Captain Wright remained standing a short distance away, his furious eyes locked on me. I suppressed the urge to groan. Or maybe roll my eyes. While mustering up the final remnants of my very limited patience, I watched as the other Junior Constables left the room one by one.

Once everyone was gone, Wright pushed the door shut with an angry thud.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“What was what, sir?” I replied in my most innocent tone.

“Drop the attitude.” He stalked up to me, getting in my face as he growled, “I thought I made it clear that you’re *my* creature now, Sterling. I own you, which means that you take



the fall for me when I need it. But instead, you ratted me out to the chief.”

“I didn’t rat you out. I just—”

*Slap.*

I flinched, more from the shock than the pain, as Wright backhanded me hard enough to snap my head to the side. My cheek stung from where the blow had landed, but I could barely feel it over the raging fury that roared up inside me.

He had slapped me.

If Ulric hadn’t already ruined my opinion of white boots, I would have been outraged that Wright was dishonoring the entire constable force by behaving like a spoiled child.

Slowly turning my head back, I met his gaze again.

But I couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

As if just now realizing what he had done, Wright blinked in surprise and then took a step back while yanking his hand down to his side. Then he cleared his throat.

“You do not talk back to me. And you will take the fall for me whenever I need it.” He cleared his throat self-consciously again. “But I recognize that what I just did crossed the line.”

Oh, he recognized that, did he?

Well, it didn’t matter that he admitted that he shouldn’t have slapped me.

Because he had just signed his death warrant.

“Make sure that the report is on Chief Anderson’s desk,” Wright ordered. “And then go home, Sterling.”

I just looked back at him in silence.

For a moment, it seemed as if he was going to say something else. But in the end, he just turned around and walked out.

I did locate the report and bring it up to Chief’s desk. But I didn’t go home afterwards. Instead, I waited outside the building.

And then followed Captain Wright home.

He lived in a fancy two-story building with a view overlooking the River of Souls. Orange light from the setting sun reflected against the water, making it look like the river was burning. I took in the beautiful scenery while waiting around the corner for Wright to unlock his door and move inside.

Cool fall winds whirled down the immaculate street and created a faint howling sound between the white stone buildings. I flipped up the collar of my white leather uniform and rubbed my hands together.

The sound of a door being opened and closed came from down the street. I peeked around the edge just in time to see Captain Wright disappear into his house.

Anticipation rippled through me.

After checking that the road was empty, I slunk back the way we had come and instead approached the house from the street behind it. Only wilted flowers watched me as I climbed over the short wall and into the tiny garden at the back of Wright's property.

Leaves crunched underneath my boots as I snuck up to the nearest window. Pressing myself against the white stone wall, I peered inside.

Captain Wright's obsession with order was as evident in his own home as it was in his office. The living room inside was neat almost to the point of being uncomfortable. Each item had its place and not one thread on the blue rug was misaligned.

I shook my head at the absurdity of it while I watched Wright walk towards the staircase and then continue upstairs.

Brushing my hands together, I summoned a small flame and held it against the hinges on the window. The metal turned red as it began to heat up. If Levi had been here, he could have just unlocked the front door for me. But I hadn't actually planned to kill Wright today, so I had to improvise.

Once I had melted the hinges, I carefully edged the window open. It let out a small creak. I paused, waiting to see if Wright's footsteps would start pounding down the steps.

They didn't.

After leaning the now ruined window against the other side, I braced my palms on the windowsill and then climbed up onto it. Then I paused again, listening for sounds. Only the faint thud of something like a drawer came from upstairs.

I dropped down on the spotless floorboards inside the living room.

While taking great care not to make any noise, I snuck across the room and then into the kitchen. After swiping a kitchen knife, I approached the staircase. Not a speck of dust was visible on the pale wood. A vicious grin slid across my lips when I thought about what this house was going to look like when I was done with it.

Moving quietly, I made my way up the stairs and onto the landing. Firelight came from the open door of a bedroom a few steps away. I closed the distance to it and glanced inside.

Captain Wright was standing in front of a spacious closet. He had removed his white leather uniform, which hung neatly on the left side of the open closet, and was instead wearing a simple white shirt and a pair of loose grey pants.

Seeing him in something that casual was so jarring that I just blinked at him for a second. Apparently, even the uptight Captain Wright relaxed when he was in his own home.

I spun the kitchen knife in my hand before sliding it into my belt. It fit awkwardly, but I didn't want to use my own blades for this.

Wright brushed his hands down his clothes and then began closing the door to the closet.

I touched my hands together and summoned a lightning bolt.

He started slightly at the unexpected sizzling sound, and began to turn around. But it was already too late.

A white bolt of lightning shot through the air and slammed into him. His body jerked as his muscles spasmed and he crashed down on the floor.

With a smile on my face, I sauntered into the room and then stopped right next to him. His limbs were twitching from the lightning, and pain clouded his eyes.

“Hello, *sir*,” I said, letting mockery drip from my words.

Shock and disbelief joined the pain in his eyes as he stared up at me. But because of the current still ricocheting through his muscles, stare at me was all he could do.

I strolled over to his desk and began rooting through the drawers until I found a stash of equipment from the constables’ department. Wright had almost stopped twitching, so I shot another lightning bolt at him. A groan of pain tore from his chest as his body started spasming again. I pulled out a pair of stiff handcuffs from the drawer before shoving it closed with my hip and then turning back to the shaking captain.

“You know, you really shouldn’t have hit me.” I strode back to his jerking body and crouched down over him. “I have been wondering exactly which sound you would make if I rammed a blade through your chest ever since you made me grovel at your feet. I hadn’t planned to kill you today. But that slap just...” I drew a hand through the air. “Sent me right over the edge.”

Grabbing his twitching arms, I brought them together and then locked his wrists in the handcuffs, leaving him unable to touch his hands together and summon magic.

Then I sat down on his desk chair and crossed my legs while I waited for the lightning to stop pulsing through his body.

When he at last stopped shaking, he sucked in a deep breath and then scrambled to his feet. He swayed a little as he straightened. His gaze flicked towards the door, but he seemed to think better of it. Instead, he dragged his wide eyes back to me.

I drew the stolen kitchen knife and twirled it in my hand while shooting him a pointed look. “Aren’t you going to beg?”

“You can’t be serious,” Wright blurted out. “If you do anything to me, you will be executed for high treason.”

“Is that really how you want to start this negotiation?”

“What negotiation?”

“The one where I might let you live. *If* you grovel prettily enough.”

His eyes were wide as fucking dinner plates as he stared back at me. “You’re insane.”

“All the more reason for you to follow my orders.”

He just continued staring back at me. Several different emotions seemed to be fighting for precedence behind his eyes. Rage. Disbelief. Fear.

Shifting my grip on the knife, I brushed my palms together.

Flames exploded through the air as I hurled a fireball right next to his head. It struck the closet, making the wood catch fire. A whooshing sound swept through the room as the clothes inside the closet went up in flames as well. Then I shot a lightning bolt into the floor right next to his feet.

“I said, *beg*,” I snapped.

Wright whipped around to stare at the burning closet in utter shock before his gaze darted down to the black scorch mark from the lightning bolt. But when he turned back, the emotion that won out behind his eyes was fear.

Dropping to his knees, he held up his shackled hands. “Please.”

I summoned a water blast and threw it at the closet. Steam hissed as it put out the flames, leaving the charred wood soaked instead.

“Please what?” I demanded as I stalked up to Wright.

“Please don’t kill me.” Panic pulsed in his eyes as he looked up at me and licked his lips. “I’m sorry for slapping you. And for making you grovel and do demeaning tasks.”

“You should be.”

“It will never happen again. I will never bother you again.”

I just raised my eyebrows expectantly.

“I’ll reinstate you to Senior Constable,” he added, almost tripping over the words in his hurry to get them out.

“Will you now?”

“Yes. Please. I’ll do anything you want.”

A wicked smirk curved my lips. “So what you’re saying is that you will be *my* creature now?”

Anger surged up in his eyes for a second.

I flashed down, grabbing him by the collar and pressing the knife against his throat. “What was that?”

Terror flooded his face instead as he tried to pull back from the knife. I kept a firm grip on his collar as I stared him down.

“Y-yes, yes, I’ll be your creature,” he blurted out. “Just don’t kill me. Please, I’m begging you. I’m *begging you*.”

Heat seared through me, intense enough to make my soul thrum.

And in that moment, I understood Levi in a way that I never had before.

Holding someone’s life in the palm of my hand like this was so fucking intoxicating. I was completely in control. I decided who lived and died, and all my victim could do was to beg for my mercy. This power, this utter command over someone’s entire existence, made me feel like I was high.

I had always been attracted to powerful and dominant men. Now I understood why.

“Look how well you grovel.” I flashed the terrified man a mocking smile as I gently drew the blade along his jaw. “You’re a natural at this.”

“Please, Sterling,” he stammered. “Please, I’m begging you.”

“I know you are.”

I moved the blade down his throat towards his heart. His chest rose and fell with rapid, shallow breaths. And whatever he saw in my eyes made true panic and all-consuming fear crash over his features.

Cocking my head, I studied that expression. Memorizing it.

I gave him a soft smile.

Wright blinked in surprise, and then his shoulders relaxed a little as relief washed over his face instead.

“But unfortunately, it doesn’t matter,” I finished.

And then I rammed the knife into his heart.

He gasped, which turned into a choking noise. And then a wet sliding sound and a gurgle mixed with a groan as I yanked out the blade again. A few drops of warm blood flew through the air with the abrupt motion, splattering my face. I didn’t bother wiping them off.

Blood bloomed like a gruesome flower on Captain Wright’s chest, turning his spotless white shirt red.

Releasing his collar, I let him topple sideways and crash down on the floor. His body spasmed a few times while the life bled out of him. I watched with curious eyes.

*Huh.*

So that was the sound a man made when you rammed a blade through his chest.

## CHAPTER 9



She returned with blood splattered across her face.

I was pacing back and forth across her hallway, wondering why she hadn't shown up yet. We were supposed to go back to the parliament building and try to find another way in, but she hadn't returned when she said she would. I was just starting to consider sneaking over to the constable force's headquarters to investigate what might have happened when the door to Eve's house was unlocked and then yanked open.

My heart stopped when I saw the blood on her face. I scanned her body for injuries, and was just about to demand to know if someone had hurt her, when my gaze landed on the bloody knife she was holding in her right hand. Confusion flitted through my brain as I snapped my gaze back up to her face.

"What happened?" I asked.

Eve closed the front door behind her again and locked it before turning back to me with a wide grin on her lips. "I stopped to kill Captain Wright on my way home."

Shock pulsed through me. I blinked, and for a while, all I could do was stare at her.

Completely oblivious to my stunned surprise, Eve just sauntered past me into the kitchen and placed the knife on the counter there before washing the blood off her hands. The blood on her face remained. Then she walked back into the hallway and removed her boots.



By the time she had hung up that awful white leather jacket of hers too, I had finally snapped out of my stupor.

“You killed him?” I asked. “Just now?”

She nodded casually as she turned back to face me. “Yes.”

“How do you feel?”

My heart was pounding when I asked that question.

This was Eve’s first.

The first person she had killed not for survival or out of any kind of life-threatening necessity, but simply because she wanted to.

She had spent the past sixteen years hating dark mages and condemning us for all the blood we spilled. And now here she was, killing people by choice too. It went against everything she used to believe in.

While I knew that there was darkness in Eve, that there was a part of her that had always been drawn to ruthless power, I couldn’t help but worry that she wouldn’t be able to fully enter this world. That the past sixteen years had done such a number on her that she would never be able to completely justify the things we did in our quest for power and revenge. That the guilt of killing someone who wasn’t a direct threat to her life would consume her. That she would drown underneath the weight of her actions.

Because make no mistake, we were the villains here. *I* was a villain here. I had killed and manipulated and blackmailed and threatened my way into an empire of blood. I had decided long ago that I would never be at someone else’s mercy ever again, so I had done whatever it took to make it so. And there was nothing I wouldn’t do to keep my power. No lines I wouldn’t cross.

But up until a few days ago, Eve had been on the opposite side of that. She had been on the side of good. The side of the heroes. And not everyone was able to handle the descent into darkness.

Which was why my heart was currently pounding in my chest.

There were only two ways it could go from here. Either I would rule the dark mage world with Eve by my side. Or this was the first of a slow but unstoppable series of guilt-ridden days full of regret that would turn Eve away from this path and make me lose her forever.

My soul was shredding itself to pieces just thinking about that.

If I lost Eve now, after she had rekindled that dangerous hope in my chest again, I didn't think I would be able to survive it.

So I waited with nerves raw and heart aching for her to answer my question. How did it feel to kill someone just because you wanted to?

Eve's brown eyes sparkled like gold as she flashed me a wide grin. "I feel like I could breathe fire."

Relief crashed over me.

No guilt.

No regret.

Which meant that I would not be losing her again.

A matching smile spread across my own lips as I shot her a knowing look. "Incredible, isn't it?"

"Yes." She started towards me, her eyes glittering. "I never knew just how fucking intoxicating it is to hold someone's life in the palm of my hand like that."

Blood rushed to my cock. At her words. At the way she spoke and moved. And because of how fucking hot she looked right now.

"Have I ever told you just how hot you look with blood splattered across your face?" I said, my voice coming out low and rough.

"No. But you should have." Her grin shifted into a sly smile as she came to a halt right in front of me. "But don't

worry. I'll let you make it up to me.”

Placing her hands on my chest, she shoved me into her bedroom. I let her. Walking backwards, I allowed her to back me into the room. Lust burned inside me at the way she dragged her gaze up and down my body.

“If you don't stop looking at me like that, you're going to end up fucked against that wall in the next ten seconds,” I warned.

With that sly smile still on her lips, she raked a highly deliberate glance over my body while biting her lip.

“Oh, you've done it now, spitfire.”

Twisting quickly, I pressed my palm to her chest and shoved her up against the wall. She hit it with a faint thud and grinned up at me in challenge. I slid my hand up to her throat before leaning down to claim those wicked lips.

She sighed into my mouth as I kissed her.

Her hands skimmed across my chest, sending lightning shooting through my body at her touch. My cock throbbed as she slid her fingers along the top of my pants, caressing the skin between them and the shirt. A shudder rolled through my body as she began undoing the fastenings.

I dropped my hand from her throat and instead grabbed the hem of her shirt. She shivered and moaned as I pushed her shirt up her stomach and then over her breasts. Another shudder rippled through her when I caressed her tits, and her fingers fumbled on the button of my pants. I took the opportunity to pull the shirt higher. It forced her to release my pants and lift her arms so that she could get the shirt off.

Breaking the kiss, I yanked her shirt over her head before tossing the garment aside.

For a few seconds, we just watched each other.

Her chest heaved as she stood there by the wall.

Then mischief glinted in her eyes and she quickly unbuttoned her pants. I did the same with mine while she shimmied out of those white leather pants and kicked them to

the side. I had barely had time to free my cock, let alone push the pants down, when she grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and yanked my mouth back to hers.

Abandoning the efforts with my pants, I slid my arms around Eve's perfect ass and lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist as I pushed her back up against the wall while drawing my hard cock along her wet pussy.

She dug her fingers into my shoulders and threw her head back as a moan ripped from her chest. I kissed her throat while teasing my tip over her entrance again. A whimper spilled from her lips.

I smirked against her skin.

As if she could feel the smirk, she growled, "If you don't start fucking me in the next five seconds, I'll use that kitchen knife on you instead."

I let out a dark laugh. She shuddered again when my breath danced over her skin. While kissing my way up her throat, I brushed my cock over her clit and then down towards her entrance once more.

"Five," she growled.

My lips skimmed her jaw as I teased her pussy again.

She sucked in an unsteady breath before pressing out, "Three."

With a firm grip on her ass, I adjusted her body but only slid my cock through her wetness again.

"Two."

While positioning my cock at her entrance, I kissed my way along her jaw and then drew back enough so that I could look at her. She still had her head tilted back, exposing her throat to me, and she was gritting her teeth as if trying desperately to restrain herself.

"One," she forced out.

I shoved my cock inside her.

Her eyes flew open, and she gasped into the ceiling. I tightened my grip on her ass, holding her firmly in place as I pulled out slightly before slamming back in, sheathing myself deep inside her.

Pleasure washed over her beautiful features, and a sigh escaped her throat as she tilted her head back down and rested her forehead against mine.

After drawing out, I rammed into her again.

She adjusted her legs around my waist before raising her head and locking eyes with me. I flashed her a grin. A moan tore from her throat as I shoved my cock into her wet pussy again.

“Making death threats to get what you want, huh?” I lifted one hand and traced my fingers around the blood still splattered across her face. My mouth curved in a sly smile as I held her gaze while thrusting into her once more. “My little spitfire. I knew there was a villain inside of you.”

The answering smile on her mouth was wicked enough to make my heart soar.

Returning my hand to her ass, I shifted her body into a better position before fucking her harder. Pleasure swirled in her eyes as I railed her against the wall. I studied each expression on her face, every emotion in her eyes, as I fucked her closer and closer to an orgasm.

I would never get enough of this. Never get enough of her.

She challenged me in ways that I never expected. Made me feel things that I never thought possible. Had my back in ways that no one else did.

And as I watched release crash over her gorgeous features and felt her body shatter around me, I swore that I would never let her go now. No matter what happened, she would always be mine.

## CHAPTER 10



As I looked at the cute little house made of white stone, complete with an artful garden and topped with a roof made of pale green tiles, I had the overwhelming urge to set it on fire and watch it burn to the ground. But there was an innocent person in there, and she didn't deserve to die, so instead of summoning my fire magic, I straightened from where I had been crouching by the flowerbed and walked around the house. Then I raised my hand and knocked on the front door.

About half a minute passed.

Then the door was opened, and a pair of surprised brown eyes blinked back at me from across the threshold.

"Eve," Ulric Smith said, sounding as baffled as he looked. He glanced up and down the deserted street, as if expecting the entire constable force to be there too. "What are you doing here, kiddo?"

*Kiddo.* I used to like it when he called me that. It had made me feel like I still had a family. Like I was a part of *his* family. Now, the word grated against my eardrums like iron nails.

Keeping all of those emotions firmly off my face, I asked in a pleasant voice, "Can I come in?"

"Of course." He gave his head a quick shake as if remembering himself, and then stepped aside and motioned for me to enter. "Come on in."

I moved across the threshold and into the pale wooden hallway inside. After taking off my boots, I continued into the living room. It looked the way it had every time I had been in this house. Which was a lot.

Cozy armchairs in a pale green color, and a comfortable couch in the same material, bookshelves made of pale wood along the walls, and vibrant flowers and potted plants in the windowsills.

“How are you holding up?” Ulric asked from behind as I came to a halt on the fluffy white carpet in the middle of the room. “With... what happened to Wright?”

It had been two days since Captain Wright had been found stabbed to death in his home. The entire constable force had been in an uproar when the news broke. After all, they didn’t take kindly to someone killing one of their own. And I should know, because I used to be one of them.

Emergency meetings had been called one after the other. But there were no signs of who had killed Wright, so all they had been able to do was to write their reports, blame it on dark mages, and then scramble to figure out what to do now. The solution they had come up with was the reason why I was currently in this house at the crack of dawn.

“To be honest, I’m still in shock,” I said, turning to face Ulric. “I didn’t know him that long, but I still can’t believe that he’s just... gone.”

Ulric’s features softened.

I almost laughed.

In truth, I felt great. Murdering Wright hadn’t been nearly as hard as I had thought it would be. Since I used to loathe people who did what I had just done, I had expected to feel a stronger sense of guilt and regret.

But I felt nothing.

It was a rather strange experience.

When I found out that my father had been a dark mage sympathizer, and that Ulric was the one who had killed him

and then lied to me about it my whole life, it was as if something had snapped inside of me. I felt like someone had not just pulled the rug out from underneath me, but had removed the entire floor from beneath my feet, leaving me in free fall.

Ever since that day, I had felt both free and out of control at the same time. Like I was spinning wildly while plummeting into a bottomless black hole.

Logically, I knew that the feeling should terrify me. Because at this point, I didn't even know what I was capable of anymore. But as I looked into the eyes of the man who had ruined my life, I couldn't bring myself to care about that.

"I know, kiddo," Ulric said as he closed the distance between us. Reaching out, he squeezed my arm. "I know that death is difficult for you."

It felt as if maggots were crawling over my skin where his hand was touching me, but I managed an appropriately sad smile and a nod. "It made me think about my father, and I... I just wish that I knew more about him. I was so young back then. I can barely remember anything."

"That is unfortunately how time works. It steals our memories one by one."

"Did you know him? Had you met him? Before that night?"

He squeezed my arm again. "All I know about Dan Sterling is that he was an upstanding citizen and a good man."

Lies, lies, and more lies. Why couldn't he just have told me the truth from the very beginning instead of spending sixteen years trying to mold me into someone else? Then we wouldn't be here right now.

But we were.

So I smiled back at Ulric, and told him that that was good to hear, while an entirely different sentence thrummed inside my skull.

*I am going to ruin your life, you lying piece of shit.*



His eyes shone as he held my gaze. “He would have been proud of the woman you’ve become.”

Keeping the smile on my mouth, I replied, “I think so too.”

Though not for the reasons Ulric imagined.

He patted my arm one last time before letting his hand drop back by his side. I resisted the urge to rub my hand over that spot to wipe away the feeling of his hand there.

“Is that why you came here this early?” Ulric asked, that ridiculous fatherly concern still on his face. “To talk?”

“No.” I shifted my sad smile to a happier one. “I heard that you’ve been reinstated. That you’re coming back.”

Now that Wright was dead, the South Side Department was without a captain. And since they were in the middle of planning an invasion, they couldn’t afford a drawn-out process of appointing a new one. So Ulric’s forced retirement had been revoked and he had been reinstated as captain.

He smiled. “I am.”

“That’s why I’m here.” I shrugged and shot him a shy smile back. “I figured we could walk there together for your first day back.”

His brown eyes shone with emotions. “You’re far too kind to an old man, kiddo.”

“You’re not *that* old.”

He chuckled. “No. But what I am is indisposed.” While starting to turn around, he winked at me. “Just give me a minute and I’ll go get dressed.”

I nodded.

“Marla,” Ulric called as he started up the steps and towards their bedroom upstairs. “Shouldn’t you be getting up now too?”

Marla, Ulric’s wife, answered something that I couldn’t hear from down here. But two pairs of footsteps were soon moving around somewhere above me.

While they got dressed, I drifted through their house. The bookshelves were too neat to be Ulric's doing, so I figured that Marla was the one who had reorganized them since last time I was here. I wandered into the small room that Ulric used as his study. In there was the familiar mess that I was used to from his office.

I scanned the shelves in there as I walked around the desk, but only old case files and notes from various missions stared back at me. I flicked through a few of them before returning the folders, along with a small notebook, to the shelf.

Footsteps sounded from the stairs.

Moving back into the living room, I stopped on the fluffy white carpet again right before Marla appeared from the stairs.

"Eve," she said, her green eyes lighting up when they met mine. "It's so good to see you."

She strode across the floor and enveloped me in a hug. Pain sliced through my heart. Marla had always been kind to me, so I didn't want to hurt her. But then again, that's what I had thought about Ulric too. As I hugged her back, I couldn't help but wonder if she knew the truth about me and my father.

"It's good to see you too," I said as I drew back.

Her pale brows creased in concern. "It's been a while."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. I was going to say hi those times when I saw you and Ulric on the south side, but it looked like you didn't want to be noticed so I figured it was best not to..." I let out an embarrassed laugh and shrugged before finishing with, "Call out to you and draw attention."

The concern on her face transformed into confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You know..." I let an awkward expression descend on my features. Clearing my throat, I lowered my voice as I whispered, "At the Red Moon."

Her brows stayed furrowed. "The Red Moon? Ulric and I have never been to the Red Moon."

“Exactly.” I winked conspiratorially. “That’s why I didn’t want to draw attention to you by going over to say hi.”

She just stared back at me, completely bewildered. But before she could say anything, Ulric’s footsteps came from the stairs.

Marla abruptly cleared her throat and stepped back. After flashing me a smile, she started towards the kitchen. But I could see the questions and doubts now swirling in her eyes.

“Ready to go?” I said as I turned towards Ulric.

“Yes.”

I nodded and then walked into the hallway to put on my boots while Ulric said goodbye to his wife. Once he had put his jacket and boots on as well, he pushed open the door and started out into the cool morning air. I flicked one more look behind me while smug satisfaction surged up inside my chest.

The spark had been lit.

Now, all I had to do was to fan the flames until they turned into a wildfire.

## CHAPTER 11



When I had said no, I had meant it. I was not going to climb into a dark narrow space and crawl through a tunnel that was fuck knows how long. I wasn't.

Except... there was no other way in.

According to the information Eve had gotten, the constables would wait two or three weeks before launching their next attack. The death of Captain Wright should hopefully push their invasion towards the far end of that time frame. Maybe even more than three weeks, if we were lucky.

But then again, we might not be lucky. And we had already used up a week and a half of the preparation time.

We needed to strike before they did.

I didn't want the south side decimated in a war now that I finally controlled it all. War was bad for business. And I had also been fighting too many battles on too many fronts lately. I just wanted a fucking break.

Which meant that we had to get the parliament to cede the south side to me before they set their attack into motion. And that meant that we had to get inside the parliament building, which in turn led us back to that fucking tunnel.

"Damn, you really look awful."

Tearing my gaze from the trapdoor, I turned around and narrowed my eyes at Eve.

She smirked at me. "White really isn't your color."

Despite the nausea rolling inside my stomach, I huffed out a breath of amusement and then glanced down at the white leather uniform that I was wearing.

Just as she had promised, she had managed to steal an extra uniform for me to wear. It was a little tight around the shoulders, but it fit decently enough that I could still move unhindered. Eve was right, though. It really did look awful on me.

With the pristine white leather and the glimmering gold trim on both the uniform and the boots, I looked like one of the constables. But I felt like a fool. The moment I had put it on, it was as if my usual confidence just bled right out of me until I barely even knew how to move properly anymore. Normally, I walked with utter confidence, expecting everyone to move out of the way when I approached and bow down to my strength and power. But in this uniform, I somehow felt like an uncertain teenager who still hadn't found his place in the world.

“Yeah, well, now you know what I've been thinking every time I've had to watch you wearing it,” I replied.

Eve tilted her head to the side, conceding the point. “True. But if everything goes well tonight, it will be the last time. Both for you and for me.”

My heart stuttered at the mere thought. This was really happening. Eve was really joining me on the south side. Or not *me* me. But joining the south side at least.

But first, we just had to threaten the parliament into submission. I slid my gaze back to the trapdoor. And that meant, getting through this tunnel.

“Ready?” Eve asked.

“No,” I admitted. “But let's get going anyway.”

She nodded, her eyes searching my face. “Just... tell me if you need me to do anything.”

“Yeah.”

I drew in deep breaths through my nose while Eve crouched down and lifted the trapdoor. In my chest, my heart was beating wildly. Fuck, I didn't want to do this. I did *not* want to do this.

Eve placed the trapdoor against the dusty stone ground and then pulled out a wooden torch. After summoning a small flame, she lit the end of the torch and then dropped it down into the tunnel.

Orange firelight danced over the packed dirt walls that surrounded the ladder. Then the torch hit the ground below. I dragged in a shaky breath.

The ladder wasn't very long, which was good, but the space that it illuminated below was small. Far, far too small. I stared at the narrow opening in the dirt wall down there that signaled the start of the tunnel.

"Do you want to go first or last?" Eve asked.

"First."

"Okay."

For a while, we just stood there. I knew that I should be starting down the ladder, but I just couldn't make my feet move. My entire soul was screaming at me not to do this.

Eve simply waited in silence, not trying to force me to get started or make me hurry up. I was more grateful for that than I could express.

Closing my eyes, I sucked in a deep breath.

And then I dropped to the ground and swung myself onto the ladder.

Blood pounded in my ears as I climbed down into that awful abyss. Every instinct inside me told me to go back, but I pried my fingers off the ladder and jumped the final distance down to the ground.

A tiny cloud of dirt swirled up around my boots as I landed.

“Take the torch,” Eve said as she started downwards as well. “Since you’re going first.”

And so that it would be as light as possible around me. She didn’t say that, but I knew that she had thought this through very thoroughly. Once this was over, I was going to tell her just how much I appreciated what she was doing for me. But right now, all of my mental capacity went into suppressing the intense urge to flee.

I crouched down and grabbed the torch right before Eve pulled the trapdoor shut above us.

And damn it all to hell, but I almost passed out right then.

Squeezing the torch so hard that the wood almost splintered, I gritted my teeth and blocked out the horrible tide of memories that crashed over me.

My heart pounded in my chest.

Eve started down the ladder again while I raised the torch and studied the tunnel before me.

*Oh fuck.*

It was narrow. So fucking narrow. And the ceiling was so low that it only allowed enough room to sit, which meant that we would have to crawl through it on all fours.

I stared at those dirt walls and floor while panic clanged inside me.

I couldn’t do this.

I couldn’t fucking do this.

Eve’s footsteps stopped above me. The space below the ladder was only big enough for one person, so she wouldn’t be able to climb down until I moved into the tunnel. But still, she said nothing. Only waited.

Swallowing, I ran my tongue around my suddenly parched mouth.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

But we had to do this. It was the only way in.

So I dragged in a shuddering breath, and started into the tunnel.

Eve jumped down into the space behind me, but I could barely hear the thud of her boots connecting with the ground over the deafening pounding in my ears.

Holding the torch before me, I crawled forward on tense limbs while repeating the same sentence over and over in my head.

*I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.*

My heart slammed so hard against my ribs that I was pretty sure that Eve could hear it from where she was crawling behind me.

The tunnel stretched on.

And on.

And on.

My mind was fraying with every excruciating second.

Memories of thick wooden walls, darkness, and world-ending panic pounded against my skull. The madness inside me surged up in response. It called to me, tempting me with that calm and peaceful nothingness where I would feel nothing at all.

I fought against it. Grinding my teeth, I suppressed the urge to slip into that state where I could just let the insanity take over.

We were almost there now. We had been crawling for what to me felt like hours, so we had to almost be out on the other side now. I could do this. I just had to hold on a little longer.

Torchlight reflected against a small sign that had been secured to the dirt wall.

I glanced at it.

And my heart stopped.

*Marker 1/5*, the sign read.

One out of five.



One fifth.

We had only made it one fifth of the distance through the tunnel.

Panic shot through my chest.

I would never get out. There was no end to this. I would be stuck here forever.

The world around me tilted.

Even with my eyes open, I could see those thick wooden walls around me clear as day. Could feel the pain pulsing through my bones as I banged my fists on them. Could hear my screams of fear and the pleas for mercy.

The madness surged up inside me. And this time, there was no stopping it.

My mind was slipping. Fast. Retreating into that safe corner inside and letting the monster lose to neutralize the threat for me.

“Eve,” I pressed out with great effort. “Get out. You need to get out. Now.”

“Levi,” her voice came from behind me, sounding very worried. “What’s going on?”

“GET OUT!” I screamed as I whipped around to face her, the words tearing from me with enough force to make me taste blood.

She jerked back at the sudden movement. Or the loud noise. Or at the insanity that she must be seeing in my eyes right now. Or all of the above.

But she didn’t turn and run like I had told her to.

Instead, she shot a blast of wind square into my chest.

The force of it was enough to send me toppling backwards and slamming back first into the ground. My elbow hit the packed dirt, and I lost the grip on the torch in my hand. It rolled sideways before stopping against the wall.

Before my mind could catch up with what had just happened, Eve climbed on top of me. Straddling my chest, she leaned down over me and placed her hands on my cheeks.

“Close your eyes,” she said.

Panic still pulsed inside me, and the insanity clawed its way through my soul, demanding to be let out. I stared up into that packed dirt ceiling that was far too close, and the sound of my own screams from years ago once again echoed inside my skull.

“I said, close your eyes!” Eve snapped with such unflinching command that I actually started.

My gaze darted towards her face.

She stared me down.

Dragging in a rattling breath, I followed her order and closed my eyes.

The madness still fought hard to pull me under.

“We are not in a tunnel right now,” Eve said. Her tone was so full of conviction that I almost believed her. “We’re in your bedroom.”

She slid her hands from my cheeks and down my throat before drawing them over my shoulders. I focused all of my attention on that. On the feeling of her hands on my body.

“You just tried to ambush me, but you failed miserably because I’m obviously much more skilled than you.”

Despite myself, I laughed. It was a short and strained sound. But it did ease the panic in my mind just a fraction.

“And since I won,” she continued as she traced her fingers over my chest. “You now have to do what I want.”

She leaned down and brushed her lips over my jaw, kissing her way towards my mouth. I sucked in deep breaths while the panic retreated a little more.

Eve took her hands from my chest and instead wrapped her fingers around my wrists. With a firm grip, she lifted my

hands from the ground and placed them on her hips. While holding them there, she leaned down again and kissed me.

“And I want you to just be here,” she breathed against my lips. “With me.”

Releasing my wrists, she drew her hands over my arms and back towards my shoulders while she kissed me again.

“Stay with me,” she whispered. “Don’t disappear into whatever it is that your mind is trying to pull you into. Come back to me. Stay with me.”

I tightened my fingers on her hips, holding on to her as if she was the only thing tethering me to this world. Because at that moment, she was.

With my eyes still closed, I focused everything on her. On the feeling of her hips underneath my hands. On the way her thighs pressed against the sides of my chest. On how her lips felt against mine. On the sound of her voice as she whispered those words over and over again. *Stay with me.*

Breathing in deeply, I filled my lungs with her intoxicating scent.

The images of thick wooden walls disappeared, the phantom pain of banging my hands against them faded, and the sound of my own screaming stopped echoing inside my skull. With their disappearance, the insanity inside me gradually withdrew as well.

My mind cleared and my breathing evened out.

Eve broke the kiss.

At last, I opened my eyes again.

A gorgeous face met me.

I swallowed against the thickness in my throat.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice hoarse.

Those words were so ridiculously inadequate for what I felt right now. But Eve seemed to understand anyway, because she cupped my cheeks and leaned down to kiss me again. I lost myself in the feeling of her body against mine.

Then she drew back and carefully climbed off me. I pushed myself into a sitting position. Twisting my head, I looked into the unending darkness of the tunnel ahead.

Panic immediately crashed into me again.

I turned back to Eve and shook my head. "I can't do it."

If it had been shorter, I would have been able to weather it. If it had just been a short tunnel underneath the wall to get inside the building, I could have suppressed the panic long enough to get through it and out the other side. But this tunnel ran under the street and then underneath the entire parliament grounds before it finally reached the building on the other side. It was too far. Too much time spent in darkness and surrounded by narrow walls.

I didn't have a lot of limits. But this was one of them.

I couldn't do it.

"I know," Eve replied. There was absolutely no judgement in her tone, or in her eyes as she met my gaze. "We'll find another way. Let's go back."

Leaving the torch for me, she scooted around so that she was facing the other way. And then she started forward at a brisk pace.

I grabbed the torch and followed.

Those fucking walls stared me down again, seeming to press closer and closer. I sucked in a shuddering breath.

"Do you want me to talk so that I can distract you or stay silent so that you can focus?" Eve asked as if she had heard the returning panic in that breath alone.

"Talk," I managed to press out.

"Alright. Do you know something you did that I found unreasonably hot?"

I couldn't manage a reply this time, but Eve didn't seem to mind. She just kept talking.

"That time when you were blackmailing those two guys from that other House." She hummed as if in thought. "Was it

the House of Fire? Or Thousand Eagles? Anyway... They said they'd do anything. And do you know what you said? *Kneel. Lick my boots.* And they did." She sighed. "Fuck, that was so hot."

A short laugh, barely more than a breath, made it past the clawing panic in my chest and spilled across my lips.

"If you remember, I left the room shortly after that. Do you know why?" There was a teasing note in her voice now. "I went straight to my room and fucked myself with my own fingers while playing that scene over and over in my head."

I let out something between a groan and a laugh.

Eve chuckled. "Oh I thought you might like that."

With a smirk in her voice, she launched into another similar story as we made our way back through the tunnel.

And with the sound of her voice keeping the panic and madness at bay, I managed to make it there without shattering completely.

## CHAPTER 12



After we made it out of the tunnel, Levi threw up five times in the alley outside the building. My heart had almost shattered seeing him like that. I still didn't know why he reacted the way he did to enclosed spaces, but if I ever found the person responsible for it, I was going to skin them alive.

"Welcome to the Red Moon," said a gorgeous woman with auburn hair. There was a genuine smile on her lips as she nodded to both me and Levi. "It's such an honor to have you and your friend here, Mr. Arden. What can I get for you?"

"A bottle of whiskey." Levi slid his gaze to me. When I nodded, he added, "Two glasses."

"Of course," she replied.

"And I would like to speak with a woman who is known to entertain older men," I said. "Preferably a blond woman."

She blinked and flicked a glance at Levi. Since he was only twenty-seven, he couldn't be classified as an old man by any sort of standard.

Levi just looked back at her with his usual air of absolute command.

"Oh, of course," she hurriedly said, her gaze darting back to me. "That would be Vera. I'll send her right over."

I nodded. She quickly moved towards the bar to get our whiskey and to speak to another woman there. While the second woman presumably went in search of Vera, the redhead

returned and placed two glasses and a bottle of whiskey on our table. Then she withdrew again.

The entire ground floor of the Red Moon was made up of a spacious bar area while the other floors housed private rooms. Even though it could be used as a bar too, the front door was painted red, marking it as an establishment that catered to the pleasures of the heart and body.

I scanned the gauzy red and gold drapes that hung around the room to provide privacy between the dark wooden tables. Since they were so translucent, they didn't technically block the view of what everyone else was doing. But they apparently still had the desired effect because people acted as if no one could see them. My gaze drifted over a couple who were making out in their own booth while Levi uncorked the bottle and poured whiskey into our glasses.

His hands were once again steady, and there was no remaining outward trace of the panic that had gripped him earlier.

Once he had finished throwing up in that alley, we had returned to my house and changed back into normal clothes. Then we had made our way to the south side with the help of a water mage who went by the name of Ferry. I had some business to take care of, and Levi had looked like he needed a drink, which was why we had decided to go to the Red Moon tonight.

“Sorry,” Levi said as he handed me one of the glasses.

I took it while frowning at him in confusion. “For what?”

“For what you had to see in that tunnel.” He downed half of his whiskey in one go and then cleared his throat self-consciously. “And for fucking up our plan.”

“Don't worry about it. We'll figure out another way.”

Leaning back against the cushioned backrest, he raked a hand through his hair and heaved a deep sigh. “Fuck. It would've been so easy. If I could just get into their parliament chamber, I could set up an attack underneath the floor and then

*bam*. Trap them all with metal in one fell swoop and give them a choice. Cede the south side or die.”

“Yeah.” I huffed out a laugh. “But when has anything we do ever been easy?”

He let out a soft chuckle and raised his glass at me. “True.”

After draining the entire glass, he refilled it. Based on the way he was drinking, I was pretty sure that he was faking the calm composure he wore like a mask on his face right now. After all, we were out in public, and the King of Metal could never be seen as anything but calm and in control. But I knew that the experience in that tunnel had rattled him more than he wanted to admit.

However, that was a conversation for another place and another time, when we were alone, so I went along with his façade and drank from my own glass before speaking again.

“Maybe we should try the kidnapping loved ones plan anyway?” I suggested. “If we find the right person, we might be able to get them all in the same place at the same time. Like a party or charity event or something.”

“Maybe.” Levi drummed his fingers on the polished wooden table. “But the problem is the amount of time it would take. Getting someone to organize a huge event for all the parliament members and their families? I doubt anyone would be able to pull that off even within a week or two, let alone a few days.”

I blew out a long sigh. “Good point.”

Lifting my glass, I was just about to take another sip when a blond woman walked up to our table. She cast a worried glance towards Levi, as if she feared that she might have done something to offend the Dark Mage King of Malgrave, before her gaze found mine.

“I heard that you wanted to speak with me,” she said in what sounded more like a question than a statement.

“Yes.” I set my glass down on the table with a thud and turned to face her fully. “I would like you to add a man to your list of past clients.”



Her pale brows creased in confusion, and she once more glanced at Levi before returning her attention to me. “I... don’t understand.”

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a folded-up piece of paper. It rustled faintly as I smoothed it out on the table. Vera blinked and then peered down at the two drawings there.

“This man is Ulric Smith.” I pointed towards the drawing on the left before moving my finger to the second one. “And this is his wife, Marla.”

Vera studied their faces and then glanced up at me. “Okay?”

“If she comes here and asks about her husband, I would like you to tell her that Ulric is indeed one of your clients. That he started coming last month after something to do with his work made him lose the spark of life.”

Before she could respond, Levi reached into his own pocket and pulled out a rather generous stack of bills that he placed on the table. Vera’s eyes widened as she took in the money.

“I... I don’t understand.” Meeting my gaze, she shook her head in confusion. “Usually, it’s the other way around. People pay me to keep quiet about their meetings with me. But you... want me to tell the wife that I slept with the husband even though I didn’t?”

“Correct.”

“Why?”

I just looked back at her in silence.

Her gaze darted to the money again, and she licked her lips.

“So...” I raised my eyebrows. “Do we have a deal?”

She hesitated for only a second before reaching for the money. “Yes.”

Her hand had only just reached the stack of bills when Levi grabbed her wrist. She yelped in surprise and tried to pull

her arm back. Levi only kept his iron grip on her.

“If you breathe a word about our involvement to anyone, you and I are going to have some serious problems, Vera.” Levi’s gray eyes glinted like sharpened steel as he leveled a commanding stare on her. “Is that clear?”

“Y-yes, Mr. Arden,” she stammered. “I swear, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Good.”

He held her gaze for another few seconds before finally releasing her wrist. She flicked a nervous glance between the two of us. I gave her a nod.

Moving more carefully this time, she gathered up the money and the drawing I had brought and then slowly backed away. I watched her leave while a villainous grin spread across my lips.

While I did feel a little bad for Marla, it was better for everyone if she left Ulric. He would be devastated by it, and she would not be caught up in the fallout from the shitstorm that was about to hit soon.

Leaning back in my seat, I drank some more whiskey.

Who would’ve thought that doing vicious evil things was so much fun?

## CHAPTER 13



**R**estless impatience swirled behind my ribcage like a crackling storm. We were coming up on two weeks now.

According to Eve, the white boot invasion was most likely still another week away, since Ulric Smith wanted to change some of the things that Wright had planned. But still. It wasn't enough.

I hated myself for not being able to handle that damn tunnel. It had been twelve years since I left that fucking place behind. And since then, I had killed and blackmailed and threatened my way to the top until I was so far above everyone else that they trembled at the mere mention of my name. But the scars were still there. Carved deep into my soul.

Everyone in Malgrave saw me as this untouchable villain, someone larger than life with limitless power and no weaknesses, because that was the image I had cultivated over the years. But the truth was that I was human. Just like them. And no matter how much I tried to convince myself, *force* myself, to believe that I could handle crawling through that fucking endless tunnel, I knew deep down that I couldn't.

So unless I wanted to bring my entire army to the north and attack the parliament building openly, there was no way for me to corner the parliament members all together like that.

I ground my teeth in annoyance as I stalked down the street. Dark gray clouds swirled in the heavens above, mirroring my foul mood. A few shopkeepers bowed their heads in respect as I passed them. I barely had enough

presence of mind to nod back as I ran the same useless plans through my head again and again.

Ambushing the parliament while they were in session was out since I couldn't sneak into the building. And there wasn't enough time to find someone to blackmail who was influential enough to stage a party and make sure that all of the parliament members or their loved ones would be there in such a short amount of time.

I ran a hand over my jaw as I turned the corner and cut through a darkened alleyway.

What if I sent simultaneous strike teams to all of the parliament members' houses in the middle of the night?

Dropping my hand again, I shook my head in frustration. That would never work. There would be too many variables. Too many things that could go wrong. And I would have to rely too much on far too many other people.

No. If I wanted—

Shock pulsed through me, and I froze mid-step as the cold edge of a blade suddenly appeared across my throat.

“You lied to me.”

Dread washed over me like a bucket of ice water. *Fuck.*

Making sure to keep my tone nonchalant, I said, “You're going to have to be more specific.”

“Oh, you know exactly what I'm talking about,” Christian White replied from behind my back.

I glanced down at the knife pressed against my skin, trying to calculate whether I would be able to touch my hands together before that damn worldwalker could slit my throat. Based on our previous encounters, the odds would not be in my favor.

“When I left your piss- and alcohol-stinking city, I stationed a spy here,” White went on. “Because I wanted to hear all the glorious details of your downfall. Of how your people rebelled against you after you killed your own. So

imagine my surprise when my spy returned with the news that you were not dead, but in fact more powerful than ever.”

“That really shouldn’t have come as a surprise.”

“No. But do you know what did? Hearing that the people I killed were *not* your top people, but instead rival gang leaders.” He tutted and shifted the blade higher up my throat. “Using me to take out your competition, huh?”

“It’s not my fault that you were so fucking ignorant of the power structure in this city.”

He pressed the knife harder against my skin. “Careful now.”

I said nothing. White was unpredictable. While I didn’t think that he would slit my throat right here in this alley, at least not unless I tried to kill him first, it was still a very real possibility. Based on our previous interactions, I was pretty sure that he was more the type to prolong his revenge rather than kill someone quickly.

But I didn’t know for certain. And I had no plans to die here in this alley today. Not when I was so close to finally having *everything*. So I remained motionless as White lightly scraped the edge of the blade down my throat.

“I have to admit, I’m disappointed,” he said. “I thought you were a man of your word, Dark Mage King of Malgrave.”

“I am. But you broke our agreement when you demanded the deaths of my people *after* the deal had already been struck, so I was under no obligation to keep my side of the bargain.”

He chuckled in my ear. “How very wicked of me.”

It took enormous effort to stay still instead of trying to whirl around to rip his fucking tongue out of his mouth. My skin crawled where I had felt his breath when he laughed.

“But you know that I can’t let this slide, right?” White continued.

Exhaustion crashed over me like a tidal wave. When White had first arrived, I had felt dread and panic. But now I just felt fucking tired. I had literally just gotten rid of this damn

maniac, and now he was back again. I had enough problems as it was without adding a bloody worldwalker back into the mix.

“What do you want?” I asked, my voice coming out flat.

“Look at you...” I could hear the fucking smirk in his voice. “So submissive and compliant.”

I clenched my hand into a fist but said nothing.

“I want blood,” White declared. “You killed my cousin, and I want blood in repayment for that. But this time, I will be going after the person I should have demanded as a sacrifice last time.” He traced the knife over my throat again. “Eve Sterling.”

My blood froze.

Then rage roared through my veins like wildfire.

Raising my hands a fraction, I tried to summon my magic and turn around so that I could kill this bastard on the spot. But White forced the blade harder against my skin. Blood slid down my throat. I stopped moving, but the fury inside me still raged.

“You stay the hell away from Eve,” I growled.

“No. In fact, I look forward to slitting her throat.”

“If you touch a single hair on her head, I’ll—”

“But don’t worry,” White continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “I won’t just assassinate her somewhere in a dark alley. I will make sure that you are there to see her die.”

“When I get my hands on you—”

“And then I’ll probably take out half of your people too. Including your top three that should already be dead. When you take out a loan, you have to pay interest, remember?”

Rage tore through my chest and I could barely keep my voice level as I ground out, “I am going to make you wish that you had stayed in your fucking castle and played happy family with your healer. Because if you ever set foot in my city again, I will—”

“It’s cute how you think you’re in any position to threaten me. How you think that someone like you can go up against someone like me and win.” He let out a mocking laugh and then shoved the blade higher up under my chin. “When you walk through the streets, the people of Malgrave might bow their heads in respect. But when someone so much as whispers my name, the whole fucking world trembles.”

I scoffed derisively. “No one outside your frozen wastelands has even *heard* your name.”

“Watch your back, King of Metal.” He tapped my throat with the blade. “Because I will be seeing you soon.”

And then, just as abruptly as it had appeared, the knife disappeared from my throat.

I whirled around, but Christian White had already worldwalked away.

Glaring at the spot where he had been standing, I reached a hand towards my throat and wiped off the blood with quick, angry motions.

Fucking worldwalker. I was going to teach him just how wrong he was about his inflated sense of self-importance. He would die at my feet, choking on his own blood.

Because no one threatened Eve.

She was mine.

## CHAPTER 14



The moment I had stepped out of the constables' headquarters, one of Levi's runners had practically ambushed me in order to deliver a warning that Christian White was back and out for blood. Specifically, mine. So I'd had to sneak through the city to get to Levi's Court. And even now, when we were an entire hour into our planning session, I could feel Levi glancing at me every few seconds as if to make sure that I was still there and hadn't in fact been worldwalked away.

"We're not getting anywhere," I said with a deep sigh, interrupting their third run-through of inadequate ideas for how to kill White while also stopping the invasion and acquiring the south side at the same time.

Levi and his three highest-ranking mages all turned towards me.

We were not in Levi's study this time. Instead, we were all seated around the table in his elegant black and gold dining room. Light from the candles along the massive table filled the room with warm light and made the gold veins in all the walls, the floor, and the furniture glimmer.

Raking my fingers through my hair, I leaned back in my chair and then picked up my glass of wine. After drinking deeply, I heaved another sigh and shook my head.

"We're not getting anywhere," I repeated. Setting down my glass, I looked between the four of them. "If there had



been an easy way to kill White, you would've done it when he was here last time."

Levi swirled the whiskey in his own glass, but then tilted his head as if conceding the point.

"I should pretend that I want to get away from you," I said. "And just give myself up to White willingly."

"Out of the question!" Levi declared at the same time as Tyler, Chris, and Shinji said, "Absolutely not!"

Levi turned to look at the three of them, eyebrows raised. They cleared their throats self-consciously. But there was a satisfied smile playing over Levi's lips, as if he was actually pleased by their reaction.

"I can take care of myself," I snapped.

"I know you can," Levi answered as he slid his gaze back to me. Authority pulsed from his entire being as he leveled a commanding stare on me. "But that plan is still not going to happen."

"It's the best option we have," I protested. "Because White wouldn't see it coming. And that would buy the rest of you the time to deal with the parliament and get the south side, and at the same time, it might also give me a chance to kill him."

"It's too dangerous."

"I'm an excellent liar. As you know firsthand."

"Oh, I'm aware."

"So I would easily be able to fool him for however long it takes you to finish things up here."

"I said no."

Narrowing my eyes, I shot Levi a hard look. "You seem to be forgetting the part where I don't take orders from you."

Metal shot up from the chair's armrests and snaked around my wrists, locking them in place. I jerked back in surprise and tried to yank my hands away, but I was now firmly trapped to the chair.

“If I have to keep you chained to my fucking bed until I have killed White, then that is what I will do,” Levi declared, his voice dripping with power as he stared me down from across the table. “If White gets his hands on you, he is going to hurt you. Regardless of how good a liar you are, regardless of whether he thinks you came willingly or not, he is going to start torturing you to death the moment he gets his hands on you. Because he knows that if he does that, he will break me. This plan of yours has no outcome that doesn’t involve you getting hurt. You know it. And I know it.”

Clenching my jaw, I glared back at him. Deep down, I knew that he was probably right. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to admit that.

“So let me make this clear. You are not, under any circumstances, going to give yourself up to White. Understood?”

I yanked against my restraints again. “You arrogant domineering asshole.”

“I said, is that clear?” The sheer command in his tone vibrated through my very bones.

For another few seconds, I just sat there, glowering at him in angry silence. Then I forced out a breath. “Fine.”

“Then say it.”

“Yes, I understand,” I ground out.

He held my gaze for a few more moments, as if to truly drive the point home. Then he brushed his palms together and let the metal sink back into the chair.

The moment the restraints were gone, I slapped my hands together and summoned a lightning bolt.

Amusement danced in Levi’s eyes as he watched the crackling white bolt flicker in my palm when I pointed it at him.

“Go ahead and shoot that lightning bolt at me, spitfire. See what happens.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He smirked.

With a frustrated snarl, I let the magic die out and instead reached for my wine glass. After heaving another sigh, I shook my head and then drank deeply from the rich red wine. Levi just chuckled softly.

“And you three,” I demanded as I set my glass down and instead stabbed a hand towards the other dark mages at the table. “Why didn’t you have my back just now? That plan would’ve kept Levi safe. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Of course it is,” Shinji replied, his calm dark eyes meeting mine.

“But *you* wouldn’t have been safe,” Chris finished.

I raised my eyebrows. “So?”

“I thought we made it very clear that morning after you freed us from prison,” Tyler picked up. His blue eyes were full of sincerity as he held my gaze. “You’re one of us now. And we protect our own.”

Warmth spread through my chest, and my mouth dropped open a little. I still wasn’t used to being surrounded by people who had my back. And not just theoretically, like my colleagues at the South Side Department who were supposed to be in my corner but then left me hanging the moment shit got real. These ruthless and violent dark mages truly had my back.

I smiled at them.

“And besides,” Chris added, and nodded towards Levi. “If we had, *he* would’ve gutted us.”

“Actually, I would’ve skinned you alive.” Levi lifted his broad shoulders in a casual shrug and sipped from his whiskey. “But the end result would’ve been the same.”

Chris shot me a pointed look. “See?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine.” After huffing out something between a laugh and a sigh, I added, “I just figured that it would’ve been good to make White solely my problem instead of having him be everyone else’s problem too.”

Levi sat up straight in his chair so fast that his knee hit the table, making the glasses and bottles on the black and gold surface rattle. The rest of us started in surprise and blinked at him.

“What if we make him everyone’s problem?” Levi said.

“Isn’t he already everyone’s problem?” Tyler asked, confusion blowing across his face. “Didn’t you say that he was going to kill us three and half of your Court too, not just Eve?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Bracing his palms on the table, he sat forward and swept his gaze over all four of us. His gray eyes seemed to swirl with schemes. “If we need to fight White anyway, then why not make him the parliament’s problem too?”

For a few seconds, no one said anything.

Candlelight danced over the walls and glinted in the glasses across the table.

Then, as if we all figured it out at the same time, the four of us sat up straighter and raised our eyebrows.

“We get White to threaten an attack against the whole city of Malgrave,” I said, spelling out what Levi had been insinuating.

“Exactly.” The King of Metal grinned like the villain he was as he leaned back in his chair again and picked up his glass of whiskey. “Then we offer to protect the city from the dangerous worldwalker and his army... in exchange for them ceding the south side to me.”

Another few seconds of stunned silence passed as we all stared at him.

“Fuck, you’re brilliant,” Chris blurted out. “And kind of terrifying.” Then he seemed to remember himself because his cheeks flushed and he cleared his throat sheepishly. “Sorry, sir.”

Satisfaction glittered in Levi’s eyes as he waved his hand, signaling that he didn’t mind the outburst.

“It is an excellent solution,” Shinji said with a considering look on his face as he nodded. “Using one problem to solve another problem.”

“I agree,” I said, almost a little annoyed that I hadn’t come up with that cunning idea myself. Furrowing my brows, I drummed my fingers on the smooth tabletop. “But how do we get White to bring his army and threaten the whole city instead?”

“We take his healer,” Levi replied immediately. “It’s what started this whole chain of events. He desperately wanted a healer, and only left when I gave him one. So if we steal the healer back, White is going to come charging down from the north with swords drawn.”

A smile drifted across my lips as I watched Levi and the others talk about strategies for getting the healer.

This was why Levi had managed to build himself an empire.

Yes, he was ridiculously powerful and ruthless and possessed an unusual magical ability. But what made Levi Arden such a formidable foe was that he was intelligent. *Dangerously* intelligent.

In just the past few months since I first met him, he had killed no less than six gang leaders and wiped out all remaining dark mage Houses.

Wicked anticipation sparkled inside me as I watched him sit there and scheme in his black and gold dining room. I almost pitied whoever would try to challenge him next.

“The problem is that we don’t know where White’s castle is,” Tyler said, raking a hand through his brown hair.

Levi ran a hand over his jaw. “I know someone who can probably find out.”

“No need,” I said.

They all turned to me with raised eyebrows.

“Chief Anderson has a contact in the city close to where the castle is,” I explained. “So I already know where it is.”

Levi smirked. “How convenient.”

“Isn’t it?” I grinned back. “Anyway, White has apparently made his home in a castle outside Helmark.”

Levi froze.

A whole host of emotions flashed behind his eyes.

I blinked. “What?”

That strange expression on his face disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. Giving his head a short shake, he shrugged and slouched back in his seat again. “Nothing. I was just surprised. Helmark isn’t exactly the north.”

“It’s north of Malgrave.”

“Yeah, but not *the* north. The true north. With the way people were talking, I expected it to be at least past the Gray Peaks.”

I studied Levi carefully. There was something else going on here. His tone was too casual. His replies too light. And that slew of emotions that had flickered in his eyes earlier had not just been from surprise.

Opening my mouth, I was about to ask him what was really going on. But before I could, Levi shot me a quick look so full of silent pleading that I started in shock.

Levi didn’t *plead*.

But the look in his eyes was clear.

*Please don’t. Not here. Not now.*

So I quickly switched paths and instead said, “True. At least Helmark is much closer. What is it, a two-day ride?”

Relief briefly blew across Levi’s face, and he dipped his chin a fraction.

I nodded back. But that curiosity stayed inside me even when we moved into a discussion about how to logistically pull this off. There was so much that I didn’t know about Levi. About his past. I had told him most of mine, but he had never

shared any of his past demons with me. And part of me wondered if he ever would.

“Alright then,” Levi said eventually. “We have a plan. Eve and I will leave for Helmark at first light to kidnap White’s healer. I expect you three to keep everything running smoothly and to keep everyone firmly in line until I return.”

“Yes, sir,” Shinji, Tyler, and Chris answered as one while inclining their heads in acknowledgement.

“Try to stay inside the Court as much as possible since it seems as though White can’t worldwalk right into it, for some reason. He shouldn’t be coming after you since he will no doubt be searching the city for Eve, but it’s better not to take any stupid risks right now.”

They nodded again.

Levi’s tone sharpened. “And Tyler?”

The lightning mage started slightly, and a hint of worry flickered across his face. “Yes, sir?”

“Gemma has been waiting for you to ask her out for three years.” Levi shot him a pointed look. “Do it now before we all perish from the sheer exasperation of having to watch the two of you dance around each other.”

Tyler’s cheeks flushed bright red. I had to draw a hand over my mouth to hide the smile that bloomed on my lips. Next to me, Chris chuckled into his glass of whiskey while Shinji pressed his lips together to suppress a grin.

“Uhm... y-yes, sir,” Tyler at last managed to press out.

“And Tyler?” Threats laced Levi’s voice as he spoke now, and his eyes were sharp as steel. “If you break her heart, I will break your hands. Understood?”

He nodded vehemently. “Understood.”

“Good.” Levi swirled the whiskey in his glass before downing it all in one go. A grin spread across his face as he slid his gaze to me. “Then let’s go steal a healer.”

## CHAPTER 15



I felt uneasy leaving my kingdom unprotected like this. Though I supposed that it wasn't technically *unprotected*. I trusted Shinji, Chris, and Tyler to keep both the civilians and the rest of my people in line. The problem was those damn white boots. If they for some reason decided to launch their invasion early and attacked while I was gone, I didn't know how successful my people would be at holding them off. But this was the only way to deal with both problems, so it was a risk we had to take.

"Shouldn't we have brought... I don't know? Tents or something?" Eve asked from where she was riding next to me with the reins of our third horse tied to her saddle as well.

Amusement pulled at my lips as I glanced over at her.

White clouds covered the sky above, draining much of the color from the grasslands around us. Eve cast a quick look up at the sky, as if it would open up suddenly and drown us in cold rain, before turning her head back and meeting my gaze again.

"I didn't take you for a person who enjoys camping out in the wild," I said.

She raised her eyebrows at me and shot me a pointed look. "Based on what, exactly?"

"You're a city girl through and through."

"What does that mean?"



“It means that you know every street like the back of your hand and can navigate crowds without the slightest issue, but if I pointed to a field and asked you which sprouts were crops and which were weeds, you wouldn’t be able to tell.”

“Oh, and you would? Mr. Dark Mage King of Malgrave inside your decidedly non-plant-friendly Court of Metal?”

“I was actually born on a farm.”

Surprise blew across Eve’s face.

My heart pattered in my chest. I had wanted to tell her about this, about my past, for a while now. But I just had never been able to work up the courage.

“So I grew up surrounded by fields and crops and stuff until...” I trailed off and had to force the next few words out of my mouth. “Until my family sold me.”

Even though Eve already knew that part, it was still difficult to say the words. I hated talking about my past. I didn’t want people to know how weak I had been. How many years I had spent at someone else’s mercy.

But I wanted Eve to know. I *wanted* to share this part of myself with her.

Opening my mouth, I got ready to tell her the rest of the story.

Cold dread washed over me.

No. I couldn’t.

“Anyway...” I cleared my throat and instead quickly said, “No, we don’t need any tents because there’s an inn halfway between Malgrave and Helmark.”

Eve looked like she was about to ask something, and part of me wished that she would. Wished that she would push for an answer so that I would be forced to tell her. But she didn’t. Because she understood more than most how painful the past could be, and especially if you weren’t ready to talk about it.

“Oh, that’s good,” she said instead, and gave me a small smile. “Because you’re right. Sleeping out in the wild really

isn't high on my list of things to try before I die.”

I chuckled, relieved that I could put off this conversation a little longer, and then raised my eyebrows at her. “Does that mean you've never been outside Malgrave?”

“No, I have. I've been south. To Castlebourne. But never north.” She shot me a curious look. “I take it you have?”

“Yeah, I'm...”

Once again, I was given an opening to share. And once again, I panicked and changed the subject. Fucking hell, why was I such a bloody coward?

“I've been to that inn before,” I said instead. “And if we keep up this pace, we should reach it before nightfall.”

“That's—”

Releasing the reins, I slapped my hands together and yanked up a metal wall right before a storm of magic could crash into us. It hit my shield instead, making the metal buckle in several places from the sheer force of it. And that meant only one thing. Other dark mages.

While shoving the metal wall towards our attackers, I threw my leg over the saddle and opened my mouth to tell Eve to get down from her horse as well. But there was no need. She had already jumped off and drawn her sword and was halfway across the grass by the time I landed on the ground.

The metal slammed into defensive magic across the grass. I let it drop and instead summoned a sheet that I flung towards the right.

Now that the wall was gone, I could see our attackers clearly.

There were five of them, and all of them were men. They were standing just a few steps in front of the small copse of trees to our left, which meant that they must have been hiding in there and waiting for us to get closer so that they could ambush us.

The two people on the ends yanked up shields of water and wind to block the metal sheet I had hurled at them. A boom

reverberated across the grass as the magic collided. The moment that the shields were gone, the three people in the middle shot lightning bolts and a fireball at me.

So, one wind mage, one fire mage, one water mage, and two lightning mages. And five against two. Not the greatest odds, but not by any stretch impossible either.

Surprise flashed across the guys' faces when the magic disappeared to reveal Eve charging them at full speed with her sword drawn. They were no doubt used to other dark mages, who preferred to fight from a distance, or to normal people, who didn't fight at all. Not to a trained constable whose first instinct was to force close combat.

I threw another metal wall to block the magic that they suddenly scrambled to shoot at Eve instead. Embers swirled in the cold air as the fireball smacked into my shield, followed closely by two lightning bolts. Dropping it, I raised another to block the combined wind and water attack. Water sprayed out around it.

Then she was there.

Alarm pulsed through the row of attackers as Eve swung her sword at the wind mage's head. I summoned a sharp sheet of metal and shot it at the other four.

Warmth spread through my chest as I watched Eve fight while I hurled attack after attack at them too.

This was yet another thing I loved about that little spitfire. She didn't need me to protect her. She was dangerous and lethal and could more than hold her own in a fight. Even in a dark mage battle.

The wind mage and one of the lightning mages were scrambling to get out of reach of Eve's sword while also trying to shoot attacks at her. But every time they tried to touch their hands together, Eve was there, swinging at them and forcing them to jump back.

Next to them, the other three were getting distracted by the melee as well. I used that opportunity to shoot a hail of metal spears at them while I strode closer. The water mage and the

fire mage managed to block or push my attacks off course at the last second, but the lightning mage didn't have any defensive magic, and the others had been too late to protect him.

Shock pulsed across his narrow face as the spear sunk deep into his chest. He coughed blood onto his shirt and then toppled backwards. It made the second lightning mage whip around towards me, leaving the wind mage to deal with Eve alone.

I threw two more spears while continuing to stalk towards them, managing to skewer the distracted lightning mage through the heart as well, and then changed my attack to wide sheets instead. The water mage had been so wrapped up in blocking the spears that he didn't notice that I had switched attacks until it was too late.

With a blast of water, he shoved my attack sideways. But because of the change in shape, the sharp metal sheet sheared through the fire mage's arm on its way past instead.

Screams of pain tore from his throat.

While he was distracted by his severed arm, I shot another sheet at him.

Blood sprayed into the air as it took the fire mage's head clean off his shoulders at the same time as Eve rammed her sword through the wind mage's chest.

The fire mage just crumbled to the ground, already dead, while the wind mage let out gurgling noises.

A few steps to the right, the water mage stared with wide eyes at his now slaughtered companions.

I closed the final distance while Eve yanked her sword out of her victim's chest and gave his body a shove with her boot. He toppled backwards and slammed into the now bloodstained grass.

"Fuck," the surviving water mage stammered. His blue eyes were wide as he flicked his gaze between me and Eve. Then he dropped to his knees and held up his hands. "Please."

Disgust flitted through me as I stopped before the pathetic man. Dark mages didn't beg. By acting like this, he was giving us all a bad name.

Eve, her bloody sword still in her hand, sauntered up to us and came to a halt next to me.

"Who do you work for?" I demanded.

"N-no one," the guy replied. There was genuine confusion on his face as he blinked at me. "We just rob travelers on the road and keep the money ourselves." His gaze darted to his slaughtered friends, and then he amended it to, "*Robbed* travelers on the road."

Eve and I exchanged a glance. So, they weren't Christian White's people then.

"Look, I'm sorry," the water mage blurted out. "We shouldn't have attacked you. If we had known who you are, *what* you are, we would never have... I would never have..."

There weren't exactly a lot of metal mages, and if their hunting grounds were this close to Malgrave, they must have at least heard about me.

Eve arched an eyebrow at me in silent question.

I discreetly shook my head.

However, our captive picked up on the gesture anyway, and fear flooded his features as he snapped his terrified eyes to me. "No, wait, please. I'm sorry. I'll do anything—"

His words were abruptly cut off as Eve discharged a lightning bolt straight into his heart from point blank range while his gaze was still locked on mine. His heart stopped immediately and he slumped to the side. Dead.

Once more, I was surprised by how merciless Eve had become in such a short amount of time. A few weeks ago, executing someone without a trial would have been unthinkable for her. And now, she had just killed a guy begging for mercy on his knees without so much as batting an eye. Granted, it had been someone who had tried to kill us just a few minutes ago. But still.

Eve was still in that phase of free fall. At some point, she was going to reach one of her hard limits. I just wondered when that would be.

“He would’ve tried to kill us the moment we let him go?” Eve guessed.

“Probably not. But he would have told people that his crew had been wiped out by a metal mage. And then White would’ve found out that we’re not in Malgrave anymore and that we are in fact on our way to him, which would ruin our element of surprise.”

“Good point.” She wiped her bloody blade on the dead water mage’s shirt and then slid it back in her scabbard. Straightening, she gave me a considering look. “But then that means that you probably shouldn’t use your magic in public at all until we’re back in Malgrave.”

I blew out a long breath. I didn’t like the idea of that. I didn’t like *hiding*. And I despised the thought of not being able to use my magic freely. It was why I had destroyed the Blade of Equilibrium in the first place, after all.

But Eve was right. If someone saw me use metal magic, there would always be a significant risk of word making it back to White. And without the element of surprise, we would never be able to kidnap his healer and get out of there alive.

“You’re right,” I said at last.

“Of course I am.”

I let out something between a laugh and a snort.

Eve moved so that she was standing right in front of me. A sly smile played over her gorgeous face as she rose up onto her toes and brushed her lips over mine.

“Don’t worry.” She grinned against my mouth and then patted my cheek. “I’ll protect you.”

## CHAPTER 16



Sunset painted the grasslands red and purple by the time we walked into the inn that Levi had mentioned. It was a surprisingly large place. Three stories high, and half of the ground floor taken up by a tavern area packed with people eating and drinking. Though, if this was the only inn between Malgrave and Helmark, I supposed that it needed to be rather big in order to house all the travelers who no doubt came through here.

The scent of baking bread and spiced meat stew filled my lungs as I walked through the tavern and over to the table that Levi had been keeping for us while I got us a room and ordered some food. My stomach rumbled in response.

“Any problems?” Levi asked as I slid into the seat opposite his.

“No.” I showed him the key to our room before slipping it into my pocket. “And food is on the way.”

He nodded, and then his sharp gray eyes scanned the room again.

We weren’t exactly hiding, but we were trying to keep a low profile. The odds of someone out here recognizing Levi on sight were pretty low, but we had still decided that it was best if I did the talking. And besides, I was a much better liar than him.

“So we’re about a day’s ride from the city of Helmark?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Levi confirmed as he slid his gaze back to me.

“But the castle is not *in* Helmark. It’s somewhere in the wilderness around it.” I drummed my fingers against the scratched wooden tabletop. “Which means that first, we have to actually find it before we can figure out a plan for how to get inside.”

“I know where it is.”

I drew back slightly and blinked in surprise.

Levi cleared his throat. “It was unoccupied last time I was in these parts, so I don’t know what the security will be like, but yeah... I know where it is.”

Yet again, I knew that there was more to the story. That there were things that Levi wasn’t telling me. Things about his past. But I didn’t comment on it. If he wanted to tell me, he would. And if he didn’t, that was okay too. We were all allowed our secrets.

“Good,” I said instead. “That will save us a lot of time.”

Before Levi could reply, our food and drinks arrived. We ate in silence, enjoying the warm stew and fluffy bread while just listening to the soft murmur of voices around us. Light from the oil lamps above bathed the pale wooden room in a golden glow.

Once our plates were scraped clean, we left the cozy tavern area behind and headed upstairs towards our room. Only... when we reached the door with the number fourteen on it, it wouldn’t open.

Wiggling the key, I tried again to unlock the door.

The key barely moved.

I scowled down at the lock.

“Need help with that?” Levi asked with a smirk on his face.

Turning my head, I directed my scowl at him. “I am perfectly capable of opening a door on my own, thank you very much.”



His eyes danced with mirth as he replied, “Ah yes, I can see that.”

“Asshole,” I muttered and wiggled the key again. “It’s as if it doesn’t fit.”

“I could just...” He curled his fingers and then motioned at the door. “Unlock it anyway.”

“And if there’s actually something wrong with the key? How do we explain that we got inside anyway?”

He just shrugged nonchalantly. I heaved a sigh and shook my head before yanking out the key and then starting back towards the stairs.

“Wait here,” I said over my shoulder. “And don’t cause any trouble.”

His answering grin wasn’t exactly comforting.

I let out a huff that was something between exasperation and amusement as I walked back down to the counter at the back of the tavern.

A short conversation later, and it became apparent that the innkeeper had told me the wrong room number. He apologized profusely and ensured me that the room next to it, room number fifteen, was in fact ours. I thanked him and started back up the steps again.

Angry voices drifted down to me when I was halfway up. Angry *men’s* voices. Drawing my eyebrows down, I focused on their words while I continued upwards.

“Well, guess what?” a blustering voice said. “We don’t take kindly to people trying to break into our room.”

“I wasn’t breaking in.” This voice belonged to Levi.

To anyone else, he would probably have sounded casual. But I could hear the threat of violence pulsing between the words. I quickened my pace, practically leaping up the final steps.

“I told you, we must have been given the wrong room number,” Levi continued. “Now, go back inside before things

escalate.”

A thud sounded right as I cleared the last step, and I just managed to see Levi’s back hitting the pale wooden wall as a tall and muscular man shoved him into it. There was another man with similarly impressive build next to him. Levi clenched his hand down by his side as he stared back at them. It looked like it took every ounce of his self-control to stop himself from summoning his magic and decapitating the two of them.

“You don’t give us orders,” the first man growled.

Neither of them had summon magic, so I assumed that they were ordinary people who had simply gotten angry when they had heard someone trying to get through their door and then opened it to no doubt find a completely unapologetic Levi on the other side.

Drawing my sword, I snuck up to the three of them.

Levi’s eyes found mine the moment I stepped into the corridor, but he quickly returned his gaze to the two men as if he didn’t want to give away my location.

“And I’ll show you exactly what it means when things *escalate*,” the angry man finished as he grabbed Levi by the collar and raised his fist.

Stopping behind them, I brushed my palms together while lifting my sword. The sound of crackling lightning filled the corridor right as I placed the edge of my sword against the side of Thug One’s neck.

He stiffened, his fist hovering a short distance from Levi’s face.

“Touch him, and you’ll be bleeding out on the floor,” I warned, my voice coming out low and vicious.

Thug Two cast a glance over his shoulder and found me aiming a lightning bolt at his back. Stunned surprise blew across his features, and his mouth dropped open slightly. But he said nothing. His gaze only darted to the sword I was holding to his companion’s neck before he turned his shocked eyes back to Levi, who was now smirking widely.

“Like he said, we were just given the wrong room number.” I deliberately pressed the sword harder against the guy’s skin while increasing the size of the lightning bolt. “Now, can I suggest fucking off quickly and quietly before I lose all sense of patience?”

The two stunned men exchanged a glance.

“Yes,” Thug One said eventually.

“Yes, what?” I demanded.

“Yes... ma’am?”

“*Yes, ma’am, indeed.*”

Using the sword, I steered the two of them around so that they were facing the open door to their room. Then I released the grip on the lightning bolt, twisted the sword in my hand, and brushed my palms together.

Water sloshed through the corridor as I shot a blast at them, making them stumble into their room. While they were busy staggering upright and turning around to gape at me, I summoned wind magic and used it to throw the door shut in their faces.

Then I slid my sword back into the scabbard and dusted off my hands before turning to Levi.

I started at the look on his face.

Desire burned like dark flames in his eyes as he drank me in.

“Which room is ours?” he asked, his voice rough.

“Fifteen.”

I had barely even unlocked the door before Levi yanked it open and all but threw me inside. Stumbling across the floor, I caught myself on a chair and then turned to glare at Levi. But my heart lurched in my throat at the way he was looking at me. I quickly used fire magic to light the oil lamp in the ceiling while Levi slammed the door shut behind him and locked it.

Then he prowled towards me, his eyes dark. “Do you have any idea how fucking hot you are when you threaten people?”

A wicked grin tugged at my lips as I raked my gaze up and down his body. “Well, you looked like you needed saving.”

“If I can see the glorious sight of you like that again, I’ll make sure to need saving every day.”

“That could be arranged.”

Levi shoved me up against the wall and then slid his hands into my hair and kissed me so desperately that I think my soul left my body for a moment.

Locking my hands around the back of his neck, I held him hard against me as I answered the kiss with the same furious passion. He moaned against my mouth.

While continuing to claim my lips, he drew his hands through my hair and down my back. Fire spread through my body where his hands touched me. He kept his mouth firmly on mine as he wrapped his arm around my ass and lifted me up.

A dull thud sounded as my back hit the wall again, but our stunned neighbors didn’t dare to complain.

My mind spun as Levi kissed me senseless while carrying me away from the wall and towards the desk. Shifting my weight to one arm, he used the other to swipe the pile of towels off the tabletop. They fluttered through the air and landed on the floor in a messy heap.

After setting me down on the edge of the table, Levi tore his lips from mine and then thrust his hips, sending me sliding more firmly onto the table. His chest heaved with pent-up need and he looked as out of breath as I felt.

For a few seconds, we just watched each other.

Then Levi’s hands shot out and he practically ripped open the fastenings on my pants. Planting his palm square against my chest, he shoved me down on my back and then curled his fingers over the top of both my pants and panties.

My heart slammed against my ribs. I lifted my hips right before Levi yanked my garments off.

A thrill raced down my spine, and my skin prickled at the exposure, as Levi placed his strong hands on my thighs and pushed my legs open wide. I stared up into the firelight that danced across the pale wooden ceiling while I sucked in shuddering breaths.

Levi drew his tongue along my pussy.

I gasped, arching up from the table.

His smug laugh caressed my sensitive skin as he continued up to my clit.

Sliding my fingers through his hair, I gripped the soft strands hard while he swirled his tongue around my clit. Lightning shot through my veins as he scraped his teeth over it before taking it into his mouth.

I fell back against the table, writhing on the smooth tabletop as Levi tortured my clit with expert strokes. Releasing his hair, I instead curled my fingers into fists while it felt as if my heart was going to break free from my chest,

“Levi,” I moaned as he worked his lips.

Tension thrummed inside me.

“Yes, spitfire?”

“Please,” I gasped, squirming against the cold wood as he scraped his teeth over my clit again.

Another dark chuckle escaped his lips, making his warm breath dance over my throbbing pussy.

Then he straightened.

Clothes rustled as he unbuttoned his own pants and freed his cock before leaning down over me. I drew in trembling breaths as he locked his hand around my throat and pulled me up from the table. A smirk shone on his face as he positioned his cock against my entrance. I wrapped my hands around his muscled forearm as he held me by the throat while dragging darkened eyes over my body.

“I do love it when you beg,” he mused.

“I—”

My words were cut off as Levi thrust his cock into me, and a moan spilled from my lips instead. Levi leaned forward and stole any remaining air from me with a dominant kiss.

After letting me adjust to his cock for a few seconds, he slowly withdrew and then shoved back in again.

Pleasure flickered through my body.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” Levi said, his voice raw, as he thrust into me again. “So bossy.”

*Thrust.*

“And violent.”

*Thrust.*

“With a tongue sharper than your blade.”

The look in his eyes as he held my gaze combined with the possessive way he was fucking me made my head spin and my heart pound wildly. I tightened my grip on his forearm, trying to keep myself from falling just from the sheer intensity in his eyes, his voice, his words, his body, everything right now.

“And I fucking love it.” Levi kept his hand around my throat, holding me firmly in place while his burning stare seared all the way into my soul. “I love everything about you, my vicious little spitfire.”

My heart soared in my chest, and heat washed through my whole body, mixing with the pulsing tension already thrumming inside me like a storm. Opening my mouth, I was about to reply. But right then, Levi hit a spot deep inside me.

A breathy scream tore from my throat instead as blinding pleasure shot through my body.

The table rocked underneath me as Levi kept up his dominating pace, fucking me through the orgasm and all the way towards another one.

Our remaining clothes ended up on the floor as Levi moved us towards the bed instead. It creaked underneath our weight and slammed against the wall behind as Levi fucked me hard until release once more crashed into me like a tidal wave.

I had barely managed to catch my breath from the last orgasm before another washed through my trembling limbs. Levi thrust into me until pleasure exploded behind his eyes as well.

The mattress bounced underneath us as we both collapsed down on it, completely spent.

Levi wrapped his arm around me, pulling me closer, while drawing up the cover to our waists. His chest was still heaving when I rolled over, nestling closer, and rested my palm on it. As was mine.

For a while, we just lay like that. Drawing in deep breaths while the world finished spinning around us. With my cheek resting on his arm, I tilted my head back slightly and studied his face. Fuck, he really was gorgeous.

“I love you too, you know,” I said once my breathing had evened out.

Light sparkled in Levi’s gray eyes, and he twisted his head so that he met my gaze. A soft smile danced on his lips.

“And I know that not summoning your magic out there in the corridor earlier was difficult for you,” I continued, watching him with serious eyes. “But I’ll always have your back.”

Emotions pulsed across his face. So intense that a jolt shot through me.

Swallowing thickly, he pulled me even closer and held me tightly.

Sparkling warmth filled my chest as I watched him. He didn’t need to reply. The expression on his face told me everything I needed to hear.

“I want to tell you something,” he began, his voice shaking slightly. “*Show you* something. Tomorrow.”

My heart almost stopped at the apprehension, and determination, in his tone.

“It’s on the way to White’s castle,” he continued as uncertainty flooded his features. “So it won’t take time away from what’s really important.”

“If this is important to you, it’s important to me. Take however much time you need.”

He swallowed and nodded again. His fingers traced restless circles on my arm as he turned his head back to stare up at the ceiling again.

In my chest, my heart was hammering as I thought about tomorrow.

Was Levi at last going to share his secrets with me?



## CHAPTER 17



It had been over a decade since I last set foot in this shithole of a village, but it somehow still looked exactly the same. The same muddy dirt path that led away from the main road and towards the village. The same dreary buildings made of age-darkened wood and stone. The same smell of smoke and iron and hopeless futures that hung over the entire settlement.

The only thing that was different was that they had added a new smithy. Even though the building that had housed the old one still stood.

Bile, along with rage that would never be satisfied, crawled up my throat as I looked at that awful building, but I still kept us riding towards it.

Next to me, Eve rode silently. She had gone quiet the moment I took us off the main road, and was now just watching our surroundings with sharp eyes.

The few people who were outside cast curious glances at us, but none of them appeared to recognize me. Either they had moved here after I left, or they had been too young back then to remember me now.

Once we reached the old smithy, I pulled my horse to a stop and dismounted. Eve did too. Her boots hit the muddy ground with a wet squelching sound. The rest of the world went unnaturally quiet as I stood there and stared at the stone building in front of me.

Both rage and nausea rolled through me.

The madness in my soul cracked open an eye.

Fuck. I shouldn't have come back here. Or maybe I should have come sooner. I should have slaughtered everyone here and razed this whole fucking village to the ground. Maybe I should do that now. If I—

A warm steady hand slid into mine. Eve, now standing beside me, kept her eyes on the door in front of us as she asked, "What is this place?"

I sucked in a rattling breath.

And reality surged back around me, time hurrying to catch up with those seconds I had stood frozen.

Eve's voice, and the feeling of her warm hand in mine, pulled me back from the edge and at last shattered the final barrier I had built to keep her and everyone else out of this part of my life. I gave her hand a grateful squeeze. And then I told her. Told her the story, the *full* story, that I had never shared with anyone else before.

"Do you remember that I told you that my parents sold me?"

She held my hand tightly. "Yes."

Cold winds whirled across the brown grass and between the soot-stained buildings, biting my cheeks. But I wasn't ready to go inside the building yet. I kept my eyes on the door ahead, but I focused on the feeling of Eve's hand in mine.

"I was born in a dirt-poor village north of the Gray Peaks. My parents had seven children and never enough food. I was the second youngest, so I was basically just insurance in case too many of the others suddenly died." I dragged in a deep breath. "But then my magic manifested."

Metallic clanking came from a short distance away. Or maybe it came from inside my own head. I blocked it out and continued.

"Since I had so many other siblings, I wasn't really needed. And I suppose my parents decided that the cost of keeping me alive until I could learn how to use my magic was

too high compared to whatever gain my metal manipulation could potentially bring to the farm, because when a blacksmith who had heard about my powers showed up and offered them money, they sold me straight away. I was seven years old.”

“Fucking assholes,” Eve growled under her breath.

“Yeah.” I heaved a deep sigh and nodded towards the deserted building before us. “And the blacksmith brought me here.” Memories washed through my mind again. “The first year was okay. He mostly treated me well while he tried to get me to develop my magic as fast as possible so that I could summon metal for him and save him the cost of buying raw material. Then he realized that, just like all other summoned substances, the metal I called up eventually faded back into nothingness. And that’s when everything started to change.”

Another biting wind swept through the village.

Gritting my teeth, I reached out and gripped the metal handle. It was cold against my skin. After drawing in a bracing breath, I pushed it down and then pulled the door open. The hinges creaked horribly.

I glanced at Eve.

And then walked inside.

My whole soul rebelled at the thought of being back in this building, but I forced down the swirling madness that was rippling much closer to the surface now.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I moved into the main workshop area. It looked exactly like it had the day I had left. Tools and equipment, warped and flung in all directions. Tables overturned. And bloodstains on the walls.

Those were almost black now.

Eve swept her gaze over the room, noting everything but saying nothing.

“He became bitter after that,” I continued. “Saying that he had paid a lot of money for me when I brought nothing in return. So I offered to help create things from metal that already existed. To lessen his workload. He agreed to that, and

taught me how to craft perfect blades and tools and equipment.” I nodded towards Eve’s hip. “It’s how I knew how to make that sword for you.”

Her gaze darted down to the blade at her hip. Then her eyes met mine again. Questions swirled in there. I swallowed, and then pressed on.

“However, because I could simply shape the metal in whatever way I wanted instead of having to forge it like a normal person, I became too skilled. Customers started praising only me. Wanting only me to fashion their items.” I heaved another sigh. “And that made him even more bitter. And jealous. And angry.”

Grabbing Eve’s hand, I led her through the messy workshop and towards one of the back rooms. Panic pulsed furiously inside me as I approached it. But I forced myself to repeat over and over in my head that I was not ten years old anymore. I was the Dark Mage King of Malgrave. *I* held the power now.

I released Eve’s hand as we reached the plain wooden door. Then I stopped.

For a few seconds, I couldn’t bring myself to open the door. But then I dragged in a strained breath and shoved it open.

“He started punishing me then,” I continued. “For anything and everything. Imagined slights that were nothing more than excuses to make himself feel better by showing me that I was nothing compared to him. That my skills with metal manipulation were nothing. Because he still *owned* me.”

Next to me, Eve had gone still as a statue. All color had drained from her face as she stared into the room, and I knew that she had already figured it out. But I spoke the words anyway, because I needed to say it.

“And he punished me by locking me inside *that*.” I nodded towards a wooden crate.

It was barely more than a large box made of thick wood. Now, as an adult, I wouldn’t even fit inside it. I had barely fit

inside it that final year when I was fifteen and my shoulders had become broad.

There were no openings except for the slab of wood that worked as a door, which was closed. The thick bar across it was still in place. Air could just barely seep in through some cracks at the joints, but no light.

Everything inside me screamed in panic as I looked at that awful fucking box.

The madness in me surged up, pounding at my restraints and begging to be let loose so that it could slaughter everything and everyone again.

“He forced you into *that*,” Eve said. There was a lethal edge to her voice now. “And locked you in.”

It wasn’t really a question, but I answered anyway because it helped distract the insanity inside me. “Yes.”

“For how long?”

“At first, he did it for a couple of hours at a time. As punishment. But then...” I forced out a long breath to calm the storm inside me. “Back then, I thought that he really was punishing me for making mistakes. So I threw everything into getting better. Into becoming the perfect metalsmith. But the better I became, the angrier he got. And the more he punished me. Eventually, he started locking me in there every night.”

Eve’s gaze snapped to me. Wildfire rage roared in those normally so sparkling brown eyes. “For how long?” she growled again.

“Years. He brought the box home for the first time when I was nine. And from ten to about fifteen, I spent every night inside it.” I swallowed as shame twisted inside my chest. “I begged and pleaded every time. Begged for him not to put me in there. Begged for him to let me out. Begged for mercy.”

Winds howled around the stone house like starving wolves. I dragged my gaze back to the wooden crate that had been my hell for so many years.

“The panic of being trapped in that small dark space so often and for so long chipped away at my sanity. Made me slowly lose my mind. Until it finally... snapped.”

Pulling the door shut, I let out a long exhale and turned back to the messy workshop instead. Eve was flexing her fingers repeatedly but turned around as well.

“One night, when he started dragging me towards that room to lock me in again, the terror and panic inside me just became too much.” I slid my gaze over the dark bloodstains. “My consciousness retreated into a safe corner deep inside my mind to protect myself, and the pure animalistic survival instincts inside me took over. I slaughtered him.”

My gaze drifted to a large stain in the middle of the room. Eve followed my gaze.

“And I didn’t just *kill* him. I *dismembered* him. I summoned my magic and hacked him to pieces.” I dragged a hand through my hair. “Or so I assume. When that haze of rage and terror and panic cleared from my mind, I woke up in a pool of blood with severed limbs scattered all around me. That’s when I realized how powerful I really was. And that’s when I decided that I would never be at someone else’s mercy again. I would never be locked up and terrified again. And no one would ever take this power from me.”

I let out a humorless laugh that seemed to echo against the stone walls. Wood scraped as I kicked a broken stool away.

“So then I summoned a sword, hacked off his head, and mounted it on a spike outside the building as a warning.” I shrugged. “I assume that’s why they built a new smithy and left this cursed building to rot.”

Our boots had created faint imprints in the age-old dust and grime that covered the floor. I scoffed.

“And then I left. Went to Malgrave. Formed my own gang. Killed and threatened and blackmailed and honed my skills until the mere mention of my name made people tremble. Then I destroyed the Blade of Equilibrium so that no one

could ever make me helpless again. And the rest after that, you already know.”

Silence descended over the damaged room. A whole host of emotions swirled behind my ribcage as I waited for Eve to say something. To be honest, I didn’t even know how I hoped she would react. All I knew was that I felt better now. I felt better having told someone, no, not someone, told *her*, about this. It felt as if part of the weight that had been crushing me for the past decade had finally disappeared.

“I’m sorry,” Eve said at last. Desperation and regret pulsed in her eyes as she turned me towards her so that I met her gaze. “I’m so, so sorry for making you climb into that small wooden lift back when we were sneaking into the alliance celebration. And for even suggesting the tunnel into the parliament building. If I had known...” She shook her head.

I cupped her cheek, stroking her cheekbone with my thumb. “You couldn’t have known.”

“But still...”

“No.”

Her gaze darted around the room again, and that wildfire rage roared up in her eyes once more. “Are any of the people who did this to you still alive? If they are, I will fucking burn them alive while making them beg for mercy that will never come.”

A surprised laugh escaped my chest.

Eve blinked, as if remembering herself. “Unless you want to do it yourself, of course.”

I smiled at her. My spitfire. The one person who had picked me over everything else. The one who would always have my back. And now, she knew everything about me. Every secret that I had kept hidden from the world. The shameful past I had tried so hard to bury.

And she didn’t think any less of me.

Instead, she was offering to help me slaughter everyone.

“One day,” I said, leaning down to steal a kiss from her lips. “I might take you up on that.”

But for now, the madness inside me retreated again as we left this blood-soaked village behind.



## CHAPTER 18



**S**hock and pain still sliced through my chest, even an hour after we had left the village. The thought of what Levi had gone through, the torture he had endured for years, made my heart bleed and my blood boil.

And I understood him now. Understood why he couldn't handle confined spaces. Understood where the madness I often saw swirl in his eyes came from. And what triggered it. Strong, unbearable emotions.

Levi had confirmed as much when we were riding out of the village. He had admitted that the insanity was still present inside him all the time, and that it rose closer to the surface whenever he was feeling cornered or trapped. Or was confronted with emotions that he couldn't handle. He had told me that the madness had saved him several times, but that it also left him completely drained. Because that animalistic part of him that took over didn't care about plans for the future. It just threw everything, all his considerable power, into surviving the next second.

That part of Levi had no boundaries. No limits. It was pure and utter power in its most lethal form.

It was terrifying.

And absolutely breathtaking.

Though the reason for it still made me want to murder someone.

Part of me almost wished that I didn't know all of this. That I didn't have the image branded in my mind of a ten-year-old Levi screaming and begging for mercy inside a wooden box.

*Fuck.* Fury rippled through me just thinking about it.

But now I also understood why Levi craved power and control over others. And I understood why he had destroyed the Blade of Equilibrium.

That blade took the magic from a mage and distributed it into the Great Current so that everyone, including people born without magic, could still have access to power. I had always thought that it was a great system. An equal system. Something with no downsides. But now, since meeting Levi and especially since he told me about his childhood, I had started to see things differently.

The concept of magic distribution wasn't as simple as people had always made it out to be.

Metal magic was a part of Levi. A part of his personality. His soul. His dreams and hopes and plans for the future. And to just rip that from his soul would have been cruel beyond measure.

By the Current, there really were no easy answers in life, were there?

I glanced over at Levi where he was riding next to me.

Gray light from the overcast sky painted everything in bleak hues, and cold winds tugged at our clothes. And yet, Levi seemed perfectly content.

I studied his features from the corner of my eye.

He seemed lighter, more at peace, than I had ever seen him. While he still couldn't handle enclosed spaces, and probably never would be able to either, at least not completely, it seemed as though the act of simply sharing this painful part of his past had helped lessen the weight of it.

And I was incredibly grateful for that. After everything he had been through, he deserved peace. Deserved to have

someone else help him carry the burden. I was glad that he had told me, so that I could be that someone for him. And I was glad to see him breathing easier.

I was also furious.

Furious at that fucking blacksmith for torturing him.

Furious at his family for selling him to that scum of the earth in the first place.

And furious at the rest of that shithole of a village for just standing by and letting it happen.

The urge to go back there and burn the whole village to the ground was so overwhelming that I had to grip the reins hard in order to stop myself from doing just that.

And that realization shocked me. Or rather, that instinct shocked me. The instinct to slaughter anyone who hurt the people I loved.

I used to be a constable. I used to think that killing was wrong. And yet, here I was, contemplating mass murder for a sin that half of the people in that village probably hadn't even known about.

My mind spun, and that feeling of falling into a bottomless abyss surged up inside me again.

I was no longer a constable. Not really, anyway. But did that mean that I had no morals at all anymore?

Was there anything that I wouldn't do?

If it was about Levi, then no, I was pretty sure that there was nothing I wouldn't do to protect him.

But what about everything else?

Where did I draw the line now? I had just casually killed that dark mage who had tried to ambush us on the road. No trial. Nothing. I had just executed him with a lightning bolt even though he had been on his knees, begging for mercy.

And the most terrifying part of all was that I didn't feel the least bit bad about it. Not even now.

So what did that make me?

A heartless monster?

A dark mage?

Or just someone who did whatever it took to survive and to carve out a scrap of happiness in this mad world?

I didn't know.

I supposed I would just have to figure it out along the way.

“Did you happen to see a goat?”

Blinking, I was snapped out of my musings by the sound of an old woman's voice. And by her strange question.

She was standing next to a small cart that she had rolled to a stop on the side of the road. Two hens clucked in a cage on top of the cart that was stacked full of baskets and tins and other odd containers.

With confusion pulling at my brows, I twisted in the saddle and looked behind me to check if she was in fact speaking to us. The road was empty behind us, so I turned back around and then exchanged a bemused glance with Levi.

“Uhm, no,” I said.

Our horses' hooves clopped softly on the stones as we continued along the road, moving closer to her.

“Ah, that's a pity,” she said, and heaved a sigh. After rolling her shoulders back, she dabbed her forehead with the back of her hand and then fixed the scarf around her neck. “Old Herbert chewed through his rope during the night and seems to have run off.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” I said.

Though, the thought of an old goat happily gallivanting through the woods and munching freely on grass did bring an unexpected smile to my face. I hid it by wiping a hand over my mouth.

“Ah.” She waved her hand in front of her face, as if it was no matter. “He'll come trotting back again once he misses the

cozy campfires.”

Both Levi and I nodded as if we thoroughly believed that too.

“Well, safe travels,” she said, and moved as if to start pulling her cart again.

“Oh, actually,” I blurted out, pulling my horse to a halt before I could ride past. Turning in the saddle, I met the old woman’s surprisingly sharp blue eyes. “We’re on our way to Helmark, but we heard that there’s supposed to be a castle somewhere around here too.”

A guarded expression blew across the old woman’s face, as if she was worried that we might be Christian White’s spies or something, out to trap her. “Aye, Helspire.”

“Yes, that’s the one. We’ve heard that it’s apparently stunning inside, so I was just wondering if you knew if it’s possible to go inside? Just for a peek?”

She vehemently shook her head. “No. No, no, no.”

“Oh, is there security?”

“Yes. Well, a little. But it’s not that. It’s more...” She cast a worried look over her shoulder, as if to make sure that White hadn’t materialized behind her. “No one is welcome there unless by prior invitation.”

“I see. And how do we get that?”

“You don’t. Take my advice, and stay far away from that place. It may look mostly unguarded, but that’s because no one is stupid enough to try to get inside.”

“But—”

“Excuse me, I need to go and find Herbert,” she interrupted. Grabbing the handle of her cart, she quickly hurried away while casting looks over her shoulder.

The cart rattled as she disappeared down the road.

From the horse next to me, Levi turned and arched an eyebrow in silent question.

“Now we know that there aren’t a lot of guards,” I explained.

He let out an amused breath. “Sneaky. But how do you know she won’t report us to White’s people?”

“The look in her eyes. She’s a woman who knows the value of secrets, and who doesn’t just go around spilling it to anyone.” I flashed him a grin as I urged my horse on. “And besides, by the time she could make it all the way to Helsingia on foot, we will already have been there and left again.”

Levi nudged his horse into motion as well. “Sometimes I forget how clever you are.”

Scoffing, I was just about to retort when I noticed that Levi had turned his horse, along with our third horse, off the road and was riding straight into the woods.

“Uhm, where are you going?” I asked.

“Helsingia,” he said over his shoulder. “We’ll approach it from the back.”

“Why?”

“Because now, we know that there isn’t a lot of security.” He grinned at me as I hurried to catch up with him. “Which means no perimeter scouts in the forest.”

## CHAPTER 19



Leaves crunched underneath our bodies as Eve and I crawled up to the edge of the small hill and looked down at the castle on the other side. The gnarled trees that had been covering our approach ended halfway up this little hill, so if we were to stand on it, we would be easily spotted against the gray sky behind. Which was why we were crawling across the cold ground instead.

“The old lady really was right,” I mused as I swept my gaze over the landscape before us. “No perimeter guards and no lookouts on the walls.”

“Yes, well...” Eve said dryly. “She kind of forgot to mention the moat.”

Below the small incline was a short stretch of flat grass. Then it dropped off. Abruptly. The grass turned into a straight rock wall that plummeted down to a wide river below. On the other side, the same smooth rock wall led up to a narrow patch of grass before the defensive wall that circled the castle. Based on the perfect shape of it, the moat had no doubt been created with the help of a stone mage.

“That she did,” I replied.

Eve blew out a sigh and narrowed her eyes at the water below. “Any ideas on how to cross it? Without being seen?”

I studied the area before us again.

While I did have a plan for how to get across, the *without being seen* part was the problem. It would all depend on

whether there were any guards inside the castle whose job it was to watch the area outside the defensive walls.

Drumming my fingers against the cold ground, I squinted at the castle itself.

Helspire was rather beautiful. Even I had to admit that. It was built of white stone, with three spires jutting up into the sky. The main part of the castle was larger than the other two towers that framed it, but they were all connected into one cohesive building. Hundreds of windows reflected the gray sky back at us and not a single smudge of dirt could be seen on the entire structure. Even though the castle was large, it still somehow managed to look elegant.

Straining my eyes, I tried to see into the windows to discern if there was anyone in there watching. But from this distance, it was impossible.

The white stone wall that circled the castle was deserted, so we wouldn't have to worry about any guards patrolling up there at least. Inside the walls, however, was another matter. There was no way for us to know if there were guards roaming the grounds on the inside. But we would just have to improvise once we got there.

"I should be able to create a metal bridge across the moat," I said at last.

Eve raised her eyebrows. "A bridge?"

"Well, more of a path, I suppose. I can't make it too wide since I'll only be able to attach it to the sides of the moat, which means that there will be nothing to hold it up from below. And if it's too heavy..."

"Then it'll collapse."

"Yeah."

Eve's perceptive brown eyes scanned the castle in much the same way I had done. "What if there's someone watching from inside the windows?"

"We still need to get down the hill. So if there is someone in there, they'll see us before we even reach the moat. And if



that's the case, we'll just have to fight anyway, so..."

"True. But still, if they only spot us once we're halfway across the moat, we'll be very exposed out there on the narrow parapet."

An idea zapped through my brain like a lightning strike. "Mist. Can't you create mist to hide us? It's common enough around these parts that no one would think twice about some mist rising from the surface of the water."

"That's... actually not a bad idea." She nodded. "Alright, let's do it."

"*Actually?*" I echoed, and shot her a pointed look.

She just grinned back at me and then got to her feet.

While standing up as well, I cast a glance over my shoulder to make sure that our three horses were still tied to the trees below. They were. Though my horse sent an annoyed look my way, as if displeased that we had left the saddles on. But we wouldn't be gone long, and we needed them to be ready in case we had to leave in a hurry.

After brushing crushed leaves off my clothes, I turned to Eve. She drew in a deep breath and then nodded.

We started down the hill.

My muscles tensed as we hurried down the grassy slope. If someone was watching this particular spot from somewhere inside, the alarm would be called any second now. I flicked my gaze over the hundreds of windows. We were almost at the bottom now.

Next to me, Eve looked equally alert. Her hands hovered close together, ready to call up defensive magic at a moment's notice.

Our boots reached the flat stretch of grass between the slope and the moat.

I kept my gaze darting back and forth.

Then we were at the edge of the water.

Brushing my hands together, I summoned a long sheet of metal that I sent flying towards the other side. It hit the rock wall with a faint thud. After securing it on both sides, I made the metal harden and then turned to Eve.

“Now,” I said.

She quickly summoned a fireball and threw it at the cold water below.

Hissing white steam immediately rose, partly obscuring the area.

Without another word, Eve stepped onto the parapet. It was only wide enough for one person, so I waited for her to get on before I followed behind. We had only made it a few steps when the mist began dissipating.

Eve threw another fireball at the water below.

More steam rose around us.

I flicked my gaze between Eve, the metal sheet, and the defensive wall ahead while my heart pattered in my chest. She had been right. If someone spotted us out here, we would be in a terrible position to fight back.

My eyes swept over the top of the wall again. No guards were visible at least. I shifted my attention back to Eve.

One second, she was walking in front of me.

The next, her loose brown curls fluttered in the air above her head as she plummeted downwards.

Panic crackled through my body.

Lurching forward, I tried to grab on to her. But the moment I moved, my boots slipped on the suddenly incredibly slick metal. I lost my balance, and my foot slid off the edge.

Eve hit the metal sheet chest first, her legs dangling down over the edge. My right knee smacked into the hard surface too as my other foot was no longer on the parapet.

A huff ripped from Eve’s chest at the impact, and she scrabbled to grab on to the other side of the walkway before

she could slide off it. Throwing out my arm, I gripped the side as well before I could topple over it too.

While yanking my leg back up onto solid metal, I reached towards Eve. With my right hand still holding on to the edge, I grabbed the back of her black leather jacket and hauled her upwards. She shifted her grip, twisting her body with the motion until she could get one leg over the edge.

Kneeling on the parapet, I kept one hand around the edge and the other firmly buried in Eve's jacket until her entire body was once more back on the metal. And even then, I held on for an extra couple of seconds before I released her.

She rolled over on her back. Her chest heaved as she stared up at the gray sky while rubbing her elbows.

"I take it back," she panted. "The mist was a really fucking terrible idea."

A relieved laugh tore from my chest. "Agreed."

It might be hiding us from view, but it had also made the smooth metal incredibly slippery.

Eve rolled over again and then pushed up to her knees. After summoning a small wave of fire, she sent it flowing along the metal. The heat from the flames made the water drops evaporate, drying the pathway once more.

I glanced up at the defensive wall. If there were lookouts in the windows, they would definitely have spotted us by now. But no alarm had been called, so we should be able to make it across without the mist.

Once the metal was no longer a slick deathtrap, we rose to our feet and continued towards the other side of the moat.

The moment our feet were on solid ground again, I released my grip on my magic and let the metal walkway fade into nothingness. Then I drew in a deep breath and tilted my head back to look up at the stone wall now blocking our way.

"It didn't look this tall from atop the hill," Eve remarked.

She was also craning her neck and staring up towards the edge. While it was possible to climb it, it wouldn't exactly be

easy.

“I’ve been working on a new move with my magic that should work here,” I said, keeping my eyes on the top of the wall. “But it will take a couple of minutes to set up.”

Tearing her gaze from the white stones, she looked back down at me. “Alright. We’re hidden from view behind here anyway, so take your time.”

I nodded. Touching my hands together, I summoned a huge amount of metal.

And then I got to work.

Eve’s eyes widened in surprise and amazement as I slowly crafted a block of metal with steps along one side, forming what was essentially a crude set of stairs.

It wasn’t particularly useful in battle since raising that much metal and also forming the steps properly took too much time. Holding that amount of summoned metal also required a lot of energy. It would have been easier to just shape a pile of metal that was already here, but since people didn’t usually have mounds of steel lying around outside their defensive walls, I had to spend time summoning it myself instead.

Once I was done, Eve tore her gaze from the now fully formed stairs and blinked at me. “Wow. That’s useful.”

Still keeping a grip on my magic, I chuckled and then jerked my chin. “Let’s get going.”

She nodded and then hurried up the steps. I followed.

When we reached the top half, we crouched down while closing the final distance so that we wouldn’t stand out against the sky behind. Staying on the steps, we peeked over the edge.

A deserted garden stared back at us. Fallen leaves covered the grass like a blanket, and the bushes that formed what I assumed was some kind of artful pattern now rattled their barren branches in the cold winds.

I quickly scanned the area again.

No guards.

“Climb onto the top of the wall,” I said while still sweeping my gaze back and forth in case this was just a temporary hole in the guards’ perimeter.

Eve did as I said immediately. Drawing myself up, I settled my weight on the wall as well. Then I let the massive metal steps fade into nothingness.

While keeping one eye on our surroundings, I summoned a round metal pole from the ground below. Eve just smiled knowingly. Then she grabbed it and pushed off from the wall, using the metal pole to slide to the ground. I followed as soon as her feet were on the ground.

My heart leaped into my throat as a man started rounding the corner to my left when I was only halfway down the pole.

Eve snapped her gaze to the man too.

I released my magic, free falling the final distance, while Eve slapped her hands together. I was just about to tell her not to kill him, because it would be too difficult to hide, when she summoned wind magic instead.

A jolt shot through my bones as I landed hard on the ground.

The guard was almost around the corner now.

Leaves whirled through the air.

Before I could even recover my balance, Eve grabbed my arm and yanked me down on the ground. Our stomachs hit the cold grass a second before the guard cleared the corner. But his gaze was not aimed in our direction. Instead, he was looking towards the wall on his left.

Then my view of him disappeared as a mass of leaves settled over us.

I almost laughed. Out of all the things we could have done to hide, we went with lying on the ground inside a pile of fallen leaves. Though, if it worked, it didn’t matter how stupid it was.

Eve’s body was lying flush against mine.

Shifting my gaze from the yellow and brown leaves around us, I turned it back to Eve. Her face was so close to mine that I could feel her warm breath against my skin. And despite the absolutely ridiculous situation we were in, I couldn't help the warmth that spread through my chest when she grinned victoriously at me. All I wanted to do was to kiss that wicked mouth of hers.

But that would cause the leaves covering us to shift, and the footsteps from the guard were still audible, so I forced myself to remain still.

Eve's eyes sparkled as she watched me.

*"Well, isn't this cozy,"* she mouthed at me.

I suppressed a laugh.

## CHAPTER 20



**S**taying close to the wall, we peeked into a window on the ground floor of the castle. It had taken some time to find a spot where no guards patrolled. But here, along the back of the structure, seemed to be a blind spot. At least for now.

I studied the room on the other side of the glass.

Warm firelight bathed the whole room in a cozy glow and reflected against a mass of pots and pans. There were two ovens on the wall to the left, and some sinks on the other. The middle part of the room was mostly made up of wooden counters with white marble tops.

This was a kitchen.

Men and women wearing white aprons milled about inside. Chopping vegetables, whisking batter, kneading dough, stirring various ingredients in sizzling frying pans or bubbling pots.

This was a *crowded* kitchen.

Tearing my gaze from the people inside, I glanced up and down the length of the wall we were currently standing at. If we wanted to get inside, we would have to do it from here. Because in all the other places, guards were meandering through the garden.

I turned back to the window, trying to calculate a way we could get in through one of these windows and make it across the kitchen without being spotted by the staff.

It was impossible.

There were simply too many of them, and they were spread out across the entire room.

From across the window, Levi was watching me instead of the kitchen. I could feel his gaze. Feel the question in it.

“To get through, we would have to kill them,” Levi said at last, his tone neutral. “They’ll see us when we slip inside, and if we let them live, they will raise the alarm straight away.”

Uneasiness slithered through my stomach like a cold snake.

Biting my lip, I kept my eyes on the men and women inside. Orange firelight danced over their features. Some brows were furrowed in concentration as they focused on what they were doing. Others chatted and laughed with each other while completing their tasks.

Even through the glass, I could hear the clanking of pots and the bursts of laughter. And I swore that I could almost feel the warmth from the ovens too.

“No.”

The moment the word was out of my mouth, I felt a sense of relief. It was as if the world around me finally stopped spinning, as if I finally stopped falling, and I once more found myself on solid ground.

A surprised laugh slipped past my lips.

Saying that one word had felt like the most natural thing in the world. In hindsight, I realized that it had never even been any question about it at all. Because the answer had always been and would always be no.

“No,” I repeated. Turning, I faced Levi head on while that steady sense of calm settled inside me. “This is where I draw the line. No civilians. I refuse to kill or hurt innocent people who are just doing their job. I don’t care if they work for someone as despicable as Christian White. His sins are not theirs.”

To my complete astonishment, Levi smiled.



“Good,” he said.

Drawing back slightly, I blinked at him in surprise. “What?”

I had expected him to be annoyed. Or at least frustrated. We were up against the clock, because we had to find the healer and get him out before it got so dark that we wouldn't be able to ride back through the forest. So I had assumed that Levi would sigh exasperatedly at my sudden insistence on a moral line.

“Because if we had killed them, it would've been noticed quickly,” Levi elaborated. “And then White, or at least his guards, would've known that we were here before we could even find the healer. Let alone make it out again.”

For a few seconds, I just stared back at him while my mind tried to process his words. When I still couldn't figure out what he was doing, I blurted out, “Then why didn't you say that from the start?”

“Because all dark mages need to figure out their own limits. And the only way to do that is to be faced with situations where you have to make choices like these.” He nodded towards the people inside the kitchen. “I don't like killing civilians either and avoid involving them at all whenever I can. While Callan, for example, doesn't feel strongly one way or the other about it. He doesn't go out of his way to kill them, but he also has no qualms about doing it if it helps him accomplish his mission.”

“Callan Blackwell?” I raised my eyebrows. “The guy who betrayed you and faked his death?”

Levi blinked and then shook his head, as if remembering that he wasn't supposed to still talk about Callan. Then he cleared his throat. “Anyway, now you know where *you* stand. No civilians.”

A smile spread across my lips as I repeated, “No civilians.”

He nodded.

With that settled, I felt much better as I turned back towards the castle and scanned the walls and windows around us. We still needed a way in. But we only had this blind spot, so that meant that we had to find something else to use.

“Do you think you could create another one of those massive metal steps?” I asked.

Levi tilted his head back and looked up at the windows on the floors above. Running a hand over his jaw, he considered.

“I’m not as proficient with the move as I would like,” he admitted. “Not yet, anyway. So creating something to reach the higher floors will take far too long. But yeah, I could create one that would reach the second floor in a couple of minutes since it’s about the same height as the defensive walls.”

“Do it.”

He nodded. And then got to work.

While Levi raised enormous amounts of metal and shaped them into crude steps, I kept an eye on our surroundings. Just because no guards had been here when we scouted it out didn’t mean that they would never come. Which was why we needed to get this done quickly.

Thankfully, though, the garden was still empty by the time Levi finished.

He didn’t show it, but I knew this required a lot of energy on his part, so I hurried up the steps the moment they were in place. He followed quickly.

We slowed down when we got closer to the top, and ducked our heads before peering into the window above. It led to what looked like an unused room. White sheets covered the few pieces of furniture that had been placed inside.

Because I was so accustomed to the crowded city of Malgrave, it was strange to see a spacious room that wasn’t even being used for anything. Though, with a castle as big as Hespire, I supposed that White had more rooms than he would even know what to do with.

Since there was no one inside to see us, I straightened and then tried to pull the window open. It groaned slightly in its hinges but didn't budge. Tilting my head, I squinted in through the glass to see that it was secured from the inside by a latch.

"Can you melt it?" I asked, not turning to look at Levi. It was more of a polite suggestion since I obviously already knew that he could.

"No."

I blinked. With eyebrows raised, I turned to stare at him in complete bafflement.

"I need to release the stairs first," he explained.

My brows furrowed. "I don't understand."

"It's two separate things. And as you know, everyone needs to release their first attack before summoning another."

"But... Aren't you some super special exception to that rule? I've seen you do it. Raise and lower multiple metal walls at the same time."

A sly smile curled his lips, and he gave me a quick rise and fall of his eyebrows. "It's a trick." He chuckled at the shock that flashed across my face. "I'll show you when we're back in Malgrave. For now, just climb up onto the windowsill."

I did as he said. It took a bit of maneuvering, but I managed to curl up at the edge of the windowsill so that Levi could climb onto it too.

Once we were squeezed together, he released the grip on the stairs. The block of metal faded into nothingness, leaving us stranded there on the ledge. A flash of panic rippled through me.

Levi only turned towards the window and touched his palms together.

Since we were taking up the entire windowsill, we would never have been able to open one of the windows to climb inside. So Levi melted the hinges on the window instead and pushed it inwards.

It creaked, almost falling to the floor inside. Levi quickly grabbed it and lowered it down gently instead. Then he squeezed through the now open side of the window. I edged along the windowsill and then climbed through.

Only once both my feet were firmly planted on the smooth marble floor inside did I release a long breath of relief. My heart pattered in my chest. That had been... more nerve-wracking than I had anticipated.

Levi arched an eyebrow in silent question.

I nodded, telling him that I was okay. Then I picked up the window and held it in place while he re-formed the hinges. Once it had been returned to its original state, we started towards the door.

Our boots whispered against the floor as we crossed the deserted room.

Only white sheets watched us as we edged the door open and glanced out.

A polished marble corridor met us on the other side.

We exchanged a glance.

Alright, we had gotten inside.

Now, we just had to find the healer.

## CHAPTER 21



As we snuck through the massive castle, I couldn't help but wonder how much of it was White's doing and how much had just been left over from the previous owner. Christian White didn't exactly strike me as someone who spent any extraordinary amounts of time thinking about interior design. And yet, the castle was beautiful.

The floor and walls everywhere we went were made of white marble that almost seemed to shimmer in the light from the oil lamps. Frescoes depicting various nature scenes, often snow-covered landscapes, had been painted on the ceiling of practically every hallway and every room we had passed. That combined with the white wooden furniture and the silver decorations made it feel like we were journeying through some kind of winter wonderland straight out of a fairytale.

I couldn't spare it too much attention, though. We had gambled on the fact that White would be in Malgrave searching for us, but since he was a worldwalker, there was no way to know for certain where he was at any given time. Technically, he could just worldwalk to Malgrave and then back here several times an hour. But something told me that White was a bit more methodical than that. Still... we had to be careful.

Keeping our ears open for any signs of White or his guards, Eve and I moved quickly and efficiently through the vast castle in search of the healer. Occasionally, some of White's servants appeared. But they never moved fast enough

to catch us off guard, so by the time they arrived, we had always managed to hide in another room.

What troubled me was the fact that we hadn't seen any guards yet. We knew that some of them patrolled outside, but there were bound to be more battle mages inside too. It wouldn't make sense for White to leave a huge castle like this practically unguarded. But then again, the old lady we had met on the road had said that no one was stupid enough to go here willingly, so maybe White had gotten too confident. Had started to rely on his reputation too much. I certainly hoped so, since that would make our job a lot easier.

"Wouldn't it be more logical to have a healer live somewhere in the middle of the castle?" Eve grumbled from next to me as we snuck down yet another white stone corridor, leaving the center of the castle behind after a thorough search that yielded no results. "That way, everyone could reach him quickly in an emergency."

"For someone who cares about others, yes." I shot Eve an amused look. "Did White really strike you as someone who does?"

"No," she admitted.

"My money is on a place somewhere close to White's own room."

"And where do we think that is?"

Silence fell as we reached a wide curving staircase. Trailing to a halt, we turned to look at each other.

"Upstairs," we said in unison.

She grinned at me and then started up the steps on quick and silent feet. I followed.

We had to dodge some more servants while searching the next few levels, but eventually, we reached a part high up where the hallways grew grander and the rooms more far apart. Eve and I exchanged a glance as we moved down a wide corridor. There were two massive double doors at the end of it. This had to be White's private wing.

Apart from the ones at the end, there were only two other doors about halfway down the hall. The first one turned out to be an elegant but deserted study. Which meant that the next door had to be where the healer was. It had to. We had already spent far too much time searching the castle. We needed to find this damn healer and get the hell out before it got too dark to ride through the forest.

My heart pattered in my chest as we snuck up to the other door.

Eve let one hand drift to the sword at her hip as we came to a halt in front of the pale wooden door while exchanging a glance. I placed my hand on the metal handle and pushed down carefully, expecting it to be locked. Surprise flitted through me when it wasn't. After another glance at Eve, I pushed the handle all the way down and edged the door open. She peered inside.

Her brown eyes lit up as she turned back to me and mouthed, "*This is it.*"

I pulled the door open fully.

A small bedroom materialized on the other side. There was a narrow bed pushed against the wall to our left, and a closet along with a bookcase on the other. Straight ahead was a window that showed the gray sky outside, and below it, a desk and chair made of pale wood.

My gaze fell on the man seated at the desk as Eve and I slipped into the room. He looked to be of average height, but was far too skinny for a man in his forties. The brown robe he wore hung like a tent on his slim frame and was cinched around his waist by a black sash. From behind, his brown hair looked matted and messy. Even though I hadn't seen his face yet, he matched the description I had gotten from Maggie earlier. The description I had given to Christian White.

I closed the door behind us once Eve and I had made it across the threshold.

At the soft click of the door, the man shot to his feet and whirled around while raising his arms as if to protect himself.

It stunned me enough that I didn't process the sound that his movement had created. Then my mind caught up.

Metallic rattling.

I snapped my gaze down to the man's feet. He was barefoot, but that was not what made disgust crawl up my throat.

He was chained to the floor.

An iron manacle had been snapped shut around his right ankle, and a thick metal chain ran from it to a sturdy ring set into the stone floor. The chain rattled across the floor as the man edged backwards, his thighs bumping into the desk behind him hard enough to make it thud against the wall.

I dragged my gaze up to his face. Wide blue eyes stared back at me in fear.

"Derek Reynolds?" I asked.

"Y-yes," he said, confirming that he was indeed the healer. Then, even though I hadn't done or said anything else, he added, "Please don't."

Frowning, I touched my palms together and then raised my hand so that I could remove his restraints. But I never got that far, because he did something I hadn't expected.

He flinched.

His whole body trembled as he held up his hands again as if to protect himself. "Please don't."

I jerked back, losing the grip on my magic as I stared at him.

He flicked a desperate glance around the room. The chain grated against the floor as he tried to edge away again.

Shock and disbelief pulsed inside me because I recognized those signs all too well. They meant that he expected to be punished. Expected us to hurt him even though he hadn't done anything. I knew, because I used to flinch like that too whenever that fucking blacksmith whose name I refused to utter would raise his hand.



“Christian White beats his healer.” The words were out of my mouth before I could even think them through properly. But the realization had stunned me so much that I was having trouble thinking straight. “A *healer*.”

Healers were worth their weight in gold. So why would White treat one like this? It didn't match up with what Eve had told me about him. That he had ordered his men not to hurt her when he had taken her captive. That all the bruises and wounds she had sported when I rescued her were caused by those three dark mages I slaughtered in the cabin.

Confusion entered Derek's blue eyes as he flicked his gaze between the two of us again. He must have assumed that we were White's people, but was now starting to realize that we weren't.

I cast another glance down at the chain resting like a snake on the floor. Derek Reynolds was trapped in this room, shackled to the floor, by someone who abused him enough to put terror in his eyes the moment someone so much as raised a hand.

And it was all *my* doing.

He had been living a peaceful life in a village out on the coast, safe from harm and people who abused him. Then I had ratted him out. I had gotten Maggie to locate him. And then I had traded his life for Gemma's.

Don't get me wrong, to save Gemma, I would do it again in a heartbeat.

But I still couldn't quite swallow down the guilt that crawled up my throat as I watched Derek flinch again when I took a step forward.

“I don't understand,” I began, holding his terrified stare. “Christian White beats you?”

Panic flashed across his face, and he cast another look around the room as if checking whether this was some kind of trap. When no threat materialized, he returned his confused stare back to me and admitted, “Yes.”

Shaking my head, I turned to Eve. “But you said—”

“I lied.”

I blinked.

Eve cleared her throat and glanced away before repeating, “I lied.”

“Eve.” My voice dropped low, pulsing with the promise of vengeance. “Look at me.”

She dragged her gaze back to me.

“You lied about what?” I prompted.

For a moment, it looked like she wasn’t going to reply. Then she sucked her teeth and blew out a long sigh. “He beat me too. When he took me captive.”

“He did *what*,” I growled. It wasn’t a question.

“Look, I didn’t tell you because I knew how you feel about settling scores. And I didn’t want you to fly into a blind rage and get yourself killed.” She cast a glance filled with regret towards Derek, who stared at us with stunned surprise in his blue eyes. “But yeah, it wasn’t just White’s people. It was him too. He was trying to force me to reveal my powers, so he beat me up and cut me.” She pushed up her sleeve to show a long scar along her forearm. “Saying that he would let me heal myself too if I healed one of his guys.”

My hand shot out. Wrapping my fingers around her wrist, I held her arm up like that before she could drop it again. Rage roared through me, making blood pound in my ears, as I stared down at that huge fucking scar. It was so all-consuming that I was having trouble thinking straight. All I wanted to do was to paint this glittering castle red with White’s blood.

“He did this?” I demanded.

Eve tried to yank her wrist out of my grip, but her strength was no match for mine.

“He put this mark on your skin?” I pushed, my voice brimming with violence.

She once more tried to pull her arm down to hide the evidence. But when she was once more unsuccessful, she

forced out, “Yes.”

Releasing her wrist, I spun around and stalked towards the door. “I’m going to fucking kill him. Right now.”

Just before I could reach the handle, a blast of wind slammed into me from behind and to the left. It was hard enough to push me off balance, sending me stumbling a few steps to the side. I whirled around to face the source of the attack.

“Calm the fuck down,” Eve snapped before I could say anything.

I blinked, momentarily stunned by the sheer command in her voice.

“We will kill him,” she continued. “In due time.” Raising her arm, she stabbed a hand towards the healer, who yet again flinched. “But right now, we’re getting Derek Reynolds out of this castle and far away from here. Understood?”

Surprise, a hint of amusement, and a lot of appreciation swirled inside me as I raised my eyebrows at her in silent question.

She flashed me a smile full of challenge. “Don’t make me summon my lightning.”

I huffed out a short chuckle. It dispelled most of the blinding rage that had seared through me. Or at least shelved it for later.

Drawing in a deep breath, I forced my mind back to the mission at hand and then touched my palms together.

With a flick of my wrist, the metal shackle around Derek’s ankle liquefied. His eyes grew even wider, with shock this time instead of fear, as he stared down at the small puddle of metal on the floor. Then he looked back up at us.

I jerked my chin. “Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 22



My heart thumped in my chest as we snuck down the stairs and across the castle again. It was quite far to the room we had entered through, but since it was the best way out, we had to make it there.

“Is White here?” I whispered as I peeked around another corner before waving Levi and Derek forward. “In the building?”

At first, there was no response. While moving quickly down the corridor, I glanced over my shoulder to find Levi raising his eyebrows expectantly at the healer. Derek at last realized that my question had been directed at him.

After giving his head a quick shake as if to clear it, he said, “No. He won’t be back for another week. Apparently, there are some people in a city to the south who are making trouble or something, so he has left to get some mages from his army to deal with them.”

Levi and I exchanged a smug grin.

“Making trouble?” I pressed a hand to my chest in mock outrage. “I would never.”

Levi let out a silent laugh.

The healer just looked between us, bewildered. Then a light went on behind his eyes, as if he finally realized that we were in fact the troublesome people White had talked about.

I checked around the next corner before starting down yet another white marble hallway. Paintings of snowy fields and

prowling wolves filled the ceiling above us.

One week until White returned to his castle to find his healer missing. That was better than we had even dared to hope for. With an entire week to spare, we would have more than enough time to return to Malgrave and get everything ready before White decided to exact his vengeance. As long as we got out of this castle without attracting attention, this mission would be a roaring success.

Footsteps sounded from the corridor up ahead.

Lots of footsteps.

I snapped my gaze around the hallway while cursing myself for declaring victory prematurely. There was a door a few steps ahead. I sprinted towards it and shoved the handle down while Levi grabbed Derek by the arm and hauled him towards the door as well.

Yanking it open, I found what looked like a large living room. Several round tables were positioned around the room, and there were comfortable-looking couches and armchairs arranged throughout the space too. One of the walls housed a burning hearth.

The people heading this way were close now, their footsteps sounding from just around the corner, so I darted into the room and then pulled the door shut as soon as Levi and Derek were across the threshold as well.

Or almost shut, anyway. Keeping a small gap, I peeked out into the corridor.

A group of angry-looking men rounded the corner a second later.

One glance was enough to confirm that they were guards and not domestic staff.

“Did you tell them to light the hearth?” a blond one demanded.

“I already told you I did,” someone replied from the back of the group.

“If it’s not lit, I’m gonna beat your ass. My very bones are fucking cold and I need to thaw them before the next shift or they’re gonna bloody snap like icicles.”

My heart leaped into my throat.

The hearth.

Fuck.

They were coming here.

Whirling around, I motioned frantically for Levi and the healer to get away from the door while mouthing, “*They’re coming!*”

Derek whimpered in fear while Levi scanned the room for places to hide. There was another door at the far end, by the outer wall. Still holding Derek by the arm, he hauled him towards it. I ran after them.

Yanking the door open, we found what appeared to be a small pantry. Food and bottles of what I assumed to be alcohol lined the shelves inside.

Dread washed through me.

This was the guards’ break room. There was no other explanation for the selection of furniture in the large room as well as the pantry.

My heart pounded in my chest as I spun around right as the voices outside reached the door to the break room.

They were going to stay here until their next shift.

*Fuck.*

A surge went through my stomach as Levi grabbed me by the collar from behind and hauled me into the pantry, closing the door behind us a second before the other one was opened.

With Levi’s arm around me, I stood pressed with my back against his firm chest while the sound of people walking into the room drifted through the air. The same voices from before echoed against the white walls again. Someone bossing another guy around. It was joined shortly by the creaking of furniture as the guards no doubt settled themselves on the

chairs and couches. A man let out a satisfied groan, presumably from standing close to the warmth of the fire.

Tilting my head back, I blew out a soft sigh.

They hadn't spotted us at least. But we would need to stay here until they left.

Or did we?

Standing up straight, I twisted around and looked towards the single window set into the wall. Gray light filtered in through it, providing the only illumination inside the small space.

After meeting Levi's gaze, I nodded towards it.

He dropped his arm from where he had been holding it protectively around me, and instead turned towards the window as well. After moving closer to it, he glanced down. I raised my eyebrows in silent question.

While tilting his head to the side, he considered. This window was much higher up than the one we had used to get inside. My heart pattered in my chest as I waited for his response. Then he shrugged as if saying that it might work.

"Did you seriously drink all the ale?" a man's voice came from the living room.

"It wasn't me."

"Then who was it? Ghosts?"

"It might have been the other shift."

"Just get more from the fucking pantry."

Panic crackled through me like a lightning bolt.

Making a split-second decision, I quickly unhooked my sword belt and shrugged out of my jacket before shoving them at Levi. "Set up those metal steps and get Derek down. I'll distract them."

"With what?" Levi hissed back as he fumbled to grab my things.

"Just do as I say."

I snatched up a crate of what I hoped was bottles of ale, and then hurried out the door. Kicking it shut with my heel, I purposely looked down at the floor as I took a determined step into the living room.

Glass clinked as the bottles rattled when I slammed right into someone's chest.

"Oh," I said while letting a mask of innocence descend on my features. Blinking, I looked up at the guy in front of me and then swept my gaze around the room as if in surprise. "You're back earlier than I expected."

Ten men stared back at me with equal surprise. They were of various ages, all the way from barely twenty to somewhere in their forties, by my best guess. But they all had the same look in their eyes. The look of dark mages who knew that the world covered before them.

"Who the hell are you?" a man with a bald head demanded.

I recognized the voice. It was the same person who had been bossing someone else around earlier, making it likely that he was their captain or something like that.

"Master White hired me," I said, suddenly thankful for my brief time in captivity because it had taught me that the worldwalker preferred people to address him as *Master White*. "To help serve you while you rest up before your next shift."

They blinked in surprise. I just looked from one face to the other with an expression that made it seem like this really should have been very obvious to them.

Several of the men raked their gazes over my body. I was wearing one of my tight-fitting black and red leather outfits, which admittedly wasn't the most feminine of styles, but on the other hand it also made me look more like I was part of this world rather than a normal civilian.

"I noticed that you were out of ale," I continued while lifting the crate in my hands a little higher and striding forward as if I belonged there. "So I brought out some more. Would anyone like a bottle?"



The utter confidence with which I spoke and moved made the last of their doubt evaporate, and they all exchanged a glance before shrugging. I handed out bottles of ale while they settled back into their seats again.

While being careful not to glance towards the pantry, I tried to remember exactly how long it had taken Levi to set up those massive metal steps last time. We were a lot higher up this time, so it should take more than a couple of minutes at least. I would just need to stall for a while and then come up with an excuse to go back into the pantry. Hopefully, by then Levi would be done and Derek would already be down on the ground so that I could just run down the steps as well.

“How about some entertainment too?”

I froze. Taking my time setting down the now empty crate, I tried to muster enough patience not to summon a lightning bolt and shoot it into someone’s heart. Once I was certain that I wouldn’t, or reasonably certain at least, I turned around and raised my eyebrows in a show of innocent confusion.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I thought you said you were here to serve us,” the bald captain said, flashing me a toothy grin.

“I am.”

He flicked a wrist towards the floor in front of their couches and chairs. “So, serve us.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand what you mean.”

His gray eyes hardened as he sat forward on the couch and leveled a commanding stare on me. “Dance.”

By the Current, how was I supposed to make it through this without murdering someone? I resisted the urge to glance towards the pantry again, wondering if Levi had heard what they were saying as well. Given that he didn’t come charging through the door, he was most likely too focused on setting up the metal stairs to hear anything. At least that was good. We needed to sneak out of here unnoticed. And a room full of dead guards would hardly be inconspicuous.

After summoning patience that I didn't really possess, I painted a smile on my face and said, "Oh, of course."

I wasn't nearly as talented as the people who performed in some of the cabarets back in Malgrave, but I had spent my fair share of time dancing behind the red-painted doors in the Entertainment District too, so I wasn't completely without rhythm.

Drawing in a breath, I closed my eyes and pretended that some of my favorite dance music was pulsing between the walls of this room.

And then I danced.

With my eyes closed, it was easy to pretend that no one else was there as I swayed my hips to music only I could hear.

At least, until I felt a pair of hands on my breasts.

I jerked back and snapped my eyes open.

The bald captain leered at me, and then flicked a glance up and down my body. "You're wearing too many clothes." He reached towards my chest again as if to grab my shirt. "Take your shirt off. I wanna see those glorious tits."

The men still seated behind him chuckled.

My fingers curled into a fist. If I'd had my sword right now, I would've run it through his fucking throat. But I didn't, and we still needed to get out unnoticed, so I just gave him a polite smile and moved back again.

"No, thank you," I said. "I don't mind dancing for you, but I wasn't hired to undress for you."

His hand shot out. Grabbing the collar of my shirt, he hauled me back towards him until I could smell the ale on his breath. "You will do whatever the hell we want. Or I will report you to Master White."

While keeping that fake smile on my lips, I tried to get his hand away from my shirt. "I really don't—"

"Pat, why don't you help her along," he interrupted.

Pat, a man with brown hair and a casual expression on his face, brushed his palms together from where he was sitting in a blue armchair.

Pale violet magic shimmered to life.

Alarm slammed into me like a shovel to the back of the head.

That color. That shimmering pale violet color. It meant only one thing.

Emotion magic.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It had been years since the last time I faced an emotion mage. They were notoriously difficult to handle because their magic could manipulate you into feeling whatever they wanted. They could make you run away screaming in fear even though you weren't really scared of them.

And they could make you hot and horny enough to take your shirt off and dance topless in front of a company of dark mages.

*Fuck.*

Desperation washed through me.

But there was nothing I could do as that cloud of shimmering violet emotion magic hit me.

## CHAPTER 23



I was pretty sure that Derek Reynolds was asking me questions, or maybe just whimpering incoherently, but I couldn't spare him any attention. We needed to get away from here right now, which meant that I had to create the metal steps faster than I ever had before, so I blocked out everything else and concentrated only on the feeling of the metal I raised from the ground.

Because of the height from the window to the ground, it still took a while. But I had definitely shattered my previous record with this creation.

Letting the metal harden, I at last stepped back from the open window and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. I felt winded even though I had barely moved a muscle. But I couldn't let anyone know that, so I just spun around to face the healer again.

"Hurry," I snapped, and jerked my chin towards the window.

He tore his worried gaze from the door to the pantry and scrambled over to where I was standing. Rising up onto his toes, he leaned out slightly and looked down at the massive metal stairs. His eyes widened.

"Whoa," he said.

A hint of smug satisfaction blew through me at the amazement in his tone, but all I said was, "Just get on with it."

He flicked a glance from the stairs to the water beyond the wall, and panic pulsed across his features again. “The moat. How are we supposed to get across the moat?”

“I can create a bridge. So wait for us down there on the grass.”

This was a risky move. As soon as he was down on solid ground, he might decide to make a run for it while I waited for Eve to come back. But given that he couldn’t cross the moat on his own, I gambled on the fact that he would stay put and wait for us.

Derek nodded and then hiked his brown robe up so that he could climb onto the windowsill. After an audible swallow, he scooted out and carefully moved his weight onto the metal. It held, which I already knew it would.

Once he was outside, he looked back at me with that same worried expression. Though this time, I was pretty sure that I could see some regret in his blue eyes as well.

“I think your friend needs help,” he said. “I heard them say...” Clearing his throat, he glanced down the steps. “Just check on her. I’ll wait down at the bottom.”

Dread washed over me like freezing water. But before I could demand to know what he had heard them say, he started down the stairs.

While keeping the grip on my magic so that the steps would remain in place, I quickly moved over to the door of the pantry and silently edged it open enough for me to peer out through the small gap.

My heart stopped.

Eve was dancing.

Half-naked.

She was still wearing her pants and boots, but her shirt lay discarded on the white marble floor, leaving her in only her black brassiere. And only a few steps away, ten men were watching her with hungry eyes as she swayed her hips.

I was half a second away from summoning a brutal attack when I remembered that the healer was still making his way down the steps. If I released that magic now, he would plummet to the ground.

Rage roared through my body, making my head pound, as I darted back to the window and leaned out. It took everything I had not to scream at him to hurry the fuck up. To his credit, though, he was practically running down the steps already.

My heart thrashed wildly in my chest, and I curled my fingers on the windowsill, as I waited for Derek to close the final distance to the ground.

There had been a strange expression on Eve's features. Even if she had done that willingly, it would have been impossible to miss the irritation that would've flickered across her face. But now, she had just looked blissful and... horny.

And there was only one thing that could have that effect on her.

Emotion magic.

I ground my teeth and flexed my fingers.

By all hell, I fucking hated emotion mages.

The moment Derek reached the ground, I released the grip on my magic and let the steps fade out. Rebuilding them would take even more time, but I needed my magic so that I could slaughter the fucking assholes who were making Eve dance half-naked for them.

Darting back over to the door, I scanned the living room again. The best solution would be to set up a metal sheet under the floor and then have ten simultaneous spikes shoot up and kill them all in one fell swoop. But that would also take time.

Eve drew her hands over her hips and then up her bare stomach before sliding them over her tits. The bastards chuckled and leered.

Everything inside me went silent as the madness surged, begging to be let loose and paint the whole room with blood.

But Eve was still in there too. So I kept a firm grip on the final threads of my sanity and instead touched my palms together.

Setting up a sheet would be too time-consuming, and I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't take one more second of watching Eve like that.

A sharp metal pole shot out from the wall to their left.

Cries of alarm erupted throughout the room. But it was already too late to block it.

The metal pole speared through several heads, killing the men instantly. But because they weren't sitting in a straight line, not everyone received a fatal blow. The sharp front of the pole cut through the eyes of three men, and slashed the back of one guy's head since he had been leaning forward in his seat instead. The other six toppled to the ground with a massive hole in their heads.

I kicked the door open and stormed into the room while letting the pole fade out.

The surviving four men screamed in pain, their cries echoing between the white stone walls.

A few steps away, Eve blinked and shook her head as if coming out of a trance. Then her gaze darted down to her bare chest, and fury burned across her features.

The guy with the wound to the back of his head stumbled up from the sofa and began bringing his hands together, so I summoned a small metal sheet and severed his miserable head from his shoulders.

Blood misted the air, and a wet thud sounded as his head rolled off his shoulders and crashed down on the floor.

Eve yanked her shirt back on and then whirled towards me.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, and stabbed a hand towards the bloodbath around her. "Now White will definitely know that we were here!"

"It doesn't matter. He won't be back for another week."

She was silent for a second before tilting her head. "True."

The three men whose eyes were now slashed to shreds writhed in pain on the floor while pressing their hands to their faces. Their screams ripped through the air.

Somewhere below, shouts of alarm and confusion rose in response. We would soon have company.

Coldness, and a hint of cruelty, shone in Eve's eyes as she stared down at the bleeding men.

"You blinded them," she stated.

"If they wanted to keep their eyes, they shouldn't have looked at you that way."

A vicious smile curled her lips.

Boots pounded against stone from somewhere in the distance.

Eve snapped her fingers. "Give me my sword."

I unhooked it from my belt and handed it back to her without question.

Steel sang into the air as she slowly drew the blade. I flicked a glance towards the door. Their reinforcements would be here soon. But I knew that whatever Eve was about to do was something that she *needed* to do. For herself.

She moved over to one of the men writhing on the floor. He was bald, and looked to be in his forties.

Crouching down, she grabbed his wrist and then yanked his hand away from his face. Since he couldn't see her, he just flailed wildly with his other hand. Eve forced his wrist down on the floor and then placed her boot on his forearm to keep it there.

Flames from the hearth danced in her blade as she raised it.

Then she chopped his hand off.

A piercing scream tore from his lungs.

Twisting around blindly, he wrapped his other hand around his severed wrist. Eve grabbed that as well and then cut that hand off too.



Blood pooled on the pale floor from the stumps.

I stared at Eve as she wiped the blood from her sword and then slid it back into her sheath. Heat seared through my body. Fucking hell, she was hot when she was ruthless like this.

With a sly smile playing over her lips, Eve turned back to me and lifted one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “He shouldn’t have *touched* what doesn’t belong to him either.”

Rage pulsed through me. “He touched you?”

“And now he won’t touch anything ever again.”

Shouts of alarm came from just a few rooms away now. I summoned two spears in quick succession and threw them at the other two surviving men. The spears sank deep into their hearts, killing them instantly and finally cutting off their incessant screaming. I let the bald man live, since Eve apparently wanted him alive and suffering instead.

She glanced towards the door where the sound of thundering boots drew closer. “We should go.”

“Agreed.”

Sprinting back to the pantry, we threw the door shut behind us a few seconds before what sounded like a mass of people burst through the main door to the living room. Eve yanked on her jacket and then placed her hands on the windowsill as if to climb onto it. Then she stopped and whipped her head towards me.

“The stairs,” she blurted out. “They’re gone.”

While stalking over to the window, I brushed my palms together and summoned my magic. “I know. I had to release it so that I could kill the guys making you dance.”

“Check everywhere!” someone screamed from just on the other side of the door.

“We’ll never make it down in time,” Eve hissed.

I yanked up a long and slim pole from the ground. This was going to hurt. But we had a healer. And we were out of options.

Eve yelped as I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close to my side. With a firm grip on her, I leaped out of the window and locked my other arm around the pole.

My stomach lurched as we slid downwards at breakneck speed.

The steel burned against my leather armor at the crook of my elbow, but it slowed our descent enough that the impact wouldn't be fatal.

“Levi,” Eve snapped, her voice full of panic. “The landing —”

Before she could finish her sentence, we reached the ground. Or rather, I did. Since I was holding her up, my legs were the only ones to hit the ground at full speed. Just like I had planned.

A cry of pain ripped from my throat as I felt the bones in my ankles snap. Releasing the pole, I collapsed to the ground with Eve on top of me. Pain pulsed up my entire legs, drawing another groan from me.

“Levi!” Eve called right as people appeared in the window we had just left.

Letting the pole disappear, I summoned a wide metal shield above us right before magic slammed into it.

“You're a healer,” Eve growled as she rolled off me and grabbed Derek by the collar before practically throwing him at me. “Fix him!”

Derek hit the ground next to me harder than he probably would've preferred, but he didn't comment. Instead, he just pushed up his sleeves and summoned his magic. Shimmering turquoise light filled the air as he began healing my broken bones and snapped ligaments.

“Get them!” someone screamed from the window above.

I shoved the shield upwards.

A second later, half of someone's torso fell towards the ground as my metal sheared right through him. Blood splattered the ground as the body parts hit the grass. The rest

of the people in the window quickly yanked their heads back, not eager to meet the same fate.

But the shout had already done its job.

The other guards who were already on the ground began rushing towards us.

Eve hurried over to the cover of a bush nearby.

The moment guards appeared, she shot them with lightning bolts from her hiding place before they could attack us.

One after the other, they dropped down dead on the cold ground as her sneak attacks stopped their hearts. It was an incredibly impressive sight.

Since Derek Reynolds had fifteen years, or something like that, on Gemma, he was much faster than she was. My bones and ligaments knitted themselves back together rapidly as he worked his magic on them.

“Done,” he eventually said.

I clapped his shoulder before quickly shooting to my feet. Rolling my ankles, I checked to make sure that everything was as it should be, and then I grabbed the healer by the arm and hurried over to where Eve was.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yes.” I scanned the area around us, but the only guards here were already dead. “Let’s go.”

We ran towards the defensive walls. My heart slammed against my ribs as I started building a new set of steps. But the guards from the upper floors were still making their way down to the ground, and everyone who had been in the gardens was already dead, so I had a short window to work unhindered.

Once the steps were in place, we darted up them.

I swept my gaze over the people littering the grass behind us.

“Now who’s leaving bodies that will definitely be noticed?” I teased and threw Eve a grin before we slid down a pole on the other side.

A villainous grin shone on her lips as she landed beside me while I summoned the parapet across the moat.

She winked at me.

“No one can notice... if there is no one left *to* notice.”

## CHAPTER 24



**D**arkness blanketed the entire forest. It was so thick that I had to summon a small fireball in my palm to light the path as I made my way from where Derek was sleeping to the edge of the lake.

Because of how long it had taken us to get to Helsing, find the healer, and then get him out, we would never have been able to make it all the way back to the inn before night fell. So we'd had to make camp in the forest until it was light enough for us to continue. Without tents and proper gear, though, it was going to be a cold night.

Yellow light from the fireball danced over the fallen leaves covering the ground as I closed the final distance to the shore. Levi was sitting there on a log, staring out at the dark water. I sat down next to him and then extinguished the fire.

"Derek's asleep?" he asked without turning to look.

"Yeah." I glanced over my shoulder towards where the healer lay curled up on a patch of soft moss. "He practically passed out the moment he lay down."

Levi nodded. "We'll get started again at first light."

Silence fell.

For a while, we just sat there side by side. Branches rustled faintly as a gentle wind caressed the trees around the lake, and somewhere farther into the forest, an owl hooted. I watched the lake before us.

Countless stars glittered in the dark water, making it look like a slice of the heavens had been placed inside the forest.

I blew out a long breath and then turned to face Levi. “Jumping out of the window like that...”

“We had a healer,” Levi said, as if that was a reasonable excuse for a fall that literally broke his legs.

“It was still dangerous. And stupid.” I shook my head. “What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t.”

Raising my eyebrows, I stared at him.

He heaved a deep sigh and raked his fingers through his hair. Then he finally turned his head to face me. I started slightly at the intensity of the emotions that swirled in his eyes.

“When it comes to you, I never think properly.” Holding my gaze, he shook his head. “Do you have any idea just how much you mess with my head all the time?”

I let out a surprised laugh, and then gave his shoulder a soft shove. “Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual. I spent weeks trying to justify to myself why I did what I did to help you, trying to persuade myself that I was still a good person even though I had fallen for a bloody dark mage, and beating myself up over it at the same time.”

“Good.” He grinned. “Then at least I’m not the only one suffering.”

“Ah, but notice the use of past tense. I used to beat myself up over it. I don’t anymore. So now, you’re the only one who’s suffering.”

Wrapping his hand around my jaw, he held me firmly in place as he leaned forward and claimed my lips with a kiss before whispering against my mouth, “You really are a vicious one.”

I laughed against his lips.

He released my jaw and pulled back, but still kept his eyes locked on mine. Or rather, his eyes searched my face. As if he was trying to read an answer to a question there. I was fairly certain that I knew what the question was. A question he had asked the day I came back. A question that I had evaded answering completely.

My heart pattered in my chest. By the Current, I had just broken into a worldwalker's castle and kidnapped a healer, but *now* I was suddenly nervous.

"Do you remember what you asked me when I came back after I had found out what Ulric had done?" I asked, my mouth suddenly very dry.

Levi once more searched my face. Carefully. Hesitantly. "Yes. I asked what this meant for us."

"And I said that it meant that I was in. That I would help you get the south side." I chewed my lip for a second before continuing. "That wasn't what I meant. Well, I meant that too. But it was... half of an answer."

"What was the other half?"

"It was... What I really meant to say was... I'm staying."

Levi's eyes lit up so brightly that they rivaled the stars. His mouth dropped open slightly as he just stared at me for a few seconds. My heart pounded in my chest. Then he at last spoke.

"You're staying?"

He sounded both hopeful and terrified, as if he was worried that I would take it back. It almost broke my heart to hear it. And I was most certainly not taking it back.

"Yes," I said, giving him a decisive nod. "When my ruse on the north side is finished, I'm staying on the south side. With you."

His smile sent a pang straight through my heart.

Then he tilted his head and watched me with a curious expression. "Why didn't you say that back then?"

"Because I was... worried."

“About what?”

“You asked me to stay the day before that, and I said no. And I didn’t just say no. I said goodbye and then walked out the door without a second look back.” Clearing my throat, I glanced towards the star-dusted lake instead. “I wasn’t sure if the offer was still on the table.”

A warm hand appeared on my skin as Levi took my chin between his fingers and turned my face back to his. “Oh, spitfire. Haven’t you learned by now? You’ve been mine since the day you pulled a sword on me in my own throne room, and you always will be mine. You own me. My heart. My soul. My everything.”

I drew in a shuddering breath, my heart swelling so much that I thought it was going to burst through my ribcage.

He stroked his thumb over my cheekbone. “My Court will always be your Court too.”

A giddy laugh bubbled up my throat. Leaning forward, I slid my fingers through his dark hair and kissed him deeply. “Good.” I laughed against his mouth and then drew back enough to grin at him. “Because you’re never getting rid of me now.”

He matched my villainous grin. “I’m counting on it.”

“And I don’t just want my own drawer in your bedroom. I want my own closet.”

His chest shook against my side as he chuckled while drawing me closer to his muscular body. Warmth enveloped me as he draped his arm over my shoulders and held me tightly.

“Whatever you want, spitfire.” He kissed the top of my head as we gazed out at the stars that glittered in the lake before us. “Anything at all.”



## CHAPTER 25



Malgrave at last appeared on the horizon. A tightness in my chest that I hadn't even noticed until now eased the moment I laid eyes on that city. *My* city. I might not have been born there, but it was my home. The home that I had chosen. And I felt more comfortable, more like myself, there on that extraordinary south side with its colorful lights, its distinct smell of perfume, spilled alcohol, and blood, and its unapologetically sinful lifestyle, than I did anywhere else on this entire continent. I was going to make it mine. Fully. Completely. Officially mine. If it was the last thing I did.

A cold fall wind swept across the fields, making the grass tremble. I scanned the area around us. It was midday, so there were other travelers on the road as well. But none of them paid us any mind. They all just flipped up the collars of their jackets or pulled their hats down while continuing towards the waiting warmth of Malgrave with determination. I glanced at my two travel companions.

Eve rubbed her hands together against the cold, but her eyes stayed sharp as she scanned the grasslands for signs of threats. Specifically, signs of Christian White, if I had to guess. We were still about a half-hour ride away from the gates, so the risk of him randomly spotting us out here was slight. But it was better to be alert.

Between us, Derek Reynolds rode quietly, just like he had the entire trip. But now that Malgrave was in view, his expression had changed. During most of our journey, it had been neutral. Or it had at least stopped being fearful once we

had put some distance between us and Helspire. But now, dread washed over the thin man's features as he stared across the grasslands and towards the city.

We hadn't told him anything, and he hadn't asked either. In fact, he hadn't even tried to sneak out and ride away when we stopped at the inn. I couldn't help but wonder if he had tried to escape from White in the beginning, and whether the punishment he must have received because of that was the reason why he hadn't even attempted to make a break for it now.

The thought made me irrationally angry. I didn't really care about this man. But I knew what it felt like to be trapped and terrified.

Before this was all over, I was going to watch Christian White bleed to death at my feet. He had a lot to answer for. Beating a healer. Slaughtering my people in Malgrave. And most of all, hurting Eve.

My mind drifted back to that scar along her forearm, and I had to grind my teeth and tighten my hold on the reins to stop myself from kicking my horse into a gallop so that I could find and kill that fucking worldwalker faster.

"We're here," Eve suddenly said, snapping me out of my murderous thoughts.

I blinked and glanced around, realizing that we had already reached the final crossroads.

The road we had been following split into four paths. One straight ahead towards Malgrave, and then another one that ran mostly straight too but also a little to the left so that it passed by the city. The third one headed straight to the left, and the final road to the right.

Eve and I pulled our horses to a halt. Derek flicked a confused look between the two of us but did the same. A strong wind washed over us, tousling the man's brown hair. He released the reins and pushed his hair out of his eyes.

Raising a hand, I pointed towards the road passing by Malgrave. "That's the way to Castlebourne." I shifted my hand

to the one running straight to the left. “That’s the way to Eldar.” I pointed to the right. “And that’s the way to the other coast. Not the one you came from.”

The healer stared at me in utter bewilderment before stammering an uncertain, “Uhm, okay?”

“I would suggest the coast if you’re looking to avoid fights.”

“I...” He jerked back and then blinked at me again. “Wait, what?”

“You are of course also welcome to come with us to Malgrave. I can set you up anywhere you like on the south side. Though I have to warn you, Christian White will be coming here with his army to get you back and to wipe us all out. And the constables are also planning an invasion. So there is a war coming to this city.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Pick a destination and be on your way.”

“You’re... letting me go?”

“Yes.”

Shock and incredulity shone on his face as he stared at me with wide eyes. For a few seconds, he just opened and closed his mouth without actually making any sound. On his other side, Eve watched us with a soft smile on her lips.

“Ever since the day I manifested my powers, almost thirty-five years ago now, people have been kidnapping me and trading me and forcing me to work for them.” Derek shook his head, his eyes still full of disbelief. “And you’re just... letting me go?”

I held his gaze. “I’m not a fan of slavery.”

“I...” He shook his head in confusion once more, and then looked between me and Eve. “But you broke into Helspire and stole me from a *worldwalker*. Why would you risk doing something so dangerous if you weren’t planning to take me for yourselves?”

Eve and I exchanged a glance.

A mischievous smile curved her lips as she said, “We have our reasons.”

“Which we really need to get on with,” I added, and jerked my chin. “So pick a road and get going.”

He flicked a quick glance at the different roads before saying, “The coast.”

“Good choice.” I gripped the reins fully again and got ready to urge my horse into motion. “Ride fast and don’t look back.”

“I don’t even know your names,” he blurted out before we could ride off.

Pausing, I turned back to him. “Levi Arden.”

He nodded and then looked at Eve.

“Eve Sterling,” she said.

“Thank you, Levi Arden and Eve Sterling. Regardless of your reasons, I’m eternally grateful that you got me out of Helspire.” Sincerity swirled in his eyes as he looked between the two of us. “Though, I hope you don’t take it the wrong way when I say that I hope we never meet again.” A small smile played over his lips. “But if we do, I will cook you a very nice meal.”

I chuckled.

Eve did too. “Good luck.”

Derek gave both of us a nod. Then he turned his horse around and quickly rode away along the path to the coast. For a minute, Eve and I just watched him go.

“It really was the best option,” she said eventually. “There’s no way White would ever believe that we let a healer leave just like that.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “He’ll think that we have Derek stashed away somewhere in the city, so he won’t even try to search for him outside.”

“Which means that Derek will get away safely.”

“And White will bring his army down to Malgrave.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

We turned and looked at each other. Amusement pulled at my lips, and I could see it swirling in Eve’s eyes too.

“This plan is insane, right?” she said, shaking her head in disbelief at our craziness.

I chuckled. “Without a doubt.”

She shrugged and then flashed me a grin while urging her horse forward. “Good thing we’re a bit insane too then.”

I followed, riding up next to her. “Indeed.”

The sound of a rattling wagon filled the air as we caught up with a small caravan. We moved into single file as we passed them. Then I moved back up so that I was next to her once more.

Winds swept across the grasslands again, tugging at our clothes and making Eve’s long curls ripple. She pushed a few loose strands out of her face before turning to me.

“Oh, by the way,” she began. “I’ve figured out another thing that I want now that I’m moving to the south side.”

“Name it.”

“My father’s tavern.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“I want something that’s mine.” She shot me a knowing look while a smirk slid across her lips. “You’ll spend a lot of time ruling the south side, and I’m not just going to trail after you like some puppy.”

“Aw, and here I was, looking forward to making you...” I raked a deliberate look over her body, “lie down and roll over.”

She snorted, but her eyes twinkled with amusement as she huffed, “Asshole.”

“Yes, I was thinking we could get to that part soon as well.”

She choked.

I grinned.

When she noticed the teasing smirk on my mouth, she rolled her eyes and muttered another curse. “Anyway, as I was saying, I want my father’s tavern. I want to preserve his legacy and once again make it a place where dark mages can meet without interference or fear of being eavesdropped on by spies from the north side.”

“That can be arranged.”

“But the problem is, someone else owns it now. Any chance you could persuade them to sell?”

With that sly smile once again on my lips, I shot her a knowing look. “Do you really think people say no when the King of Metal shows up on their doorstep?”

She shot me a smug look back. “*I did.*”

“Yes, but you were an undercover white boot plotting to lead me into a trap.”

“Good point.”

I chuckled and shook my head at her as she grinned at me.

We’d certainly had an interesting start to our relationship. But now we were in this together. Always and unequivocally. And as soon as all our schemes were finished on the north side, I couldn’t wait to tell the whole fucking world that Eve Sterling was mine.

## CHAPTER 26



It felt as if I had been breathing in bags of dust. But I had wanted to visit the archives and go through some old case files before everyone else showed up at the office today. They would no doubt have questions about where I had been for the past week after I simply left without a word, and I needed to get some things done before I became the object of their scrutiny.

When I finally returned to our floor, most of my colleagues had arrived. Most of them started in surprise when they saw me, but a fair share also shot me irritated looks. Jamila was one of them. I couldn't really blame them, though. They were probably getting tired of me just coming and going as I pleased without even bothering to let them know that I would be gone for a week. But since I couldn't exactly tell them that I was going to Helspire to kidnap a healer from a murderous worldwalker so that he would bring his army down to Malgrave, I had decided that it was best not to say anything before Levi and I left.

"Food poisoning again?" Jamila said, her voice sharp and mocking, as I reached my desk.

"No," I replied, shrugging out of my jacket as if I had just come from outside and not downstairs. "I just couldn't handle being here after Wright was murdered. So I just had to take a few days to get my head on straight."

Her dark eyes flashed. "We were *all* shocked by his murder. And we were *all* worried that we might be next. But

we still showed up. Every day. Trying to find the one responsible while also getting ready to finally take back the south side. But you, you just waltz around as you like.”

“If you have a problem with how I do my job, take it up with Ulric.”

“You mean *Captain* Smith?” she shot back pointedly at my use of only his first name.

I scoffed, silently stating that I didn’t need to address him so formally. “Anyway, thanks for the reminder. I should probably go talk to him.”

With a sharp smile in her direction, I left her fuming at her desk and instead sauntered down the corridor towards Ulric’s office. It was closed, so I knocked on the door once I reached it.

“Come in,” Ulric’s voice came from inside. He sounded uncharacteristically distracted. Almost a bit muted.

Pushing down the handle, I slipped inside and then closed the door behind me again.

“Eve,” Ulric blurted out as his gaze landed on me.

I was just about to reply when I finally took in his appearance. He had been standing bent over his desk, presumably looking for something in the mess that was once again back in this office, but when I entered, he straightened and turned to face me fully.

And he looked awful.

His white leather jacket was draped over the back of his chair, leaving him in only the shirt he wore underneath, which was incredibly rumpled. It almost looked as if that was the shirt he had worn yesterday, and that he had slept in it too. His hair was equally messy, sticking out at odd angles as if he had repeatedly pulled at it in frustration. And there were dark circles under his eyes.

Momentarily losing track of what I had been about to say, all I managed to press out was, “I...”



“You’re back,” he said. He sounded almost relieved. Then exasperation blew across his tired features, and he raked his fingers through his hair again while heaving a deep sigh. “We talked about this, kiddo.”

I suppressed the shudder of revulsion that that term of endearment now brought every time he uttered it.

“You can’t just run away when things get hard,” he continued, his tone both frustrated and full of pity. “I know that Wright being murdered by dark mages must have brought back terrible memories, but you should have come to me. You should have told me that you were struggling instead of pretending to be fine and then disappearing.”

I didn’t know whether to be annoyed or grateful that he once again just assumed that I had thrown a tantrum and run off like a child. It certainly helped my ruse, but it irritated me to yet again be reminded of what he really thought of me.

“I know.” I winced and shot him an apologetic look that was pure calculation. “I’m sorry.”

“I know, kiddo. But Chief isn’t happy. We’re in the middle of getting ready for our final invasion, a captain was just murdered, and you simply... run off.” Holding my gaze with regretful eyes, he shook his head. “I tried to cover for you, but I’m not sure if it was enough. I’m sorry, kiddo, I don’t think I can protect you this time.”

“It’s fine. I’ll handle it. I’m guessing Chief wants to see me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll head up there right away.” I squinted, letting a mask of concern descend on my features as I studied Ulric’s face. “But first, are you okay? You look like...” I was about to say *shit*, but quickly changed it to, “you haven’t slept. Is it just the coming invasion or has something else happened?”

“It’s, uhm...” He ran a hand over his neck, tugging at his hair. “Marla.”

“Has something happened to Marla?”

“No, it’s... Well, yes. She...” Desperation flooded his eyes as he stared back at me with such a helpless look that I could almost feel it pulsing through the air. “She’s divorcing me.”

Feigning shock, I drew back slightly and stared at him. “What? Why? I didn’t know that you two were having problems.”

“We weren’t. We *aren’t*. But she thinks I cheated on her and she says she has proof so...” He trailed off and shook his head in confusion. “I don’t even know what happened. One day, we were fine. The next, she’s slamming divorce papers down on my desk.”

It took every ounce of my self-control to stop a wicked grin from spreading across my face. *Told you I would ruin your life.*

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I said with very convincing sympathy. “Is there anything I can do?”

Apart from planting the idea in Marla’s mind that I had seen Ulric on the south side and then bribing a woman in a pleasure house into telling Marla that she had indeed been sleeping with Ulric, of course. However, I kept all of that firmly off my tongue as I instead looked back at Ulric with brows knitted in concern.

“No, no, just... Don’t worry about me. I’ll figure it out.” Clearing his throat, he stood up straighter. “You’d better go up to Chief’s office.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

With great effort, I kept the grin off my face until I was out in the corridor and had closed the door behind me. Then I practically skipped all the way down to the nearest stairwell.

*Ha.* Now the bastard knew firsthand just how much one lie could turn a person’s life upside down. And we were just getting started.

Once I reached the top floor, I schooled my features back into an appropriately remorseful expression before starting down the hallway towards Chief Anderson’s grand office. There was no one else up here at the moment, and the door to

the office was closed, but I was certain that the chief himself was indeed here. With the invasion drawing closer, he would spend as much time at the office as possible.

Raising my hand, I knocked on the sturdy door. The sound of it echoed down the deserted corridor.

“Come,” Chief Anderson called from inside.

I drew in a deep breath, bracing myself, and then stepped into his office.

Eric Anderson was sitting behind his massive desk, and there were papers strewn across the tabletop that he had presumably been reading. But the moment I walked across the threshold, his sharp blue eyes locked on me. They hardened instantly, and he clenched his jaw, making the scar across it stand out even more against his skin. His gray hair looked like steel in the morning sunlight that fell in through the windows.

“Sterling,” he said in a tight voice. “Finally decided to make an appearance?”

“Yes, sir.” I stopped a few steps in front of his desk and clasped my hands behind my back. “I was—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

Closing my mouth again, I looked back at him in silence instead.

The stare he leveled on me was so cold that I swore I could almost see ice spreading across the floor. This was not going to be pleasant.

“We’re done,” he announced.

“What do you mean, sir?”

“As of this moment, you are dismissed from the constable force.”

“Dismissed?” I raised my eyebrows. “You’re *firing* me?”

“Yes. Clear out your desk, go home and change, and then return your uniform by the end of the day.”

“You can’t fire me!”

He slammed his hands down on the desk, making the pens scattered there jump in alarm. His chair scraped against the floor as he slowly stood up, his palms still pressed against the tabletop, while he locked hard eyes on me. “I can do whatever I want. I am the Chief Constable of Malgrave and you have turned out to be an untrustworthy, disloyal, incompetent—”

“Disloyal?” I interrupted, throwing my arms out in a show of frustration. “I was practically raised by the Captain of the South Side Department, for Current’s sake!”

“I know. And that is the only reason why I, against my better judgement, allowed you to join the force.”

I drew back and blinked at him. “What does that mean?”

He flicked his hand impatiently. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you have now been dismissed.”

“You can’t just dismiss me.” I threw out an arm in the direction of our department. “Ulric can vouch for me. He has *always* vouched for me.”

He slammed his hands down on the table again, making the pens clatter and a stack of documents topple. “That’s what I’m telling you! The only reason why you were allowed in here in the first place is because Smith vouched for you. But now, even his words and his good name can’t protect you anymore.”

“I...”

“I always knew that you were trouble. Smith insisted that you could change. That you could become something better. But blood will out, as they say.”

Genuine shock whirled through me like a storm as I stared at Chief Anderson. For a moment, I couldn’t process his words. Then realization cleaved through the storm clouds inside me like a lightning bolt.

*He knew.*

Chief Anderson also knew the truth about me and my father. And he had known all along. Just like Ulric.

“When we became aware that we had a mole somewhere in here, in the back of my mind, I always thought it would turn out to be you,” Anderson continued. “But Ulric insisted that it was impossible. It would’ve fit, because of all your screw-ups with the Levi Arden operation, if we hadn’t actually found the real mole. So be glad that I don’t have you arrested as a dark mage accomplice, just because of your sheer incompetence, if nothing else.”

I almost laughed. Oh if he only knew.

“You think *I’m* crooked?” I snorted and then let an insolent grin spread across my lips as I gave Anderson a highly dismissive once-over. “And yet you say time and again that Ulric has always vouched for me.” I clicked my tongue. “Oh well, your mistake.”

“I would bet my entire fortune that I’m right about you. That I have always been right about you.”

“Hmm.” I gave him a quick rise and fall of my eyebrows. “Interesting statement, given what that would mean for the rest of your worldview.” Spinning on my heel, I strolled towards the door while giving him a nonchalant wave with the back of my hand. “Well then, I wish you all the best of luck with your invasion, Chief Anderson.”

He blurted out curses and annoyed remarks about how I still needed to return the uniform, but I swore that there was now a hint of confusion in his voice too.

Slamming the door shut, I rolled my shoulders back and started towards the stairwell. Even though I hadn’t planned on getting fired today, I still somehow felt lighter than I had in years. It would have been better to have eyes inside the South Side Department for a little while longer, so that we would know exactly when the invasion was going to happen, but we *had* considered that I might be fired after disappearing for a week. And we had still decided that it was worth the risk.

Drawing in a deep breath, I strode down the stairs with a wide smile on my face.

This was it.

My last tie to the north side had been severed.

Now, I could finally stop pretending to be someone I was not.

And just be me.

## CHAPTER 27



The tavern was packed with people, but all my attention was focused on one single person. Eve. There was a whole tangle of emotions on her features as she stood there quietly along the counter's short side, taking it all in.

Pain flickered in her eyes as they drifted to a spot on the wooden floorboards about halfway to the door. And I suddenly had the distinct feeling that *that* was where her father had died.

But then as she raised her eyes and swept them over the dark wooden tables and booths and the emerald green curtains by the windows, a wistful smile blew across her lips instead. As if she was recalling fond memories.

My heart tightened in my chest. When all this was over, I was going to ask her about that. About what her life had been like before everything went to hell.

Then she slid her gaze to the old man behind the counter who was still reading through the sales contract I had presented to him, and another emotion shone on her face instead. Excitement.

A smile ghosted across my mouth. *This* was what Eve wanted to do. She wanted to run a tavern in the pulsing heart of Malgrave's south side, surrounded by clinking glasses, thrumming music, and boisterous laughter. It suited her. I could sense her soul sparkling and could see the life burning in her eyes in a way that it never had when she wore that awful white leather uniform. That cursed piece of clothing had

suppressed her entire soul, and if I never had to see it on her ever again, it would still be one time too many.

“This is...” the tavern owner began, looking up from the paper and meeting my gaze with wide eyes. “A *very* generous offer, Mr. Arden.”

Yes, it was. When I had found out that the guy was in his sixties, I had realized that he was too old to start all over again and build up a new business, which meant that he would have been reluctant to sell. I could have threatened him into selling, of course. But I didn’t want to. He was one of mine now. They were *all* mine now.

Every business on the entire south side paid a portion of their earnings to me now, and I would hold up my end of that bargain too. To make sure that they could continue plying their trade in peace. So threatening someone into selling and then leaving him unable to set up another business was out of the question. Which was why the offer I had made him would make sure that he could live comfortably for the rest of his life without having to work.

I kept an expression of casual power on my face as I said, “So, do we have a deal?”

From two steps away, I could feel Eve tense up. She wanted this. Badly.

The tavern owner glanced down at the contract again, as if to make sure that it was in fact real. Then he looked up again, and a smile spread across his lips.

“Yes, we have a deal indeed, Mr. Arden,” he said. Tears lined his eyes as he held the paper closer to his chest and whispered, almost as if to himself, “I can’t believe I’ll be able to *retire*. My grandkids are going to be so happy.”

I wanted to smile, but I had a reputation to uphold, so I kept that mask of nonchalant power on my face as I pulled out a pen and a second identical contract and slid them to him. “Then sign the contract.”

He hurriedly put the paper he had been clutching back onto the wooden counter, and then grabbed the pen. Without even



checking to make sure that the second contract was identical to the first, he signed them both.

*That* surprised me so much that I barely managed to suppress the shock that threatened to flash across my features.

I knew that people feared me, and that they took great care not to offend me. And I knew that they were aware of my reputation as someone who upheld his end of the bargain. But to have someone just blindly trust me without even checking to make sure that the bargain they were about to sign was the right one... It made a strange sensation flow through my chest. I had always seen myself as the villain of the story. But perhaps not everyone saw me that way.

Once he had signed it, he handed the second contract back to me, along with the pen. I folded the paper and slid it back into my pocket before holding out my hand. The former tavern owner clasped it, a wide smile on his lips.

From the edge of the counter, Eve released a long breath, as if she had forgotten to breathe for several minutes.

The tavern owner turned towards her. "I assume that you are..." He glanced down at the name written on the contract he had just signed. "Eve Sterling?"

She started slightly. "Uhm, yes."

"Congratulations on your new tavern. It really is a marvelous building. I'll show you all the ins and outs of it in a moment," he offered, clearly not aware of the fact that Eve probably knew this entire place like the back of her hand. "But first, I have an announcement to make."

While he began climbing up onto the bar itself, Eve moved over so that she was standing next to me. The patrons laughed and called out questions about what the old man was doing as he worked to get himself into a standing position.

"You put *my name* on the contract?" Eve asked as she stared back at me.

"Of course." I shrugged. "You said that you wanted something that was yours."

“Yes, but... you paid for it. With your money.”

“My money is your money. And in case you hadn’t noticed, we’re very rich.”

She let out a surprised chuckle.

I smiled while reaching out and hooking a loose curl behind her ear. “And besides, this tavern is your birthright. It has always been yours. I’m just helping to return it to its proper owner.”

A warm smile spread across her lips. It was joined by a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she said, “Hmm. I might have to stop referring to you as an arrogant domineering asshole now.”

“Oh?” I flashed her a sly smile. “Then I suppose I will have to remind you why you call me that.” My fingers trailed lightly over her throat, drawing a shudder from her. “Tonight. In bed.”

Her eyes lit up with dark desire.

But before she could retort, the former tavern owner had finally managed to get to his feet on top of the sturdy counter.

“Oh quiet down, you,” he called at his hooting patrons. “If you only knew how many tables I’ve danced on in my life, you wouldn’t look so worried now.”

Laughter rippled through the packed tavern.

The old man placed his hands on his hips and rolled them with surprising agility. “See! I’ve still got it.”

Several people hollered and catcalled while another wave of wonderful laughter surged through the warm room. It was getting increasingly difficult to keep a smile off my face, so in order to keep the hard and powerful expression on my features, I forced my mind back to our plan for a moment.

It had been almost a week now since we came back from Hespire, which meant that White should be returning to his castle any day now to find some of his people dead and his healer missing. I had pulled the guards I usually kept stationed out in the open, and instead instructed my people to stay inside

the Court as much as possible. At least until White made his first move.

“And that’s the only dancing you will get out of me, you deviants,” the old man continued with a chuckle. Then he raised the contract and shook it in the air. “Because I have an announcement for you.”

The room immediately quieted down, surprise blowing across several faces.

He beamed as he waved the document again. “I’m retiring!”

“Nooo!” his patrons moaned.

“Oi!” He stomped his foot in a show of mock outrage. “You’re supposed to be happy for me, you cretins.”

Some people laughed while others instead called, “Yay! We’re so happy for you.”

“That’s more like it.” He grinned at them. “And besides, you’re in good hands. The one who will be taking over for me is this young lady here.” He pointed down at Eve. “Eve Sterling.”

Most of the crowd clapped and whistled excitedly. Eve flushed a deep shade of red before recovering enough to smile and wave at them.

“Wait!” someone called from the back of the room.

I turned to find an old man sitting at a table by the wall. His wrinkled face was scrunched up in thought as he squinted at Eve.

“Eve Sterling,” he said. “Are you... Dan’s daughter?”

A hush swept through the tavern as everyone looked between him and Eve. He must have been a regular at this tavern for decades. And as I scanned the room, I noticed more people who looked like they were old patrons cocking their heads and watching Eve with curious eyes.

“Yes, I am,” she replied, keeping her spine straight and her chin up.

The older gentleman kept watching her through narrowed eyes. “I thought you were a white boot.”

“I was.”

Inside the room, the silence suddenly grew so loud that I could almost hear it beating against my eardrums.

A villainous smile curled Eve’s lips as she gave them all a quick rise and fall of her eyebrows. “Well, *they* thought I was, anyway.” She lifted one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “I’ve been sabotaging them from the inside for years. Making investigations go away. Helping southsiders get out of trouble. Things like that.”

Lots of eyebrows rose.

I had to fight the urge to shake my head at her in disbelief. She really was an excellent liar. Even I, who knew without a doubt that she was making this up, couldn’t detect the lies in her words.

Eve jerked her chin towards me. “How do you think all of his battle mages miraculously escaped prison earlier?”

Clothes rustled as everyone turned to look at me. I nodded in confirmation.

“I’ve been working for him for years,” she lied effortlessly.

“And your captain never found out?” someone asked.

A conspiratorial grin slid home on her lips. “Oh, Captain Smith knew *exactly* who I was the whole time.” She lifted her shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. “But unfortunately, the Chief Constable has found out now. So...” She spread her hands helplessly. “Cover blown.”

For a moment, the entire tavern was silent.

Then, the sound of a chair scraping against the floorboards filled the warm room. We all turned to find the old gentleman who had first recognized Eve now standing by his table instead.

“Well, then.” There was a smile on his face as he raised his mug of ale in a salute. “Welcome home, Miss Sterling.”

“Welcome home!” everyone else echoed, raising their drinks as well.

Eve grinned back at them.

Warmth spread through my chest. Yes, she really was home now.

After she had stayed for a drink that everyone wanted to buy her, we at last made our way back to my Court. Eve walked with such light steps that it almost looked like she was floating across the stone streets. Colorful lights from the oil lamps above shifted across her features as we walked. They made her eyes glitter. Or perhaps that was the joy I could feel radiating from her.

By all hell, I wanted to see her like this *every* day. Happy. Free. Fierce. Wild. That was my little spitfire to her core, and I swore that once we had dealt with Christian White and the entire north side, I was going to make sure that nothing and no one ever dampened her spirit again.

As we rounded the final corner and started down the street towards my front gates, I could sense that something had happened. It was like a charge in the air. A tension vibrating through it, pressing in from all sides.

I let my hands drift closer together as I scanned the road. It was empty of guards, just as I had instructed.

Next to me, Eve was on the alert as well. Her gaze flicked back and forth.

But the street remained silent as we closed the final distance to the red-painted doors.

A surge went through me.

There.

On one of the doors was a single folded-up piece of paper. I ripped it down and flipped it open.

Christian White’s messy handwriting stared back at me. The words were scrawled so hard that the pen had almost sheared through the paper. Furious. He had been furious when he wrote this.

I held the note out so that Eve and I could read it at the same time.

As opposed to his previous letters, which had been long-winded and taunting almost to the point of being chatty, this one contained only three sentences.

*Big mistake. I once told you that I would bring my army down from the north and wipe your entire fucking city from the map if you disrespected me. Now, that is exactly what I will do.*

## CHAPTER 28



The house was dark and silent around me. We had to be careful now. With White and his army finally on the move, we were reaching the end of our grand schemes. Taking unnecessary risks now was stupid, so Levi had stayed behind on the south side, getting things ready there, while I broke into Captain Ulric Smith's house.

I carefully slipped the papers into the folder before returning it to one of the lower shelves in Ulric's office. Moving on to the desk, I gently picked up the documents strewn over the tabletop instead and quickly scanned their contents.

Since I had lost my direct line of communication with the South Side Department, I had to resort to stealthier tactics in order to find out exactly when the invasion was scheduled to begin.

We didn't know exactly when White would arrive with his army either, so we had to keep an eye on both fronts to make sure that the invasion from the north side didn't happen before the worldwalker showed up.

I put down the document and picked up another one. Ulric often took his work home, hence this messy office, but so far I hadn't been able to find any papers that contained information that I didn't already know.

Only the moonlight filtering in through the window provided light inside the room, so I had to hold the paper close to my face and squint in order to read it. Once I had

determined that it was useless, I put it down and continued with the next one.

A quick but thorough search revealed nothing of importance. I scowled at the dark room around me before slipping back out into the hallway again.

Well, at least the entire break-in hadn't been a waste of time. Though I did wish that I could have found some new information about the exact date for the invasion.

My gaze slid to the darkened staircase.

Maybe Ulric had brought those papers up to his bedroom. To read before he went to sleep. It was worth a shot.

After quickly scanning the area around me, I snuck over to the stairs. Since they were made of wood, I stayed close to the edge of each step to minimize the risk of any creaking.

Three steps away from the landing above, my luck ran out.

The wood let out an annoyed groan as I placed my weight on it.

I froze.

My heart pounded in my chest.

While frantically trying to get my heart to stop making so much bloody noise, I strained my ears and listened for anything that would indicate that Ulrich had woken up.

One minute passed.

Two.

I released a long breath. Apparently, Ulric was exhausted enough that he hadn't heard that damn creaking noise. I shot a glare down at the offending piece of wood before quickly making my way up the final steps.

The upstairs was as dark as the downstairs, but not as silent. As I slunk through the hallway, I could hear the deep breaths of someone who was fast asleep. My heartbeat slowed slightly.



While keeping an eye out for any other creaking floorboards, I closed the distance to Ulric and Marla's bedroom. The door was open, so I drew myself up next to it and glanced inside.

Silvery moonlight slanted in through the window and illuminated the sleeping face of Captain Ulric Smith. He was lying on his back, the sheets pushed down to his waist and twisted around his legs.

Wicked satisfaction pulsed inside me when I noticed that the other side of the bed was empty, with the covers still pulled up neatly. Marla truly had left him, then.

I stifled a smug chuckle as I slipped across the threshold and made my way towards Ulric's side of the bed.

It really was extraordinary what a simple rumor and a paid-off pleasure worker could do.

Stopping by the side of the bed, I looked down at Ulric's sleeping form. His chest rose and fell with the steady telltale signs of deep sleep, but his features were anything but smooth. He looked troubled. Restless. If it was due to Marla divorcing him, the stress of the coming invasion, or perhaps even the news of my dismissal, I didn't know. But it didn't matter.

I flicked a glance towards the bedside table, confirming that there were no documents there that I could read through. Then I returned my attention to Ulric.

My hand drifted towards my sword.

Forcing it to a stop, I flexed my fingers instead.

I was itching to draw my blade and ram it through Ulric Smith's lying fucking heart.

I had wanted him dead when I found out what he had done.

I still wanted him dead.

But Levi had been right that night in the pouring rain.

So instead of shoving a sword through Ulric's chest, I forced my fury back behind my ribs and then slipped back out into the night.

## CHAPTER 29



Metal clanged faintly as I set down another piece of armor on the pile beside the table. Then I brushed my hands together and sent my magic flowing into the next lump of metal, molding and shaping it into the form I wanted. It was tedious work. Especially given that it was practically all I had done for the past two days. But a war was coming, and we needed to be ready for it.

My gaze drifted from the metal before me to the woman rearranging glasses behind the bar.

I smiled. At least the view was nice.

Eve placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head as she studied the glasses she had moved to a different shelf. I watched her. That black and red leather outfit accentuated her honed body, and that, combined with the way she was standing, made power radiate from her. Tall, athletic, proud. Fucking hell, it should be illegal to be that hot.

After another few seconds of contemplation, Eve shook her head and moved the glasses back to the shelf that they had been on originally. I chuckled.

Turning around, she arched an eyebrow at me. “You could help, you know. Instead of just sitting there laughing.”

“I could.” I smirked at her. “If you ask nicely.”

She scoffed and narrowed her eyes at me.

“You also said you wanted to make the tavern your own,” I added before she could decide to shoot a fireball at me. “I

figured that's something you'll best accomplish by yourself."

Yesterday, the day after Eve took over ownership of The Black Emerald, she had temporarily closed it down so that she could go through the whole place and start putting it together the way she wanted it. All our other plans were already in motion, and the only thing that remained was for me to make these sets of armor, so we didn't see any harm in her taking this much needed break from all the warmongering before the battle at last broke out.

"And besides, I have armor to craft," I finished with a wicked smile, and nodded down at the half-finished piece on the table before me.

She raised a brow and then shot a pointed look down at my unmoving hands. "Then why aren't you?"

"Because I got distracted by how hot you are."

Eve's brown eyes lit up like gold. Then a sly smile curved her lips. "Did you now?"

I matched her smile as she sauntered around the bar, drawing her hand along the counter as she moved. Her hips swayed more than usual. I raked my gaze over her perfect body as she cleared the wooden barrier and started towards me. The mischievous glint in her eyes when I dragged my gaze back up to her face made my heart skip a beat.

Wood grated against wood as Eve pushed the table that had been in front of me towards the side instead so that she could approach me from straight ahead. I raised my eyebrows in silent question. She just smirked back.

Leaning back in my chair, I watch her stride towards me.

"Well, then," she began as she came to a halt before me.

Blood rushed to my cock as she raised her leg and planted her foot on the edge of my chair, right between my spread legs. Then she pushed, forcing the chair back a short distance.

She grinned, as if she knew exactly how much heat seared through me at the sight of her like that.

“Allow me to distract you properly,” she finished, leaning forward to draw her fingers along my jaw.

A shudder of pleasure rolled down my spine at her touch. Her eyes danced with satisfaction.

Taking her foot off the chair, she instead slowly lowered herself to her knees between my legs. My heart thumped in my chest as she drew her hands up my thighs and towards the top of my pants. Fire licked my insides as her nimble fingers undid the fastenings. A sharp breath ripped from me as she reached inside the fabric and wrapped her hand around my cock. It pulsed with need as she freed it.

She drew her hand up and down the shaft, and I had to bite back a moan.

“It’s cute how you think you can hide that sound from me,” she teased, squeezing as she ran her hand up and down again in a way that made my eyes flutter. “But I will hear you moan my name soon enough.”

Before I could retort, she leaned forward and took my cock into her mouth. With her hand still wrapped around the base, she sucked and then swirled her tongue around the tip before taking me deeper again.

I dragged in a shuddering breath and tipped my head back as a wave of pleasure washed over me.

Eve chuckled around my cock. Raising my head again, I tried to shoot her a threatening look, but right then, she deep-throated me.

Lights flickered behind my eyes and a moan slipped past my lips.

Drawing back, she let out another smug chuckle and then teased the crown of my cock with her tongue again. I slid my fingers through her loose brown curls, gripping her hair firmly.

“You wicked little thing,” I said as she worked her lips along my shaft again.

Her eyes glittered with villainous delight as she held my gaze while she continued sucking me off.

Pleasure built inside me as she ran her hand up and down the base at the same time as she drew more moans from my throat with her talented mouth. I gripped her hair and the arm of the chair harder as the tension inside me grew. Eve showed no mercy.

With a flick of her tongue, she sent a ripple through my entire body. Her lips slid along the pulsing shaft. Everything inside me was crackling with need.

“Eve,” I moaned, my mind feeling like it was spinning precariously.

She took me deeper.

“Eve.” Her name was a plea on my tongue.

My soul thrummed with tension and my brain flickered.

She might be the one on her knees, but she held my entire being in the palm of her hand. Always had. Always would.

With a masterful maneuver of both her tongue and lips, she made release explode through my body.

I let out a deep groan.

She kept her mouth around my cock while I came down her throat with stars flashing before my eyes. My chest heaved as I slumped back in the chair, letting my hand fall back to the other armrest. Tilting my head back, I stared up at the ceiling while trying to piece my mind back together.

Eve slowly slid my cock out of her mouth and then pulled my pants back up and redid the fastenings. I sucked in deep breaths.

Bracing her hands on my thighs, she pushed to her feet. Then she swung her legs over mine and settled right on top of my lap. Her pussy ground against my cock as she adjusted her weight with what I assumed was a highly deliberate motion. Raising my head, I arched an eyebrow at her.

With a smug smile on her lips, she slid her hands through my hair and then locked them behind my neck. “Told you that you would moan my name.”

“So now you think that you have won?” I teased, flashing her a smile full of challenge.

“You not only moaned it once. But twice.” Leaning forward, she stole a kiss from my lips before drawing back again and cocking her head. “And I would even categorize that second one as *begging*.”

“Would you now? Do you—” I sucked in a sharp breath as Eve rolled her hips, grinding her pussy against my cock again. Narrowing my eyes, I refused to acknowledge the distracting move, so I just continued with, “Would you like me to show you what it means to truly beg, spitfire? Because—”

I was once more cut off by an involuntary intake of breath as Eve ground against me again, making my cock harden instantly.

She flashed me a smug grin. “You were saying?”

My hand locked around her throat, and I pulled her face down to mine in a savage kiss. She answered the kiss with equal dominance and rolled her hips again. A shudder rippled through me.

“Oh, the things I will do to you,” I whispered against her lips.

She let out a dark laugh while I moved my hands down to her ass. Holding her against me, I rose from the chair and walked us over to the table she had pushed to the side. She kept her hands around the back of my neck, kissing me hard, while I swept an arm over the tabletop.

The lumps of metal and the half-finished armor on it went clattering to the floor.

Eve nipped at my bottom lip as I set her down on the table. Drawing back slightly, I locked eyes with her while placing my hands on her thighs, spreading her legs wide.

“Now, spitfire,” I began, my voice low and dark. “I’m going to make you demonstrate what begging really looks like.”

“Oh, you really are an arrogant domineering—”

The door was yanked open.

Slapping my palms together, I shot a sheet of metal towards it right as a young man darted across the threshold. He screeched to a halt. With eyes wide, he raised his hands in the air as the sharp sheet hovered right in front of his neck. His chest heaved as if he had sprinted all the way here.

Before I could demand to know who he was and what the hell he was doing interrupting us like this, his terrified eyes found mine and he blurted out, “She said to tell you to read it right away.”

“What?” I asked. “Who?”

Then my eyes landed on the piece of paper in his raised hand.

“Please. You need to read it now,” he said.

Striding around the table, I walked up to him and took the offered paper. The metal stayed at his neck.

“What is it?” Eve asked from behind me.

I opened the folded-up note.

And coldness settled in my stomach.

Even though there was no name, I recognized Maggie’s handwriting. There were only three words written on the paper, but they made alarm spike through me.

*Get out. Now.*

I immediately dropped the sheet of metal and snapped my gaze back to the messenger. “Tell her thanks.”

He nodded and then darted back out again.

Shoving the paper into my pocket, I spun around towards Eve. “We need to leave. Now.”

She immediately hopped down from the table and sprinted to grab her sword while asking, “Why?”

“I’m not sure.”

Metal clanked as I scooped up all the pieces of armor I had already finished and tossed them into the nearest storage room.

Then I summoned the remaining lumps of metal and sent them flowing in underneath the door before I hardened them into a solid wall on the inside of the room to stop anyone from opening the door.

Eve ran up to me right as I finished and released my magic.

“There’s a way out the back,” she said.

“Let’s go.”

We darted through the empty kitchen and towards the back door. Not bothering to lock it behind us, we simply threw it shut and sprinted out into the narrow alley. There was no telling how much time we had, so I grabbed Eve by the arm and pulled her with me towards the nearest door. She had been charging straight ahead, so she almost stumbled at the abrupt change in direction. But she righted herself quickly.

Releasing her, I summoned my magic and melted the lock on the door before yanking it open. Eve ran across the threshold right as a surprised yelp came from inside the hallway. I hurried across the threshold and pulled the door shut behind me. Then I re-formed the lock bolt.

“Mr. Arden,” a woman stammered from somewhere behind me.

I spun around to find a blond woman in her thirties staring at me with a mix of shock, fear, and panic.

“H-have I done something wrong?” she pressed out in a worried voice. “I’m sorry, I—”

“No,” I interrupted. “You haven’t done anything wrong. We just need to use your upstairs window for a minute.”

“Of course. Of course.” She stared between me and Eve, completely bewildered. But no one refused the King of Metal, so she just motioned towards the stairs. “Please, go right ahead.”

I gave her a nod before hurrying up the steps. Eve followed close on my heels.



We quickly made our way through the woman's home, which housed a surprising number of paintings depicting hedgehogs, of all things, and made it to the window facing the alley in short order. Drawing ourselves up along the wall on each side of the window, so that we wouldn't be spotted from the outside, we glanced out at the alley and the tavern across the narrow space.

Lights were still burning in the kitchen, and the rest of the tavern too, making it look like we were still in there. I narrowed my eyes at the calm area outside, wondering what Maggie's note had meant.

Barely a minute after we had reached the window, I understood exactly what her warning had referred to.

Stunned shock pulsed through me as a mass of people descended on the tavern. They were dressed in civilian clothing, but there was no mistaking who they were. *What* they were. White boots.

They rushed up to the tavern like a horde of ants. A moment later, they opened jars full of white smoke and used wind magic to blow it into every window and every door on this side. Presumably, the same thing was happening at the front of the building too.

I stared at them as they remained outside in the fresh air, waiting for the white smoke to dissipate inside the tavern. There was no way to know for sure, but if I had to guess, I would say that the white smoke was sleepcore. It was the drug that they had used to knock all of my people out in that warehouse during their first ambush, and it had worked then, so they probably hoped that it would work now too.

As soon as the smoke had cleared, the white boots charged inside.

From across the window, Eve turned away from the tavern and slid her gaze to me. I met it, and we exchanged a long look.

If Maggie hadn't sent that note to warn us, we would be lying unconscious on the floor in there right now while they

just walked right in and slapped handcuffs on us.

Disbelief clanged through me.

That had been close.

Far too close.

I hadn't expected that they would be smart, and ballsy, enough to try this kind of sneak attack. They must have moved across the Bridge of Life and through the Entertainment District alone or in pairs, pretending to be normal civilians before they all converged right before this attack, otherwise my people would have seen them coming.

A relieved laugh threatened to spill from my throat. I knew that being on good terms with Maggie would save my life one day.

Drawing my eyebrows down, I cast another glance at the white boot silhouettes we could just barely see through the windows. They had been planning an attack, but it shouldn't have been this. And it shouldn't have been now.

"What does this mean?" I said, shifting my attention back to Eve.

She heaved a deep sigh. "It means that the war has started early."

## CHAPTER 30



Here on the north side, among the brightly lit white buildings and quiet streets, it was almost hard to believe that war had raged inside the city of Malgrave for over a day now.

After the failed ambush in the tavern, the constables hadn't withdrawn as we had hoped against hope that they would. Instead, they had attacked with their full force.

The south side was now a battlefield. Wave after wave of white boots had crashed against Levi and his dark mages, trying to force the King of Metal to surrender. Or to get him into a position where they could capture or kill him.

Even now, in the middle of the night, Levi was working tirelessly to shore up their defenses, move the civilians out of the areas that were most likely to become a battlefield again once the sun rose, and to figure out how to withstand these attacks without losing any of his people.

Christian White was still coming, and we would need every mage we had to win that battle, so we couldn't risk losing any to these damn attacks.

I squeezed my hand into a fist and ground my teeth as I slunk around another corner and then continued down the next street.

Why couldn't Chief Anderson have waited just another few days? The worldwalker would be here soon with his army, and then this invasion would cease to matter entirely. So why did they have to attack *before* he showed up? Now, we had to

waste energy and risk lives that we would sorely need when the real battle began. Having exhausted battle mages face off against White would put us at an awful disadvantage.

In order to throw the constable force off balance, and hopefully stall their attacks until White arrived to threaten the whole city instead, we needed to do something that hadn't been part of our original plans. Or rather, *I* needed to do something.

It would've been far too risky for Levi to sneak through the north side right now. The constables had shut down the Bridge of Life and set up a siege blockade along almost the entire River of Souls. Just getting *me* through had been almost impossible. And Ferry, the water mage who had been helping us cross the river all this time, had told us in no uncertain terms that tonight would be the last time until the blockade was lifted. It was becoming too dangerous to sneak through, and she didn't want to risk getting caught, regardless of how much money Levi offered her.

I understood her, though. After all, what use is money if you're locked in a cell? Or worse, executed?

So I would have to make tonight count, because tonight was all I had.

Slowing down, I drew myself up along the white stone wall and then stole a glance around the corner. The wide street ahead was silent and still. Given that it was the middle of the night, and on the north side, it shouldn't have been a surprise. But after the chaos I had left behind on the south side, the stillness was almost jarring.

I drew in a deep breath. I needed to focus. This mission would be good for both angles of our schemes, but it was a risky one. There were a lot of things that could go wrong. More than I wanted to admit. But at least Levi had Gemma on standby right by the shoreline on the south side, in case I needed urgent healing when I returned. He hadn't been happy about letting me go alone, but I had very pointedly reminded him that he didn't *let me* do anything. I did what I wanted. And I wanted to do this.

After checking again to make sure that the street was deserted, I slipped around the corner and snuck up to the fourth house on the left side. The buildings here weren't attached, like most of the houses were on the south side. Instead, these had generous gardens that separated the buildings from one another, providing quite a lot of privacy.

Thin branches rustled in annoyance as I jumped the hedge at the side of the property and then darted up to the building.

As opposed to Ulric's house, I couldn't just knock on the door and waltz inside or slip in through a window that I knew was always unlocked. This particular house was a lot more secure.

However, I still skulked around it, checking every window and door just in case I might get lucky and find one unlocked.

I didn't.

Keeping close to the walls, I made my way towards the back of the house. The garden there ended at a tall hedge full of thick bushes that blocked the view from the neighboring houses. And there was a backdoor there, along with several windows. For what I was about to do, I would need as much privacy as possible.

After scouting out the best locations, I moved so that I was standing in front of one of the windows.

Then I summoned a blast of wind and shattered the window to Chief Eric Anderson's living room.

Glass exploded, raining down on the wooden floor inside with a clinking sound that rippled through the cold night air.

I immediately darted to the spot I had picked out right by the back door. Whipping my head from side to side, I checked if any neighbors had heard the crash.

No sounds came from inside the closest houses, and no lights bloomed in the windows. Relief washed through me. One less complication at least.

Inside Chief Anderson's house, however, there was both light and sound.

Firelight immediately flared to life in an upstairs window, and through the broken glass, I could hear cursing. The light moved closer to the window. I pressed myself against the wall even though I knew that he wouldn't be able to see me from up there.

Sure enough, after a few moments, the firelight moved away from the window.

Thudding footsteps came from the stairs.

Chief Anderson was one of those people who were married to the job, so he didn't have a wife or kids. Which meant that I could be confident that it was indeed the chief himself who came down to investigate.

I unsheathed my knife, flexing my fingers on the hilt as the stomping footsteps drew closer.

Once they reached the living room, I moved slightly again so that there was a bush between me and the broken window.

“What the bloody hell?” Chief Anderson cursed from inside. His voice sounded like it was very close to the window. “Matilda! Thomas! If this is you again, I swear I am going to arrest you this time.”

Only silence answered him.

“And I'm going to arrest your damn mother too for not keeping you in check,” he added in a mutter that seemed to be directed more to himself than to the nonexistent children outside. “Don't they know we're in the middle of a bloody war?”

His feet thumped against the floor, moving away from the window and towards the backdoor.

My heart pounded in my chest as I shifted my position yet again.

I resisted the urge to suck in rapid breaths.

The hilt of my blade suddenly felt slick in my hands.

Fuck, this had to work.

Chief Eric Anderson shoved the door open and stalked out, wearing only a pair of underwear and a white shirt. “If you don’t come out this instant, I will—”

Panic shot through me as he suddenly cut off and whipped towards me.

His eyes went wide.

I slammed my knife into the side of his ribs.

A huff ripped from his throat. Shock and pain pulsed in his blue eyes as I yanked the knife out.

With alarm still crackling through my veins, I raised my hand to strike again. I had planned to slit his throat from the side, killing him quickly in one fell swoop. But he had sensed me and spun around before I could get my weapon into position.

And now he was hurt but not dead.

*Shit.*

I had to finish this quickly.

My hand had barely gotten the blade out when Anderson started bringing his palms together. Making a split-second decision, I abandoned my attempt to stab him again and instead summoned a blast of wind that took him in the chest one second before he could slap his palms together and attack.

He flew backwards, in through the still open door, and crashed into something inside the living room. I darted after him, slamming the door shut behind me to stop the neighbors from hearing the noise, and got ready to summon a lightning bolt.

The door was still vibrating in its frame when a water blast smacked into me, sending me crashing back against the door.

On the floor halfway inside the living room, Anderson was trying to push himself up while also summoning more magic.

Water dripped down from my soaked clothes, splattering on the polished floorboards, as I dove to the side right before a

lightning strike zapped into the door behind me. Rolling across the floor, I came up on my knees and threw the knife at him.

It shot through the air, but was stopped by a wind blast before it could bury itself in his chest. The knife spun wildly, smacking into a bookshelf instead and tumbling down on the floor with a metallic clattering.

The moment I threw the blade, I slapped my palms together and summoned a lightning bolt. Since Anderson had been forced to block the knife, he didn't have time to call up another shield in time.

White light flashed inside the room as the bolt struck him.

I ground my teeth.

It hadn't hit him in the heart, as I had planned. Instead, the Chief Constable of Malgrave had managed to throw himself sideways at the last second. His left arm jerked and his fingers spasmed as the lightning hit his bicep instead.

Blood dripped on the floor, and the entire right side of his white shirt was now stained red. He was badly injured, and he must be in tremendous pain, and yet the stubborn man was still putting up one hell of a fight. Though I supposed there was a reason why he had become the head of the white boots.

His left arm no longer moved, but he slapped his right hand against his unresponsive left and then shot a lightning bolt back at me. I shoved it off course with a wind shield, making it crack into the pale sofa instead.

Chief Anderson struggled to get to his feet.

I used that moment to dart forward.

Pain pulsed across his features as he leaped upright, making more blood well up from the wound in his side. He tried to summon more magic, but I was already too close, so he abandoned the effort and instead tried to leap back. I drew my sword and feinted right in one fluid motion.

Anderson unfortunately saw it coming and tried to dodge. But his body spasmed involuntarily from the pain in the



wound when he tried to twist it, so he didn't manage to get out of reach in time.

I rammed my sword through his chest.

He gasped. It quickly turned into a gurgle.

Bracing one hand on his shoulder, I yanked the sword back out of his chest. He coughed blood into my face. Then his knees buckled.

Dull thuds echoed through the darkened living room as Chief Eric Anderson collapsed to the floor. He toppled over, slumping down on his side. His chest rose and fell with jagged, gurgling breaths.

I crouched down in front of him.

Blood poured out of the wound in his chest and side, forming a pool on the floor. I made sure to keep my boots out of it as I looked down at the dying man.

Part of me felt sad, and horrified, and guilty about what I had done. I had known Eric Anderson for years. He had worked hard to keep the streets of Malgrave safe from dark mages.

But at the same time, he had known about Ulric killing my father and had done nothing about it. And he had also ordered an attack on the south side, which put the lives of the civilians there at risk.

Maybe there were no real heroes. Maybe everyone had blood on their hands in some way.

So I dismissed the guilt and the sadness and instead focused on my mission. We needed the constable force, and the entire north side, to be thrown into complete chaos. Both right now, when they were hammering us with attacks, and also when White appeared. And having the Chief Constable assassinated would certainly create chaos and panic and discord.

“Blood...” Anderson croaked, his unfocused gaze finding mine. Hatred bled into his eyes. “Will out.”

*Blood will out.*

A cold huff of amusement ripped from my lungs.

Careful not to touch the blood, I grabbed his wrist and lifted his hand. Then I used his own finger to draw a couple of curving shapes in the shallow part of the blood.

“Yes,” I said, dropping his hand again. “It will indeed.”

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but only a choked gurgle made it out. His body spasmed once. Then his normally so stern blue eyes glassed over.

I rose to my feet.

Walking around his dead body, I picked up the knife I had thrown earlier before searching his house until I found his study. Then I placed some documents in there.

Chief Anderson’s death would create chaos.

And so would those documents.

Once they were found.

## CHAPTER 31



G lass shattered as a combined wind blast from the mass of white boots blew out every window on the street. Broken shards rained down, clinking against the stone road and the wooden floorboards inside the houses. Terrified screams rose from the building on my left.

Gritting my teeth, I raised a metal wall to block the bombardment of fireballs while wondering why the hell there were still people in these houses. The civilians on this street were supposed to have been evacuated last night.

Behind me, Shinji was sending torrents of fire barreling towards the rows of constables. They were forced to abandon their own fireballs and instead raise overlapping shields of water to block it.

White mist exploded over the street as the fire and water clashed, turning the attacks into hissing steam. I squinted, trying to see through the thick fog. Eve summoned wind and whirled it around us, sweeping away the mist.

I shot a massive sheet of metal towards the white boots. It crashed into shields of wind and fire.

With an annoyed scowl on my face, I called up more magic and hurled it at them.

I had to give it to them, they had planned this invasion well. Attacking from practically every side, they had forced me to split up my forces in order to make sure that we wouldn't find ourselves trapped between them. It significantly

decreased the otherwise overwhelming power we would have met them with.

The other problem was of course that I wasn't trying to win. I was trying to keep as many of my people alive and out of custody as possible for when White got here with his army. That had meant that I had only been able to risk bringing out my experienced battle mages for this fight while leaving the medium- and low-level fighters out of it. Even with the added numbers I had gained from the other dark mage Houses, we were severely outnumbered against the entirety of Malgrave's constable force.

I yanked up another wall as a hail of lightning bolts suddenly barreled towards us. They slammed into my metal with loud *cracks* that reverberated through the air.

"They're going to rush us!" Eve called from next to me while blocking the lightning on both sides with rapid shields of water.

Since Eve knew their tactics, we had been able to avoid falling into some of their traps. But with just the two of us and Shinji defending this street, it was getting difficult to block them even when we knew what they were going to do.

"Shinji," I snapped.

"Got it," he replied before I even had to specify what I wanted him to do.

Red flames roared down the street on his side while I shoved a thick sheet of metal between the buildings on mine. Another loud bang echoed through the cold fall air as it crashed into their shields.

Steam washed over the street once more as Shinji's fire was met with water.

The moment the attacks faded out, the back rows of constables who hadn't used their magic to block must have loosed their attacks.

A mass of wind blasts slammed into us from both sides. It created a surge, snatching us from the ground and tossing us into the buildings next to us.

I crashed into a yellow-painted door with enough force to break it. My breath exploded from my lungs at the impact.

Gasping in air, I struggled to get to my feet while frantically whipping my head around to find Eve. Relief pulsed through me when I found her trying to disentangle herself from the toppled chairs that she had crashed into a few strides away from me. But it was quickly replaced by worry when I noticed the blood dripping down her arm from a slash that must have been caused by the broken shards still attached to the window that she had no doubt been flung through.

Another wave of unease smacked into me when I realized that Shinji was nowhere to be found.

“They’re pushing for close combat,” Eve pressed out while shoving a chair to the side and straightening. “We need to get back out into the street.”

Red flames shot out from the building right next to ours. A brief flash of relief pulsed inside me as I darted towards the opening where the door had been. At least Shinji was still in fighting shape.

“Levi!” Eve screamed.

Wind slammed into me from the side, from *her* side, sending me flying sideways right before a lightning bolt zapped through the door and the space where I had been standing only moments before. Dull pain pulsed through my hip as I crashed into a table. The force of it knocked the glass candleholder clean off the tabletop, sending it crashing down and shattering on the floor.

A whimper came from the other side of the sturdy wooden counter on my right.

My blood froze.

There was a civilian in here.

But I didn’t have any more time to think about that, because a horde of white boots poured across the threshold.

Rage surged up inside me. They wanted close combat? Fine, I would give them close combat.

Steel sang into the air as I drew the massive sword strapped down my spine.

Lunging forward, I swung the blade at the white boot who had been sprinting towards me. His eyes only had time to widen in shock before the sword crashed into the side of his ribs, cleaving him halfway through. I could feel the strike hit bone, so I put my boot on his chest and shoved him backwards while yanking my sword free.

The brutal move had made the other constables hesitate for a fraction of a second. And that was all I needed.

I darted around the falling corpse and struck at them with quick swings. They at last lurched into motion, raising their swords to block my onslaught.

A short distance to my right, Eve was fighting two constables on her own. Even when outnumbered, she was a force to be reckoned with and held her own perfectly. But I didn't want to risk her getting overrun, so I stopped pressing my own attacks long enough to twist my sword in my palm and brush my hands together.

Magic flared to life inside me, and I summoned a spear that I shot at one of her attackers. The sharp point hit the back of his head, passing clean through before lodging itself in the wall behind. Eve flicked a quick look at me before slamming her sword towards the other guy.

The moment of inattention to my own fight had allowed the white boots around me to recover, and I had to leap aside as a blade cleaved through the air where my ribcage was supposed to be. Twisting with the motion, I spun and slammed my sword into another attacker's neck. The force of it took his head clean off his shoulders.

Cries of rage and sorrow rose from the others.

Outside on the street, a gigantic torrent of fire tore through the air. The heat of it was so intense that I could feel it from all the way through the broken windows.

Constables screamed in panic, issuing orders to pull back.

My mouth twisted in a vicious smile as Shinji stalked past, his face a mask of silent fury as he positioned himself in front of our door and shot another massive wave of flames towards them. By all hell, he really was incredible when he went all out.

However, going all out meant that he was draining his energy faster. He had done it to force the white boots back and buy us time to get back out onto the street. We really had to finish this fight right now and join him, otherwise he would weaken himself too much trying to hold them all back on his own.

I flicked a glance around the now ruined tavern.

Eve was still fighting the other guy a short distance from me, and three of the constables who had attacked me still lived. In addition to that, two more people had just barely managed to dive in through the door before Shinji launched his attack. They were rolling to their feet right now, so I still had a few seconds.

Six people left to kill.

This should be quick.

I swung my sword at the three guys in front of me right as a gasp echoed through the room.

Metal clanged as my blade met two swords, and I risked a glance towards the gasp.

The two people who had just rolled to their feet had stopped dead in their tracks. Their mouths were open as they stared at Eve in shock. The guy she had been fighting twitched with lightning and toppled to the ground. His eyes fluttered while his body jerked, so he must still be alive.

Then Eve looked up, and her mouth dropped open slightly too.

While dodging another blow and delivering one of my own, I cast another quick look at the two people.

Both of them were wearing white leather uniforms. One was a tall man with blond hair and blue eyes. The other a

woman with dark curly hair and dark eyes.

Realization hit me.

I recognized them from that fight inside the watchtower on the north side. These were two of Eve's former colleagues. Frank and Jamila.

The three white boots before me had thankfully also gotten distracted by the gasp and the sudden stillness to the fight behind them, so I used the second of grace to ram my sword through the closest guy's chest. A huff ripped from his throat. I yanked my sword out. He coughed blood onto his white uniform while the other two snapped their attention back to me.

Red flames washed past the windows again as Shinji poured more fire down the street to keep the tide of white boots at bay. I had to get out there. Now.

Dodging a blow aimed at my back, I twisted down and around before driving my sword towards the man who had swung it. It speared him through the gut.

Frank and Jamila spun around at the sound, both of them bringing their hands together as if to attack me. But before they could, Eve shot a blast of water at them. A wet slapping sound echoed between the walls as it hit them in the back, making them stumble a step forward.

"Eyes on me," she taunted.

Incredulity pulsed across their faces as they whirled back towards her.

I feinted a strike to the left and instead brushed my palms together. A spike shot up from the floor underneath my final attacker, impaling him. He grunted as the metal speared through him, and then slumped down on the ground when I retracted the spike.

With a questioning look in Eve's direction, I started towards the door.

Shinji was still trying to hold back the mass of white boots closing in on both sides. They were so close to him now that I



could see their white and gold leather uniforms through the broken windows. I had to help him.

I had just placed one foot on the threshold when a loud cry split the cold air outside.

“FALL BACK!”

Jerking to a halt in the doorway, I stared in shock as the constables suddenly stopped attacking and instead began raising shields to protect themselves while they quickly retreated.

*What the hell?*

Why were they retreating? They had the advantage. If they had just continued pushing a little while longer, we might actually have been overrun. So why would they fall back now?

“Shinji,” I said.

The fire mage turned towards me. I could see the exhaustion plain as day on his face, but he still said, “I’m fine.”

He turned watchful eyes back to the retreating white boots, to make sure that this wasn’t some kind of elaborate ruse, while I slid my attention back to the scene inside the tavern.

Jamila and Frank were standing a little closer to me than they had been before, as if they had tried to make for the door when the call to retreat rose, and then realized that I was blocking it. Eve was standing where she had been earlier, lightning crackling around her hands.

Her two colleagues cast panicked glances between her, me, and Shinji out on the street. No matter which way they looked at it, they were trapped in here unless we let them go.

“I’d heard rumors, but I didn’t want to believe it,” Jamila blurted out, staring at Eve with wide eyes. “You’re a dark mage sympathizer.”

“I’ve always been a dark mage sympathizer,” Eve replied, a vicious smirk curling her lips. “And I’m not the only one.”

Lightning continued dancing in her hands, casting flickering light over her features. It made her look like a vengeful demon.

Jamila opened her mouth to reply, but then she just swallowed, as if she suddenly didn't know what to say. Someone else spoke, though.

“Did you kill Chief?” Frank said, though it sounded more like an accusation than a question.

“Chief is dead?” Eve jerked back in shock and the lightning in her palms fizzled out, as if she was too stunned to keep the grip on her magic. “What? How? When?”

It took great effort not to grin at the utter bafflement in her voice even though she, more than anyone, was aware of the Chief Constable's murder.

“Last night,” Jamila answered, suddenly finding her voice again. And it was a sharp, bitter voice. “As for how, you tell me. Seeing as you or your dark mage friends must have been the one to kill him.”

“Seriously, Jamila?” Eve threw her arm out in frustration and stabbed a hand in the direction of the river. “How are we supposed to have gotten to the north side when you have a fucking siege blockade there?”

Jamila and Frank exchanged a glance, and I could tell that both of them were forced to grudgingly admit that she was right. I almost snickered. *Fools.*

“Yes, well,” Jamila huffed, clearly frustrated that her theory hadn't panned out. “We haven't even been able to investigate his death properly because everyone has to be here, fighting you. And *that* is your fault at least.”

A sharp smile spread across Eve's lips. “Is that really the tone you want to take with me right now?”

I glanced out at Shinji. He was still keeping an eye on the eerily silent street, but I could tell that he was clenching his jaw against the exhaustion that must be washing over him after an entire day of fighting. We needed to get going so that I

could check on the other teams, and also figure out why the white boots had suddenly retreated.

“Eve,” I said before her former colleagues could answer. Keeping my expression neutral, I slid my gaze back to her. “We should go. Do you want to kill them or let them go?”

Panic flashed across Frank and Jamila’s faces as they whipped around to stare between the two of us. It appeared as though, just because Eve was there, they had forgotten that they were in the presence of their most heartless enemy.

Instead of replying, Eve just cocked her head and studied them for a few seconds.

All color drained from their faces.

“Eve, wait, I...” Jamila began before trailing off.

Eve let out an amused huff and then flicked her wrist. “Get out before I change my mind.”

They scrambled towards the door only to find me still blocking it. I stared them down for another moment before slowly stepping aside. Swallowing, they edged around me. Then they sprinted down the street. Shinji arched an eyebrow at me in silent question. I shook my head. If Eve wanted them alive, then there was no need to throw a fireball at them from behind.

A moment later, the white boot that Eve had knocked out with a lightning bolt jumped to his feet and sprinted out the door as well. I rolled my eyes but didn’t kill him either. Instead, I just slid my sword back in its scabbard.

“We’re heading back to the rendezvous point,” I said once he was gone. But I turned towards the sturdy wooden counter at the back of the tavern instead of the door. “First, I just need to do one more thing.”

Broken glass crunched underneath my boots as I strode across the ruined tavern until I reached the counter.

“Get up,” I ordered.

Another whimper came from behind the bar.

Two seconds passed.

Then an old woman with graying hair rose from where she had been hiding behind the counter. Her legs shook and her hands trembled even worse as she braced herself on the worn countertop while scanning the room. Tears streamed down her face as she took in the destruction.

“My tavern,” she pressed out, her voice breaking on the words. “My life’s work. Ruined.”

I ground my teeth. This was why I had wanted to avoid an all-out war on the south side. It was incredibly bad for business.

“How am I going to afford the repairs for...” She stared at the room, heartbreak clear on her face. “For *this*.”

“You’re not,” I said, keeping my voice full of authority. “You’re going to write up a list of everything that needs to be repaired, and then you’re going to send it to my Court. I will take care of it.”

Her eyes were round and her mouth dropped open as she turned to stare at me. “Y-you—”

“Tell the others to do the same.” Before she could answer, I stabbed a hand towards the door. “Now, you were supposed to have evacuated last night. Go there now. Before the white boots attack again.”

She blinked at me, her mouth working up and down as if she wanted to say something. But she did as commanded and stumbled around the counter. However, before continuing to the door, she stopped in front of me and clasped my hand in both of her wrinkled ones.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

Warmth spread through my chest at the sincerity in her eyes, but I just jerked my chin down in a nod of acknowledgement. After all, I still had my reputation to maintain.

Once the old lady had left, I heaved a deep sigh and raked a hand through my hair. Small pieces of glass fell out, clinking

down on the floor.

“Fucking hell,” I said to the ceiling.

Then I turned back to Eve.

The wicked little spitfire was grinning at me with a knowing look on her features.

I shot her a pointed look. “Not a word.”

She chuckled. “You really are such a softie.”

“What did I just tell you?”

“No idea. I never listen to you.”

“Don’t I know it.”

She laughed again while I let out a huff that was half amusement, half exasperation.

“Come on,” I said, starting towards the door. “We need to figure out why they retreated.”

We had only just walked across the threshold and reached Shinji when another person came sprinting up the street towards us. My hands drifted closer together before I realized that it was Anna, one of my runners.

She skidded to a halt in front of me, her brown hair flying around her face at the sudden stop. I almost snapped, *what is it?* But it wasn’t her fault that I was tired and annoyed, so I bit my tongue while she sucked in a deep breath.

“Christian White has been spotted,” she gasped out between breaths. “His army is one day out.”

I released a long exhale.

So that was why the white boots had retreated.

“Alright,” I said to Anna. “Pull everyone back to the Court.”

She bobbed her head and then took off again.

Eve, Shinji, and I exchanged a glance.

“Well, I guess the real war is finally about to start,” Eve commented.

Shinji's dark eyes searched my face. "What do we do now, sir?"

Cold fall winds whirled down the street, ripping at my clothes and hair as I turned to gaze towards the north side. A wicked smile slid across my mouth.

"Now, we wait for them to raise the white flag."

## CHAPTER 32



Hushed silence spread through the tent like a plague as we strode inside. The white tent flaps fluttered behind us, falling shut, as we moved farther into the surprisingly well-furnished space.

The tent had been set up right in the middle of the Bridge of Life, and pale wooden chairs were positioned on both sides, facing each other across the empty stretch in the center. There were three rows, with ten chairs in each row, on both sides of the tent. Our side was naturally empty. The north's side was not.

I scanned the faces of the people seated there. The entire Parliament of Malgrave was in attendance. All twenty-five men and women who made up the democratically elected parliament were sitting straight-backed in the chairs and watching us with a mixture of anger and panic.

The white flag had been raised within the hour, along with a request for a meeting to discuss a truce. I could tell from the looks on their faces that the parliament wasn't at all happy with this turn of events, but they were also terrified of what would happen if White attacked the city.

My gaze glided over the constables standing behind the rows of chairs. Frank and Jamila were there, standing by the pale tent wall.

Ulric was not.

Because Ulric Smith was sitting in a chair on the front row, wearing a white leather uniform with straps that marked him

as the new Chief Constable of Malgrave.

I locked eyes with him. “So, Chief Anderson died and you became the new chief. How... convenient.”

Ulric’s eyes flooded with pain, presumably at seeing me in the company of Levi Arden. But he didn’t reply to my comment. Someone else did, though.

Anger flashed in the green eyes of a parliament member on the front row as he snapped, “Silence, you traitorous—”

“Careful how you finish that sentence,” Levi cut off, sliding his ruthless stare to the man who had spoken. “I’ve just had my boots cleaned, and I would hate for them to be covered in blood again so soon.”

Several people flicked their gazes down to Levi’s boots. I almost laughed.

Levi just kept that cold, nonchalant expression on his face as he sauntered up to the chair in the middle of our front row and dropped into it. Tyler and I took the seats on his right and left, with Shinji and Chris claiming the ones on our other side. The other twenty-five chairs remained empty.

From across the gap that had been left in the middle of the tent, the parliament members and the constables all watched us with various expressions blowing across their features. In total, there had to be something like fifty of them. And five of us. Some of the northsiders looked like they thought we were mad for showing up with so few people. But just like Levi had said when he issued the order, it was a statement. *We are not afraid of you.*

An unexpected burst of heat seared through my stomach as I stole a glance at Levi while adjusting my weight on the chair.

Levi was sitting on that plain wooden chair in the same way he sat on his throne. Leaned back, arms draped over the armrests, and legs spread wide. Effortless. Arrogant. And exuding power. Everything about him screamed ruthless dominance and unquestionable authority.

“So, you’ve raised the white flag of surrender.” Levi flicked his gaze up and down in a very degrading once-over,



and then flashed a cruel smile. “I’m listening.”

“It was *not* a flag of surrender!” the brown-haired woman in the middle spluttered, looking very indignant. “It was a temporary truce so that we could have this meeting and discuss much more important matters.”

“And what would those matters be, Miss...?”

She jutted her chin out. “Parliament Member Nikita Dreary.”

“*Dreary?*” A slow smile spread across Levi’s lips.

Her cheeks and neck flushed bright red, and she huffed out something incomprehensible.

Since everyone else was only looking between her and Levi, I assumed that she had been chosen as the spokesperson for this meeting. As opposed to city states like Eldar, Malgrave didn’t have a Chancellor who led the parliament. All twenty-five parliament members held equal power, so they needed to choose someone to lead during each session or meeting. Though why they had chosen someone as easily flustered as Nikita Dreary was beyond me.

“Well, *Miss Dreary,*” Levi said, deliberately disregarding her proper title. “You wanted to talk.” He lifted his broad shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. “So, talk.”

It took her a few more seconds to compose herself. At last, she cleared her throat and sat up straighter, apparently choosing to ignore Levi’s slight. “Christian White, the worldwalker from the north, is on his way here with an army.”

“I know.”

She started slightly, as if she hadn’t expected him to also be aware of that. Then she gave her head a short shake before continuing. “Yes, well, then you understand why we have called this meeting.”

“Enlighten me.”

“We need to postpone our internal hostilities until the external threat that the worldwalker poses has been neutralized.”

“Or I could join forces with him and wipe out the entire north side.”

Deafening silence fell like a death shroud over the tent. It was so intense that I could almost feel it vibrating in the air.

Half of the parliament had blanched visibly as they stared at Levi in open-mouthed shock and horror.

“What?” Nikita Dreary at last managed to press out.

“Christian White and I have no issues,” Levi lied smoothly. “I gave him another healer last time he was here. He and I are good. So I assume he’s here because he wants a larger area of influence.”

“He would be encroaching on *your* area of influence.”

“No. We’ll just split the city between us. I’ll keep the south and give him the north.”

She slowly shook her head. “You wouldn’t.”

“Are you under the impression that I have a conscience? Or that I give any fucks at all about your side of the river?”

Worry flickered in her brown eyes, and she opened her mouth but then just closed it again.

“I can make a deal with him and help him wipe you out,” Levi said, his voice as unyielding as the metal he commanded. “Or I can make a deal with you and help you wipe him out. Your choice.”

Clothes rustled faintly as the Parliament of Malgrave twisted in their seats to exchange nervous glances.

“What do you want?” Dreary asked carefully as she shifted her attention back to the King of Metal.

“The south side. Formally cede it to me.”

“Absolutely not!” she and several more people blurted out at the same time as others snapped, “Out of the question!”

Noise broke out inside the tent as all the parliament members started speaking at once. Ulric was on his feet, trying

to calm several of them down while the constables along the walls did the same.

I flicked a quick glance at Levi. The corner of his mouth twitched in a barely perceptible hint of amusement as he watched the chaos unfold. Then that merciless expression was back on his face as he quickly summoned a small sheet of metal and slammed it into the stone bridge below our feet.

The bang it produced cut through the noise like an axe.

Magic flared to life from all the constables, and they fell into battle stances, ready to defend the parliament members. But Levi had already let the metal fade out again.

Stunned surprise and confusion flitted from face to face as the parliament tore themselves from their heated discussion and returned their attention to Levi. The constables kept their magic up, suspicion swirling in their eyes.

Levi just sat there on his chair like it was a throne, staring them all down with eyes like steel. “In all your years of hating me and hunting me and condemning everything I do, you seem to have forgotten the most fundamental truth about me.”

Hushed silence once again spread through the tent as the people who had been standing up settled down in their seats again. After a nod from Ulric, the constables let their magic fade out.

Once everyone had their attention firmly on Levi again, he swept his hard stare over them all before he continued.

“The most *important* thing about me.” Then he paused, making sure that everyone was listening. “There is nothing I won’t do to get what I want. No lines I won’t cross.” His tone sharpened. “I want the south side and I am going to get it. How I get it is up to you.”

“But—” Dreary began.

“You either give it to me, and in exchange, I will protect you from White,” Levi interrupted. “Or I will join forces with White and then we will slaughter our way through the north side until the streets run red with blood and you’re on your

knees begging for mercy and pleading for permission to surrender.”

She swallowed. Visibly.

“I don’t care one way or the other, because the end result is the same. I get the south side either way.” Levi swept merciless eyes over the now very pale-looking parliament members. “So, here is what it comes down to. I can either be your saving grace. Or your worst nightmare. Choose.”

Once again, everyone started talking all at once. I stifled a huff of amusement. Then I slid my gaze to Levi, and fire seared through my veins at the pure command that pulsed from his entire being. Fuck, he was so hot when he executed these kinds of power plays.

As if he could feel my gaze, Levi smirked but kept his eyes on the arguing parliament members.

“Quiet!” Dreary called, holding up her hands. She was on her feet now, trying to get a handle on the situation. “Quiet. We need to...” Trailing off, she turned to Levi. “Can we have a few minutes to discuss among ourselves?”

Levi flicked his wrist in a nonchalant motion that said, *go ahead*.

Dreary gave him a curt nod before turning to Ulric. “Chief Smith. Would you...?”

He immediately ordered the other constables to form a temporary barrier between us and the parliament members so that they could discuss more privately. I watched him, but he didn’t look in my direction. In fact, he hadn’t looked at me at all since that first pained look he had given me when I strolled inside the tent shoulder to shoulder with Levi Arden. Since he had personally vouched for me all these years, he no doubt wanted to put as much distance between us as possible now. Literally and metaphorically.

While Levi turned to say something to Tyler, I rose to my feet and drifted over to where Frank and Jamila were standing.

They tensed when I approached but didn’t summon magic. Ulric was still looking everywhere except in my direction.

What a fool.

“You should sit down,” Jamila said when I stopped in front of her and Frank.

Ignoring her, I kept my eyes on Frank as I said, “Look, I know we’re on opposite sides now. Or I suppose we always have been, but now you know that we are.”

Frank’s pale brows furrowed, but he didn’t say anything.

“Anyway,” I continued. “You were there for me when I was demoted and reprimanded and you told me how you supported me against Captain Wright, so I just have one last bit of friendly advice.”

“Don’t show my face on the south side?” Frank said, a bite to his voice.

I chuckled softly. “No. In fact, you’re welcome to the south side anytime.”

He blinked in surprise, but before he could say anything, I went on. Though, I lowered my voice for this part. I could see Jamila listening in even though she was pretending to be uninterested in our conversation.

“In repayment for moments of unexpected kindness, my last advice to you is this... Watch your back around him.” I nodded towards Ulric. “You don’t know him like I do.”

Frank frowned in confusion. And both his and Jamila’s gaze darted towards Ulric.

While they were both looking in the other direction, I slipped back to my seat. Levi met my gaze when I returned, but said nothing. I sat down, shifting my attention back to the still arguing parliament members.

They kept that up for another few minutes before Nikita Dreary apparently had enough. With a quick word to Ulric, she ordered the constables back to their places by the wall so that we could once more see each other clearly. However, she didn’t sit down again.

“This is a very big decision to make,” she said, locking eyes with Levi. Frustration was evident on her face as she

blew out a sharp breath. “And not one we can make just like *that*.” She snapped her fingers to emphasize the point. Drawing herself up to her full height, she raised her chin. “We need some time to discuss and think this over. Privately.”

Levi pushed to his feet.

It sent a ripple through the crowd of northsiders, and several of them flinched or even edged a step back. I suppressed a wicked smile as Tyler, Chris, Shinji, and I rose from our seats as well.

“Take all the time you need,” Levi said.

Taking a step to the side, he moved as if to make his way out of the tent. Then he stopped and turned back to face them. His gray eyes glinted like polished steel.

“Well, maybe not all the time.” The King of Metal smiled like the villain he was. “Seeing as how White and his army will be here tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER 33



It took them two hours of no doubt epic arguing before they sent us a message, asking us to return to the tent on the bridge. I knew that this would be a terribly hard decision for them to make. Relinquishing the south side wasn't something they would've even considered doing under any other circumstances. But right now, they were desperate. They, like everyone else on the continent of Valda, knew that no one stood against a worldwalker and lived. And especially not when he had also brought an army.

Well, *almost* no one anyway. Because *we* were going to pull this whole insane scheme off and take the south side and then kill a worldwalker.

Desperation, anger, and bitter resentment hung like a sour-tasting cloud inside the tent when the five of us strode through the opening. Ulric Smith's gaze flicked briefly to Eve before promptly fixing on me instead. He narrowed his eyes, staring at me as if I had corrupted her. Maybe I had. At least partly, anyway. But being a villain really did suit her.

Wood creaked as I dropped into the chair in the middle of the front row. Eve and Tyler took up position on my sides, and Shinji and Chris sat down beside them. The parliament members and the new Chief Constable were all already seated. Several people ground their teeth and outright glared at me while others just looked depressed. Or perhaps frightened.

"I assume you have reached a decision," I drawled, arching an expectant eyebrow.

“We have,” Parliament Member Nikita Dreary pressed out, her voice tight.

“And?”

“And,” she echoed, her brown eyes flashing at my insolent tone. “If you help us protect Malgrave from the worldwalker...” She paused, looking at me pointedly as if waiting for an answer even though she hadn’t asked a question.

I nodded, signaling agreement to the term.

“And if you swear to leave the north side alone, to never attack or do anything to cause harm to the north side itself or the people who live there, and to never try to conquer it...” She paused again.

“I have no interest in the north side,” I said, leveling a commanding stare on her. “As long as you don’t cause problems, or in any way try to interfere with my rule on the south side, I will leave you to govern the north side in any way you see fit.”

She nodded, apparently satisfied. “And as long as citizens from the north side are still permitted to freely visit the south side whenever they want...”

“Naturally.”

“Then yes.”

A smile dripping with challenge spread across my mouth. “Yes, what?”

For a few seconds, Nikita Dreary only ground her teeth together while staring daggers at me. I just held her gaze, waiting. I had worked my entire life for this, so I was damn well going to force her to spell it out. She blew out a sharp breath and then raised her chin.

“In exchange for you upholding the previously stated terms...” She paused and worked her jaw as if her next words were physically painful to speak aloud. “We will formally cede the south side of Malgrave to you.”



Brilliant sparkling victory pulsed through my whole soul, but I didn't show the relief or the giddiness I felt.

Instead, I kept a cruel smile on my lips and a wicked glint in my eyes. "I want to hear you say *please*."

Fury flashed in Dreary's eyes. "You—"

"You want me to make this deal with you instead of striking one with White?" Spreading my legs a little wider, I dragged an arrogant gaze over the fuming parliament members before giving them a degrading once-over. "Say please."

They looked like they would rather strangle me. Dreary gnashed her teeth. Then she forced in a deep breath.

Her eyes were locked on mine as she finally said, "Please."

I chuckled. It was a smug and vicious sound.

Dreary clenched her jaw.

"Good," I said, keeping that edge of command in my voice. "And I want it public. Summon all your fancy people to the Main Square on the south side in one hour. We will sign the formal document there for everyone to see."

"Fine," she bit out.

"Well then, Parliament Member Nikita Dreary," I said, using her proper title this time. "You have yourselves a deal."

Several people let out whooshing breaths of relief. Most of the white boots along the walls, though, stared at me, and Eve, with contempt. I flashed them a smile that was sharp enough to make some of them flinch.

A ripple went through them all as I abruptly stood up. Eve and my top three did the same.

"One hour," I said to the parliament members as I started towards the exit. "Don't be late."

Cool winds washed over me, filling my lungs with the scent of the river, as I stepped back out into the open air.

The moment we were outside, wide grins broke out on Shinji, Chris, and Tyler's faces. Eve chuckled and shot me a

knowing look.

*“I want to hear you say please?”* she said, echoing my words from inside. She let out another wicked chuckle. “Ah, the looks on their faces...”

A laugh spilled from my own lips as I lifted my shoulders in a show of mock innocence. “Half the fun of winning is rubbing it in people’s faces.”

Eve’s eyes glittered with mischief. But before she could say anything, we reached the spot where Anna and most of my other runners had been waiting.

“Spread the word.” I flashed them all a smile. “Anyone who wants to watch the parliament formally cede the south side to me, be at the Main Square in an hour.”

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Apparently, most of south Malgrave wanted to watch that.

An hour after we left the bridge, the entire Main Square was so packed with people that I had to order some of my battle mages to clear a path to the raised dais so that the parliament members would even be able to get through.

Nervous-looking northsiders in fancy dresses and suits stood pressed together to the left of the dais. They formed a somewhat sizeable group, but the vast majority of the crowd was still from the south side. People watched from every window of the surrounding buildings and filled every side street leading towards the square.

I soaked in the excited buzz that hung over the entire area. It spread through me, making my soul thrum in response.

This was it.

This was the day I finally accomplished the feat I had spent over a decade working towards.

Sunset was close now. The slanting sun cast orange and red light across the city, glinting against the windows that had

been thrown open and painting the buildings in rich colors. I drew in a deep breath.

Next to me, Eve brushed the back of her hand against mine. I glanced over at her. A smile ghosted over her lips before the serious mask returned to her face. Tyler, Shinji, and Chris were there on the platform with me as well. Though they were mostly keeping an eye on the crowd.

A ripple went through the sea of people, and they all turned towards the road to the left. I followed their gazes.

There, the parliament of Malgrave at last became visible. The twenty-five members walked with their backs straight and chins held high, but I could feel the tension radiating from them all the way across the square.

People turned to watch as they strode through the path that my battle mages had cleared. And for almost a minute, no one said anything. Then a feminine voice called across the dead silent square.

“Parliament Member Trinell! Good to see you again, sir. Should we meet up at our pleasure house tonight as usual?”

That broke the spell. Laughter spread through the crowd as the parliament member in question flushed a deep scarlet. I grinned. Damn, I fucking loved the south side.

More calls went out to other parliament members who had apparently also visited one of the many sinful establishments on this side of the river. They might act all high and mighty with their morals, but when it all came down to it, they were just as desperate to escape their boring lives as everyone else.

With a wicked smile on my mouth, I watched as they closed the final distance.

Nikita Dreary kept her chin raised as she strode onto the platform along with the other parliament members. Eve and my people backed up slightly, giving us room at the table that had been set up on the edge of the dais. Warmth spread through me at the gesture. Without me even having to say anything, Eve had understood that this was something I needed to do on my own.

The parliament members all squeezed in together on the right side of the table. From where I stood on the left, I ran mocking eyes over them.

“Not as unfamiliar with the south side as you pretend to be, huh?” I taunted.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Dreary muttered as she took her place at the front of the group.

After a snap of her fingers, someone handed her a gilded file. Paper rustled as she opened it and pulled out two ornate documents. The script at the top of the paper had been made with gold ink while the rest was black. The gold letters read: *Formal Cession of Land*. Excitement pulsed through me at the sight of it.

“I assume you want to check them first?” she said, and handed them to me before I even had time to reply.

Taking the contracts, I read through both of them to make sure that they contained only the terms we had discussed and agreed to. They did. I hadn’t really expected anything else, but I never signed anything unless I knew exactly what it said.

“Approved,” I said as I placed the two documents on the table before us.

Silence spread across the crowd again. It felt as if the entire square was holding its breath.

Nikita Dreary shifted as if to reach for one of the ornate pens that had been placed on the table as well.

“No,” I said, quietly enough that only she could hear. “First, you’re going to announce what you are signing. You are going to tell everyone here that you formally cede the south side to me.”

“I want you to know, *Mr. Arden*,” she said through a fake smile while adding a slight hint of mockery into that honorific, “That if there was any other way, I would just hang you and be done with it.”

A dark laugh full of threats dripped from my lips. “Careful now. I could still make that deal with White instead.”

“You really are a ruthless villain.”

“I know.” I fixed her with a merciless stare. “Now, do as you’re fucking told.”

Her eyes flashed with indignation and fury. But there was nothing she could do about it. I held all the power in this negotiation, and she knew it. So in the end, she just dragged in a deep breath and turned to face the crowd.

“As the chosen spokesperson for the democratically elected Parliament of Malgrave, I make this declaration with the full support of my peers and my fellow citizens,” she called across the square. “Let it be known that from this day forward, the Parliament of Malgrave gives up all rights to govern all of the city’s areas south of the River of Souls. We hereby formally cede the south side of Malgrave to Levi Arden.”

Shock and amazement pulsed through the silent crowd, as if they hadn’t truly expected that they would actually do it, as Nikita Dreary bent forward and picked up the pen. I swore that even the people in the back heard it scratching against the paper as she signed the formal cession contract.

Once she was done, I picked up the other pen and did the same.

Then I straightened.

And a deafening roar split the air.

All the southsiders in the audience raised their arms and cheered and whistled in joy and excitement. Because they all knew what this meant. An end to the hostilities. An end to a war that had plagued the south side for far too long. And finally, a chance at peace where they could simply live and love and fuck and drink and dance without having to worry about losing their lives or their businesses in a battle that had nothing to do with them.

Or it would be, at least. As soon as we had killed the worldwalker heading for us with his army right at this very moment.

I slid my gaze to Dreary. “Make sure the entire constable force is ready and waiting on the fields outside Malgrave tomorrow morning. Christian White and his army will be here before midday, and we need to set up our position before that.”

She gave me a curt nod.

Then she and the rest of the parliament stalked down from the dais without another word. The other northsiders quickly followed suit. I watched them move through the path my battle mages had cleared until they were swallowed up by the crowd.

The setting sun painted red and purple streaks across the sea of people as they all turned as one to stare up at me.

“Kneel before the Dark Mage King of Malgrave,” Tyler bellowed across the square.

And then he, along with Shinji and Chris, lowered themselves to one knee. Damn, I really needed to give that man a raise.

Clothes rustled as the entire square dropped to their knees as well. Next to Tyler, Eve watched me with mischief sparkling in her eyes. But she understood the importance of public perception, so she sank down to one knee as well. Her sly smile, though, promised that she expected me to make that up to her later. Privately. And very thoroughly.

I flashed her a quick grin in acknowledgement before turning back to fully face the packed square.

Every single person was on their knees, head bowed in respect and submission.

Wicked glee and incredible relief and smug fucking victory thrummed inside my soul, making my heart pound, as I stared out at the sea of kneeling people.

The south of Malgrave was mine.

Formally.

Fully.

Completely mine.

I had finally accomplished what I swore to myself that I would do back when I was locked in a wooden box, desperately clawing at the walls in the darkness and begging for mercy.

*I* had become the one in control. The one who ruled. The one who people knelt before and begged for help from. I held all the power. And no one would ever take it from me again.

But first, we just needed to handle the even bigger threat.

A pissed-off worldwalker and his army.

## CHAPTER 34



“Well, Dark Mage King of Malgrave,” I said, my voice teasing, as Levi strode out of his bathroom and into the bedroom. “I believe you have some kneeling to do.”

Turning towards me, he opened his mouth as if to respond. But then his gaze reached me, and whatever he had been about to say died on his tongue. He stared at me, his mouth still slightly open. Since he had just come out of the shower, he was only wearing a towel wrapped around his hips. A bulge quickly formed at the front of it. I smirked.

I was standing by the foot of his bed, casually leaning back against the black and gold metal bedframe. And I was completely naked.

Levi’s gray eyes burned like fiery steel as he raked his gaze over my body. He licked his lips. It sent a thrill down my spine. His eyes found mine again.

“Yes.” He pulled the towel from his hips, letting it flutter to the floor. “I believe I do.”

Heat pooled in my belly at the sight of his naked body. And I momentarily forgot what I had been about to say as I dragged my gaze over the sharp ridges of his lethal muscles and down to his hard cock. *Damn, maybe I should skip all this teasing and go straight to the part where he fucks my brains out.*

Then Levi reached me, and I snapped back into the present.



Arching an eyebrow, I gave him a surprised look. “You’re not even going to try to smooth-talk your way out of this? Kneeling isn’t usually your style.”

“Normally, no.” He wrapped his hand around my jaw as he leaned closer. “But for you, spitfire, I will always kneel.”

A ripple went through my body. At his touch. At the look in his eyes. And most of all, at his words.

He flashed me a sly smile before drawing his hand down my throat. My skin prickled with pleasure as he caressed my collarbones before sliding his hand down my chest and stomach. And while his hand traveled lower, so did he.

His eyes, burning with lust, remained locked on mine as he slowly lowered himself to his knees before me. My heart skipped a beat.

“You like this, don’t you, spitfire?” he mused while drawing his hand over my hip and down my thigh. “Watching me kneel at your feet?”

“Yes,” I replied, my voice coming out breathless as he slipped his hand down to my inner thigh. I slid my fingers through his dark silken hair before drawing them along his strong jaw. “Almost as much as I like it when you dominate me.”

A sly smile played over his lips. “Almost?”

I held his gaze and grinned back. “Almost.”

He leaned down and kissed the inside of my thigh, making a shudder course through me. “Then I know exactly what I will do once I’m done atoning on my knees.”

Tilting my head back, I let out a moan.

Levi slid his hand around my thigh, towards the back of it, and then lifted my left leg up. I returned my gaze to him and slipped my hand back into his hair, gripping it harder for balance. His wicked mouth curved in a smile as he kissed the inside of my thigh again before draping my leg over his shoulder.

My breathing grew uneven.

He adjusted his position. My heart thumped in my chest as I drew in another shuddering breath in anticipation.

A gasp tore from my lips as he drew his tongue along my pussy. I tightened my grip on his hair.

“You’ve suddenly gone very quiet, spitfire.”

He traced his tongue around my clit, making me swallow down a whimper. His warm breath danced over my throbbing pussy.

“But I *will* hear you moan my name,” he finished, echoing my words from back in the tavern.

Fire seared through my veins as he took my clit into his mouth, rolling it between his lips and then giving it a gentle nip. My fingers curled harder in his hair. He drew his tongue along my pussy again, pausing at my entrance. I sucked in ragged breaths as he pushed his tongue inside.

A whimper spilled from my lips.

The villain before me let out a dark chuckle that made his breath once again caress my sensitive skin. I shifted slightly, adjusting my hips against the sweet torture. Levi’s hand quickly found my hip, holding me immobile as his tongue slid back to my clit. My heart pounded in my chest as he played with it.

Long teasing strokes were exchanged for gentle nips and then firm lips.

My mind spun.

Pleasure thrummed inside me as Levi dragged his tongue around my clit again before plunging it back inside me. I gasped. Throwing out my other hand, I placed it on his broad shoulder and dug my fingers into his muscles as he pushed me towards an orgasm.

“Levi,” I panted.

He licked and sucked mercilessly, sending me tumbling towards that sweet edge.

“Levi.” This time it was a moan. “I—”

But I never found out what I had been about to say, because blinding pleasure exploded behind my eyes. It shot through my body like lightning. I gasped in desperate breaths as I came hard with Levi's mouth still on me. He tightened his grip on my hip and thigh, holding me steady while the orgasm swept through my limbs.

Once it ebbed out, I realized that I was still gripping his hair hard. While drawing in a ragged breath, I pried my fingers from his now mussed hair and slowly lifted my leg off his shoulder. Only when my foot was back firmly on the ground did Levi take his steadying hands from my thigh and hip.

Still kneeling naked on the floor, he tilted his head back and met my gaze. "May I get off my knees, Dark Mage Queen of my Heart?"

Sparkles danced inside my chest at the nickname playing on his Dark Mage King of Malgrave title, and at the way his eyes glittered with mischief when he said it.

I drew my fingers along his jaw. "Yes, you may."

He rose to his full height, his muscular body once again towering before me. That wicked mischief still glittered in his eyes as he slid his hand down my throat and towards my chest.

"Good," he said. And then he flashed me a smile that was downright villainous. "My turn."

A yelp slipped past my lips as he used the hand that he had against my chest to give me a firm shove. Losing my balance, I toppled backwards over the bedframe and landed back first on the mattress. It bounced underneath me.

Black silk sheets crinkled as I scooted backwards, aiming for the headboard. But I had only made it to the center of the bed when Levi made his move.

Brushing his palms together, he summoned his magic while watching me with that wicked smile on his lethally handsome face.

Bands of black and gold metal shot up from the bedframe and snaked around my wrists and ankles. With smug satisfaction on his face, Levi pulled at the metal with his

magic to move my arms and legs until I was fully spreadeagled on his silken sheets. Then the metal hardened, leaving me trapped like that.

“Oh, you really do play dirty, don’t you?” I teased, shooting him a look through narrowed eyes.

His lips tipped upwards in a smirk. “Is there any other way to play?”

I let out an amused huff while he slowly climbed onto the bed as well. Swinging a leg over my body, he settled his weight firmly on my hips. His eyes darkened with desire as he ran them over my body.

“Look at you...” He drew two fingers down the center of my chest. “So completely at my mercy.”

My skin prickled at his featherlight touch.

He cocked his head, the image of delicious trouble. “Should I make you squirm?” His fingers traced the curve of my breast. “Gasp?” A shudder coursed through me as he teased his fingers around my nipple. “Beg?”

I let out a whimper.

His eyes lit up and a wicked grin curled his lips. “Is that it? You want me to make *you* say please too?”

By the Current and all of hell, yes I did. When he had told them all *I want to hear you say please*, and then spread his legs in that cocky way, I’d had to press my thighs together to stop myself from coming right there. He was so fucking hot when he did shit like that.

“Hmm,” he mused, clearly satisfied by how I trembled and moaned underneath him.

He slid his other hand up the side of my ribs. I sucked in a shuddering breath as he curved it around my tit.

“Why are you gasping already, spitfire?” he teased. “I haven’t even started yet.”

Before I could retort, he drew his thumbs over my nipples. I arched up from the bed. Or tried to, at least. His weight on

my hips, and the metal around my wrists and ankles, were keeping me firmly trapped in place.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I squirmed against the cool silk sheets as Levi traced his thumbs over my nipples again before rolling them between his thumbs and forefingers. My pussy throbbed with need.

I yanked against my restraints as his strong fingers worked my nipples meticulously, *relentlessly*, until I was writhing desperately underneath him. My heart felt like it was going to crack my ribs and break through my chest. I swore my mind was melting from the pent-up tension pulsing inside me.

“Levi,” I gasped.

He continued torturing my nipples, the overwhelming stimulation making it feel as if my brain was going to shatter completely.

“Do you want me to stop teasing you and fuck you properly?” he asked.

Squirming underneath him, I tried to string a full sentence together, but it was impossible. So all I managed to press out was, “Yes.”

As if he had read my mind earlier, he echoed his exact phrase from his power play as he demanded, “I want to hear you say *please*.”

And fuck, I nearly came just from the utter dominance in his voice.

Staring up into his handsome face and those glittering gray eyes, I got ready to plead as I said, “Pl—”

Right then, he pinched my nipples.

Hard.

I gasped instead, my eyes widening as a hint of pain shot through my swollen nipples.

Levi smirked like the fucking villain he was as he rubbed his thumbs over my nipples again, soothing the ache, while taunting, “What was that? I didn’t quite hear you.”

“You arrogant, fucking—”

“Hmm,” he interrupted with devilish delight, and leaned back to brush one hand over my pussy instead.

Lightning shot through me as he teased my throbbing clit instead.

“I suppose I could just continue edging you for another hour then.”

“No!” I blurted out, struggling desperately against the metal shackling me to the bed. “No. Please.”

It made no difference whatsoever. Levi just continued toying with my clit, making the last threads of my sanity fray until they were so close to snapping that I let out a pitiful whine.

“Please,” I begged, throwing my head from side to side as the pleasure inside me mounted to unbearable levels. “Please, please, please.”

His other hand wrapped around my throat, stopping my movements. While continuing to edge me mercilessly, he locked commanding eyes on me. “What was that, spitfire?”

“Please,” I moaned.

“Again.”

“Please.”

“That’s right.” He stopped teasing my clit and instead leaned forward, stealing a possessive kiss from my lips. His gray eyes pulsed with seriousness as he held my gaze. “You’re mine. Your body is mine. Your soul is mine. Your heart is mine. Just like all of me, every shredded part of my bloodstained soul and every wicked part of my blackened heart, is yours. Now and always.”

My heart swelled in my chest. “Mine.”

“Yours. Always.”

He slammed his cock into me. I gasped. Releasing my throat, he brushed his palms together and then flicked his

wrist. The metal that had been keeping me trapped flowed back into the bedframe.

I drew my hands over the hard muscles along Levi's arms while he pulled out slightly and then shoved back in, sheathing himself deeper inside me. His eyes stayed locked on mine. I raked my fingers through his hair and then locked them behind his neck. Our lips clashed in another desperate kiss.

Shifting my hands to his cheeks, I held his face to mine and whispered against his mouth. "You are mine. And I am yours. Wholly. Unequivocally. Yours."

He kissed me so fiercely, so passionately, that I gasped into his mouth.

My fingers slid down to his shoulders and then raked over his back as he started up a dominant pace, thrusting his hips with enough force to make me slide up and down on the silken sheets.

I gripped his biceps hard, holding myself steady as he pounded into me.

Pleasure pulsed inside me like a thunderstorm.

My heart slammed against my ribs as he claimed me so completely that I could barely remember my own name. Only the feeling of his body against mine. His lips on my mouth. His hard cock inside me.

Release crashed over me like a massive wave, sweeping through my limbs and ricocheting through every vein. I cried out in pleasure as Levi came as well. His deep moans joined mine, echoing through the black and gold room.

I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life with Levi doing exactly this. Teasing, fucking, trying to outmaneuver each other with power plays. Living. Levi and I were going to fucking *live* when all this was over. No more pointless battles. No more desperate attempts to stay alive. And no more fucking hiding. After this was done, we were going to live.

First, we just had to pull off one more impossible feat.

Kill a worldwalker.

## CHAPTER 35



Tension rippled through the mass of white boots to my right as Christian White's army at last became visible on the other side of the field. The wave of worry spread through the ranks like rings on water. My experienced battle mages, who flanked me and made up the foremost rows of my south side force, didn't so much as flinch. The medium- and low-level fighters behind them, though, shifted their weight nervously.

Gray clouds covered the heavens, bathing the grasslands in bleak light, as if the sky itself knew that this would be a day of death. Cold fall winds whirled around me as I stared across the field and curled my hand into a fist, vowing that the only death this day would be Christian White's.

As if my thoughts alone had summoned him, the worldwalker's voice rang out across the empty stretch of grass that separated our armies.

"I see that you've come out to surrender before I could even attack the city," he called, the mocking clear in his voice. "How considerate. But you should know that I only accept a formal dark mage surrender."

A formal dark mage surrender, just like the blood oath, was one of the few formal rituals that every dark mage across Valda recognized. And it was humiliating as fuck. It was not something that I had ever done in my entire life, and not something I would ever do. I would rather be tortured to death.



“Funny,” I called back. “I was just about to say the same thing to you.”

“The longer you drag this out, the less merciful I will be.”

“Look around you, White.” I spread my arms even though I knew he couldn’t actually see it from all the way across the field. “You’re outnumbered.”

It was true. With the whole dark mage population on the south side united under my rule, and the addition of Malgrave’s entire constable force, we outnumbered White’s army three to one.

“Numbers don’t matter,” he shouted back. “Not to someone who can—”

Magic exploded across the field.

All the dark mages spreading out to my left and right immediately slapped their hands together and yanked up shields of magic as a torrent of fire and lightning and wind and several other lethal powers shot through the air.

“—worldwalk,” Christian White finished as he suddenly appeared behind my back and rammed his knife into my throat.

It produced a metallic *ding*.

Summoning my magic, I tried to skewer him with a spear. But by the time the spike had shot up from the ground, White was already gone.

He reappeared behind Shinji and rammed his knife into my fire mage’s back.

Yet again, a metallic *ding* sounded.

Confusion, and no small amount of annoyance, flashed across his pale features before he vanished into thin air. He tried the same thing to Tyler, who was busy shooting lightning bolts at the army across the grass while Chris blocked them both with wind magic, though this time he shoved his knife into Tyler’s side.

Another metallic *ding*.

White's lips pulled back in a snarl before he worldwalked away again.

I let out a smug laugh. It really was terribly difficult to stab people when they were wearing metal armor.

Gray light shone over the sea of armor-clad people around me. Every single person in my army, Eve included, was wearing light steel armor that protected their chest and back, neck, and head. It had taken me days to craft that many pieces, but I knew how Christian White operated. If I had just let everyone wear their normal leathers, White would've worldwalked back and forth across the battlefield and simply stabbed people in the back before they had time to notice him. Just like he was trying to do now.

First, I had created standard pieces that had all been the same size. Then, once that very time-consuming part was done, I had simply adjusted each piece of armor to fit the person it was on. For my experienced battle mages, that had been done before we left the city this morning. Everyone else's had been done yesterday, because we simply wouldn't have had time today, which meant that they'd had to sleep in theirs. Not the most comfortable night, certainly. But it was better than bleeding out on a field today.

Frustration shone on White's face as he worldwalked through my people, trying to sneakily stab them while they were busy shooting magic at his army, only to each time be stopped by the sleek metal sheet that fit snugly around their chest inside their clothes. Now that he was this close, he could clearly see the neck and head protection that everyone wore, but he apparently needed to try to stab everyone through the ribs as well, even though it was completely futile.

I tried to anticipate his movements, to throw a sharp spear through his own throat when he materialized, but he was moving quickly and without any clear pattern. It made it impossible to guess where he would show up next. He might not be able to assassinate me or my people, but we weren't able to kill him either.

"Sir," Tyler suddenly said, his voice pulsing with urgency.

Snapping my gaze back towards the army across the field, I found a wave of fire roaring across the grass. It was so massive that it must have been created by simultaneous attacks from every fire mage in White's army.

"Water shields," I called.

"Water shields," Eve echoed farther to the right.

She was standing at the very edge of the first row of dark mages. A position I had tried to talk her out of. But she had insisted that she needed to be close to the constables so that she could make sure they knew what to do as well. At least she was standing with my dark mages instead of those fools in their white and gold uniforms.

Sloshing sounds rippled through the cool air as a mass of overlapping water shields shot towards the wave of fire. They came from both our side and the constables' side, which meant that the white boots had actually listened to Eve. Apparently, survival trumped politics every time.

The magic forces slammed into each other in a violent collision that sent hissing steam exploding across the landscape.

As soon as the water had struck, I yanked up a massive wall of metal. It speared through the thick white mist before it had even finished forming.

The moment it went up, Eve called, "Wind! To the right."

A second later, a hail of lightning bolts crashed into my metal wall.

Deafening booms ripped through the air, and my shield buckled in several places. But nothing made it through.

However, the wall only protected my side of the battlefield. The white boots were on their own.

White bolts crackled through the air towards the constables, but Eve's shouted order saved almost all of them. Their overlapping wind blasts redirected the lightning to the right, causing it to miss most of their troops.

"Counter explosions," I called. "Now!"

I dropped my shield.

Thick mist still covered the grasslands between us, and we took full advantage of that.

Orange and purple light streaked through the air as my explosion mages shot attacks towards White's forces the second that my shield was down. They looked almost like fireworks. Until they exploded into the unsuspecting ranks of dark mages on the other side, that is, and screams of pain tore through the cool air instead.

"Fire," I said.

My fire mages, led by Shinji, poured torrents of red and orange flames towards the now slightly panicked army on the other side.

"Lightning!" Eve snapped to the white boots.

Wind magic whooshed across the plains, sweeping away the final blankets of mist, right as our fire and lightning barreled towards our enemies. Shouts rang out, and shields of water and shadow shot from the ground.

I snapped my gaze around, trying to locate White. His army was now at a disadvantage, having to focus on blocking our attacks more than delivering ones of their own, but their commander was nowhere to be seen.

Uneasiness slithered through my stomach like a cold snake.

What was he plotting? He—

That's when the screaming started.

Whipping around, I stared towards the mass of constables on my right. Panic spread through their ranks like wildfire as Christian White worldwalked back and forth through their army, stabbing backs and slashing throats as he went. All of my people might be protected by metal armor, but the constables still only wore their leather uniforms.

Blood stained the white leather red as men and women fell to the ground like sheared stalks of wheat.

With the loss of the white boot attacks, our numbers were suddenly a lot more even with White's army. It turned the battle back to a mutual onslaught. I yelled commands for both defense and attacks as we lost the punishing advantage we'd held for a few minutes.

People screamed from my right. The constables spun around, panic clear on their faces, as they tried to estimate where the worldwalker would appear next. And yet, they kept dying.

My gaze found the newly appointed Chief Ulric Smith across the carnage. He was just staring at the people around him, shock and disbelief on his face. My hatred for him grew even more. He was supposed to be their leader, but he was doing nothing to save his people. Nothing to help them organize so that they might protect themselves. I fucking despised men like him.

"Circle formation!" Eve bellowed, taking control. "Backs to each other. Now!"

But the panic among the white boots was already too widespread. Some of them tried to follow her orders, but the rest just whipped around like terrified chickens.

Wind and shadow magic shot from across the field. I yanked up a metal wall, shoving most of the attacks sideways while Shinji and the other fire mages burned off the shadows that made it through. Tyler and Chris answered with a combined attack of lightning and wind.

Booms echoed through the air and lights flashed as several different types of magic collided. I gritted my teeth as I shot sharp sheets towards the army on the other side. We needed to get the advantage back and force White to go on the defensive. Otherwise, this plan would never work.

I flicked a quick glance to the right while summoning another attack, and to my horror found that Eve had left my dark mages and instead sprinted over to the constables. Grabbing them by the arms, she physically shoved several people into the formation she had been trying to get them into before.

It created a ripple effect, finally breaking people out of their blinding panic. Suddenly moving with purpose, the white boots began to form circles where the front row faced outwards and the people at their backs faced inwards. The formation protected both their sides and their backs while giving them a clear view of what was in front of them.

My heart swelled as I glanced at Eve. She really was clever. And a true leader.

Flashing purple and orange light yanked my attention back to the field ahead. I slapped my palms together and raised a metal wall right before a series of those lethal fireworks could reach our side. They hit my shield with deafening bangs that reverberated through the air. The explosions tore through the metal in several places, and my shadow mages summoned twisting darkness to absorb the shrapnel that shot towards us from it.

Shinji and Chris hurled a combined fire and wind attack at the left side of their forces, creating a whirling tornado of flames, while Tyler shot targeted lightning strikes at the explosion mages who had tried to blow us up. I shoved another sharp sheet towards them as well while casting another glance towards Eve.

The blood froze in my veins.

Eve was still on the constables' side of the field, trying to hold their defenses together. She had been shouting orders while gesturing with her arm.

Then she turned around.

And came face to face with Christian White.

## CHAPTER 36



A jolt shot through me as I spun around and suddenly found Christian White right in front of me. His pale blue eyes were cold as shards of ice when he flashed me a cruel smile that was all teeth.

“Eve Sterling,” he said as he dragged his gaze up and down my body. “I owe you a beating.”

I yanked out my sword, abandoning any attempts to summon magic, right as White vanished into thin air.

Metal dinged as he reappeared next to me and rammed his knife into the side of my ribs with enough force to make me stumble a step to the side. But the metal underneath my clothes, courtesy of Levi’s brilliance, held.

“Fucking armor,” White growled.

Spinning around, I swung my sword at him. He worldwalked away right before the blade could cleave his chest. With my swing going wide, I was momentarily off balance. White used that well as he reappeared behind me and drove what felt like his boot into the small of my back.

I toppled forwards. Keeping my sword away from my body, I rolled with the motion so that I could come up to my knees on the other side.

The metal armor was fitted perfectly to my body, but it still restricted my movements more than my usual leather would have. And the helmet that protected my head and face limited my vision slightly. Still, better limited than dead.

While rolling to my knees, I swiped the sword across the ground.

Just as I had predicted, White had been about to strike me while I was on the ground. But the quick swipe forced him to abort his attempt.

I leaped to my feet and twisted around with an overhead blow directed at where I hoped the worldwalker would appear. It almost worked. He materialized a little farther to the left, so only the very top of my sword flashed down towards him.

Alarm crackled across his pale face as he threw up his knife to block the strike. Metal ground against metal as he barely managed to push my strike off course. He clenched his jaw while his blue eyes flashed with fury.

Then he brushed his palms together in that lightning quick way of his and disappeared.

I turned again and again, waiting for him to materialize. Usually, he did so right away. But not this time.

Right when I thought that he might have given up and decided to leave me alone, a whooshing sound came from behind me.

On instinct, I jerked up my sword as I spun around.

Metallic clashing filled the air as my sword crashed into another sword. I narrowed my eyes at the worldwalker who held it. So, that was why he had been gone for a few more seconds. He had returned to his side and retrieved a sword so that he could beat me. Or that was what he thought he would do, anyway. There was one problem with his plan, and he was about to find out exactly what that was.

Yanking up my leg, I kicked at his hip at the same time as I twisted my wrist and slid his sword away from mine. He leaped back to avoid the kick and then worldwalked out.

I whipped around and swung my sword wide.

He barely had time to block it when he reappeared a couple of steps from where I had guessed he would be. Rage twisted his features as he shoved my blade back and then



swung at me. I sidestepped it and jabbed at the side of his ribs. He was forced to throw himself sideways to avoid it. I pressed the advantage.

While he was still trying to recover his balance, I lunged forward and slammed my sword towards his chest. He was already moving the wrong way, so he wouldn't be able to change direction before the strike hit.

A fraction of a second before my blade could sink into his gut, he vanished. I let out a vicious curse but spun around as he reappeared a few steps from me.

His chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, and he stared at me as if he couldn't believe how close I had come to killing him.

I flashed him a grin dripping with challenge.

This was the one thing practically all dark mages seemed to forget. Yes, they would always be magically stronger than the rest of us. But because of that, they never bothered much with normal fighting techniques. I had spent the past fifteen years of my life honing my skills with a blade while White trained himself to worldwalk and stab people in the back. Apart from annoying exceptions like Levi, most dark mages were severely outclassed against constables when it came to swordplay.

Fury coated White's face like a sheet of ice as he stared me down.

Magic flashed all around us. The constables were once more helping Levi's forces attack the army across the field, while the King of Metal himself protected his dark mages from a massive blast of lightning mixed with explosion magic. I could feel his eyes constantly darting in my direction, as if he wanted to abandon his role as the leader who directed the battle and rush over here to help me. But we both knew that I could hold my own in a sword fight, while his people would be at risk if he left, and that the armor he had crafted for me would keep me safe.

Deafening booms echoed across the grass and lights flashed in every color as magic shot through the air and collided with more attacks.

Christian White matched my ruthless smile.

Then he disappeared.

I kept my eyes moving as I turned again and again, waiting for him to reappear. This time, he was gone longer than any time before. A hint of dread curled around my spine, but I blocked it out. Whatever he was planning, I could handle it. I just hoped that Levi would remain where he was, because we needed him and his battle strategies to beat White's forces relentlessly until the damn worldwalker was forced to call a ceasefire. Otherwise, all of this would be for nothing.

The skin at the back of my neck prickled. I whipped around immediately, but I was already a second too late.

A massive weight slammed into my side.

Air exploded from my lungs.

The force of the blow sent me flying sideways and crashing down on the ground. While trying to gasp in a breath, I rolled across the grass, purely on instinct, right before something slammed into the ground where I had been only seconds before.

Scrambling to my feet, I stared at the weapon in Christian White's hands.

A hammer. A massive fucking hammer.

Dread washed through me like cold water.

*Oh fuck.*

His grin looked more like a snarl as he taunted, "Told you I owed you a beating."

I spun around and slashed my sword through the air at the same time as he worldwalked. He appeared close to where I had aimed my strike, and was thankfully forced to stop his own blow and instead worldwalk again.

A *clang* split the air as his hammer hit me in the back, connecting with my armor. I stumbled forward, losing my footing. The whooshing sound of a weapon being swung came from behind me, and I barely managed to twist in the air to avoid another strike. I hit the grass hard, losing the grip on my sword.

White swung again, and I had to roll away instead of retrieving my blade. The hammer smacked into the cold grass, leaving a small crater in its wake.

Pain speared through the back of my ribcage as I shoved myself up to my knees. Fuck, I was pretty sure some of my ribs were cracked.

Before I could push myself to my feet, White materialized right in front of me and swung again.

I could see the hammer coming, but there was nothing I could do to stop it.

My head snapped to the side, and I crashed down on the ground as the blow struck the side of my head.

I heard it connect with my helmet more than I felt it. Or maybe that was because the blow and the terrible metallic clanging it produced inside my helmet dazed me so much that I couldn't even try to get my bearings again.

Lying on my back, I stared up at the gray sky through the visor of my helmet while I tried to get my ears to stop ringing and my skull to stop feeling like it was vibrating.

Christian White appeared above me, his hammer raised high for a blow that would probably make my head cave in even despite the metal protecting it.

All around us, constables were shooting magic and raising shields. But none of them moved to help me. I could barely get a coherent thought through my dazed mind, but I could taste the bitterness on my tongue.

I had helped them protect themselves when White was targeting them. Hell, I had even been one of them for years. Up until last week, for Current's sake! But not one of them

was brave enough to intervene and stop Christian White from cracking my skull. So much for north side loyalty.

The hammer sped towards me.

I tried to lift my arms, but it was as if my entire body had stopped obeying my mind now that it was only vibrating with the aftershocks of the previous blow.

What a shitty way to die.

Shock pulsed through me as the hammer liquefied halfway towards my head.

A second later, a massive wind blast crashed past right above me where I was still lying flat on the ground.

Then lightning zapped through the air, leaving a taste of ozone in its wake.

My mind was still spinning, but my limbs at last obeyed me again. Pushing myself up on one elbow, I caught a glimpse of Christian White flying through the air like a ragdoll from that wind blast. His hammer was now a puddle of metal on the grass next to me. I pressed a hand to my head to steady it as I blinked at the tumbling worldwalker.

The lightning bolt had almost reached him when he managed to get his hands together and vanish into thin air.

“Eve.”

Relief and gratitude washed over me as that dark and wonderful voice wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

Raising my head, I met Levi’s steel gray eyes. Both terrible worry and world-ending fury burned in his eyes as he looked me over.

Everyone was wearing metal armor, mostly underneath their clothes, but Levi was something else. He looked like a fucking demon from hell. Sharp shoulder plates rested atop his broad shoulders, as they usually did, but now they had been joined by armor across his chest and back as well. Thick metal plates formed overlapping protection across his torso and neck. And on his head was a helmet crowned with spikes,

making it look like a gruesome crown. All of it was incredibly well crafted. Perfect for the King of Metal.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I think some of my ribs are broken,” I pressed out, and then coughed. It sent a spike of pain through my side, which in turn made my head spin. *Yep, definitely broken.* “And I think I might have a concussion.”

Before Levi could reply, White reappeared on the grass a short distance away. The moment his feet touched the ground, Chris and Tyler sent a combined attack of wind and lightning at him while Levi hurled a metal sheet towards his neck.

His eyes went wide, and he worldwalked away again.

The attacks slammed into the ranks of white boots who had been standing behind him. They screamed as they were tossed back by the gust of wind. And some of them crumbled down on the ground, dead, as Tyler and Levi’s attacks struck them. Neither of the dark mages so much as blinked. In fact, all three of them just stared at the constables with fury and disgust twisting their features. Maybe they were as bitter as I was that the white boots had done nothing to help me.

The worldwalker materialized even farther away this time. His giant hammer was a puddle on the ground, and he was now faced with two other dark mages, plus the King of Metal himself, in addition to me. Even from this distance, I could see him grind his teeth in anger.

Levi and his men just shot vicious attacks at him, forcing him to worldwalk away again.

And this time, he didn’t reappear.

“You need to get back,” I said before gritting my teeth and pushing to my feet. “You need to direct the battle, otherwise —”

“You’re going straight to Gemma,” Levi interrupted, his voice still laced with fury. Gently placing his hands on me, he helped me into a standing position. “Let’s go.”

I tried to pull away from him, but it only made my head spin and my vision swim. “Did you hear me? Your people need you. If you don’t take charge of the battle, your empire —”

His hand shot out, grabbing the bottom of my helmet and holding my head steady, as he fixed me with a commanding stare. “My empire means nothing if you’re not in it.”

I think I might have gasped.

“Do you understand me?” he pressed. “I would trade anything, burn everything I have built to the ground, to save you.”

My heart pounded in my chest. And as I stared back at Levi with stunned eyes, I realized that he meant every word of it.

“So I will take you to Gemma right now, so that she can heal you,” he finished.

I smiled, even though he could only see part of it through the visor. Then I reached up and placed my hand on his forearm, giving it a squeeze. All around us, magic flashed and crackled.

“I will go to Gemma alone,” I said. Before he could protest, I pressed on, “Right now. I swear that I will go to her right now. If you go back and lead your people.”

“Didn’t I just tell you—”

“Remember what I said about trusting me instead of trying to do everything on your own?”

He ground his teeth. Oh, he remembered. I’d shot a wind blast at him and then put a sword to his throat when I informed him that it was time to stop keeping me in the dark.

“We need to force White to call a ceasefire,” I continued. “Otherwise, everything we have been through these past months will mean nothing. So go back and lead your army.”

It looked like he wanted to argue, but then he forced out a controlled breath. “*If* I agree to this, you will stay right next to

me for the rest of the battle afterwards. Not with these spineless white boots.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

I raised an arm to point back towards his army, the motion unfortunately making me wince and ruining some of my commanding air. “Get going.”

He drew his hand over my shoulder and then down my arm before giving my hand a quick squeeze.

“Troublesome, infuriating, stubborn—” he muttered as he turned around and stalked back towards his position at the head of the army.

“Arrogant, domineering asshole,” I finished for him.

He shot me a look over his shoulder. I grinned back at him.

Then I went to retrieve my sword before starting towards the spot at the back where Gemma was. I had only made it a few steps when someone else fell in beside me. I glanced over and found Tyler walking there next to me.

I arched an eyebrow even though he couldn’t see it through the helmet. “Shouldn’t you be heading back as well?”

“Not before I make sure you get to Gemma safely,” he answered.

“Let me guess, Levi would have your head otherwise?”

“No.” His blue eyes were serious as he met my gaze through our visors. “I’ve already told you. You’re one of us now. And we protect our own.”

Warmth spread through my chest, and I swallowed past a sudden lump in my throat. Clearing my throat, I bumped my armored shoulder against his and grinned. “Admit it, you just want a chance to flirt with Gemma.”

He laughed. It was a wonderful sound. One that I had very rarely heard.

Around us, the battle raged. I looked towards the front lines.

Levi was back where he should be, directing his warriors like the ruthless commander he was. Except now, he seemed to be even more merciless as he ordered another wave of attacks. As if he was taking out all of his rage about what White had done to me on the worldwalker's army.

Crackling lightning bolts shot across the grass, followed by orange and purple explosions, which were then joined by a massive torrent of fire. Deafening booms rang out as the other army desperately tried to block it. But Levi kept up the vicious onslaught. His metal shot out, sheet after sheet. Blood sprayed in their wake. Shadows snaked across the ground. Winds howled. Water splashed.

For a moment, all I could do was stare as the magic clashed in a storm of light and darkness.

The tide was turning now. White's army started focusing more and more on defense while Levi's dark mages battered them furiously.

We hadn't won yet. As long as Christian White still lived, this would be a long and bloody and drawn-out battle. One that would claim the lives of far too many of our people.

I quickened my steps as much as I could without making my brain rattle in my skull. I had to get back to the front lines as fast as possible.

We had to finish this before White realized that the lower half of our bodies were unprotected and went back to his sneak attacks, slashing hamstrings and wreaking havoc. Before he realized that Gemma, the healer he had wanted from the beginning, was hiding here among the other dark mages. Before too many of our people died as their strength waned.

By the Current and all of hell, we had to force him into calling a ceasefire.



## CHAPTER 37



Strength was draining rapidly from the back half of my army now. I could feel it in the way they raised shields and shot attacks. It was just a fraction slower than it had been earlier, but I knew my people and their capabilities better than anyone. Cold dread snaked through my chest. If I had noticed, we would only have maybe another half hour before Christian White also noticed. And once he did, there was no way that he would call a truce.

Slamming my hands together, I picked up the pace and shot more attacks across the grass to cover up the fact that half of my people were starting to weaken. At least my experienced battle mages at the front were still bearing down on our enemies with unending fury.

Red flames roared across the grass as Shinji attacked, aided by a wind blast from Chris that propelled the fire faster across the ground. Screams rang out as part of it hit.

I glanced at the stubborn woman next to me.

Eve had indeed kept her word and come back to our ranks when she returned from Gemma. And Tyler with her. I hadn't told him to go with her, because Eve would've bitten my head off if I had. But he had gone with her anyway. I really, really needed to give that man a raise.

Since Eve was now next to me, well protected with dark mages flanking her, White hadn't made another attempt to go after her. He had, however, gone back to assassinating the

constables at random intervals. But I didn't care. They fucking deserved that after the way they let Eve hang. Again.

Covering for my medium- and lower-level fighters was draining a lot of my energy, but I had to risk it. We had to make White think that he was going to lose.

I shot a barrage of sharp metal sheets at them. They frantically blocked it with wind and shadows.

Magic roared across the grass from all sides.

And then I saw it.

A white flag waving at the front of the worldwalker's army.

Truce.

He had finally called a ceasefire.

Relief washed over me. And I could hear men and women from the ranks behind sucking in deep breaths as well.

We had what we wanted. Now, we just had to play this very carefully so that we didn't all end up dead anyway.

"Any chance I can convince you to stay here?" I said as Eve stepped up beside me.

She just laughed at me from inside her helmet before saying, "Let's go."

After shaking my head at her in exasperation, I turned to Tyler. "If shit goes sideways, make sure she gets out."

"If shit goes sideways," Eve interrupted, and shot me a pointed look through the visor. "I will also be lying dead on the ground right there next to you, you idiot."

Oh no, she most certainly wouldn't. I would make sure of that. But there was no arguing with that damn stubborn spitfire, so I just met Tyler's gaze again. He lowered his chin in acknowledgement. No matter what happened, he would make sure Eve left these blood-soaked fields alive.

Before Eve could protest again, I started forward. After some muttering about how much of an idiot I was and how she

would never leave this battlefield without me, she rolled her shoulders back and straightened her spine as she fell in beside me.

From across the grasslands, a lone figure started forwards as well.

Worry rippled through me. This was the final piece in my massive scheme to get everything I wanted. In the next few minutes, I would either win or die. There was no in between.

I had prepared everything that could be prepared. I had plotted and calculated and stacked the deck as much in my favor as possible. But in the end, I could only control my own actions. There was no way for me to know what Christian White would do when we finally had this meeting.

My heart thumped in my chest. I once again glanced at Eve, wishing that she would've agreed to stay behind with my army. If White didn't make the decision I hoped he would, she would be in terrible danger. The thought made fear slash through my heart.

Drawing in a breath, I reminded myself of what Eve had proven time and again during these months we had spent together. Eve Sterling did not need protecting. She was entirely capable of protecting herself.

She would be fine. We would both be fine.

I repeated those sentences over and over in my head as we crossed the grass.

Christian White was striding towards the middle of the battlefield from the other side. His blond hair, so pale that it was almost white, stood out in stark contrast against the now bloodstained grass. He had drawn himself up to his full, and rather impressive, height and he kept his broad shoulders rolled back. He walked with confidence, even though he was the one who had called this ceasefire.

Though, given the fact that he was walking at all instead of just worldwalking to the middle of the field, betrayed the fact that he desperately wanted us to actually come to this meeting.

I let that fact seep through me, steadying my thumping heart and calming the anxiousness inside me. This had to work.

As we drew closer, I brushed my palms together and sent my magic flowing into my armor. Then I retracted the helmet, letting it liquefy and disappear to join the backplate of my armor, so that I would be able to face White fully. He would expect nothing less.

If I had shown up to the meeting with my neck and head protection still in place, it would have signaled that I feared him. After all, in our world, power, or at least the perception of power, was everything.

Eve's helmet, however, remained firmly in place.

At last, we reached the middle of the battlefield. I stopped, Eve beside me, and waited for White to come to us. He closed the final distance and then came to a halt about five strides away, leaving the appropriate distance between two negotiating parties. Eve casually let her hand rest on the hilt of her sword.

I studied the worldwalker before me.

He didn't look desperate. Or even angry. He looked *smug*.

It sent a pulse of annoyance through me. I was going to wipe that fucking insolent expression off his features if it was the last thing I did.

"So, you raised the white flag of surrender," I said, letting a mocking note into my voice as I gave him a dismissive once-over. "I meant what I said earlier. I only accept a formal dark mage surrender."

He flashed me a smile that was laced with both threats and amusement. "Cute."

"I agree," Eve said, making her voice deceptively sweet. "I also think you would look rather cute on your knees, kissing Levi's boots."

Finally, that composed mask on his face cracked, and the first hint of fury flickered in his eyes. While flexing his hand

down by his side, he slid his gaze to Eve. “Once I’m done dealing with your little King of Metal, I am going to take you back to my castle where you will spend the rest of your days on your knees, kissing *my* boots and begging me for mercy as I slowly torture you to death.”

“Ah, yes, you’ve said that before.” She cocked her head. “Tell me, how did that work out for you last time?”

“I believe he ended up with two dead elite mages and one dead cousin,” I filled in, keeping my smile vicious.

“And then half a castle full of dead guards,” Eve finished.

“Indeed.” My gaze hardened as I locked eyes with him. “You’d think he would learn from his mistakes and think very carefully before he dares to threaten *my wife*.”

Next to me, Eve started in surprise. I hadn’t even realized what I had said before the words were already out of my mouth. Thankfully, though, White hadn’t noticed Eve’s reaction because his hateful eyes were locked firmly on me.

“You keep running that mouth, and you’ll soon find yourself without a tongue,” White warned.

There was nothing left of the smug casualness he had worn like a mask when he arrived. Now, his pale blue eyes burned like frozen flames as he stared me down. His hand flexed down by his side again.

“Threats?” I arched an eyebrow. “Is that really how you want to begin this negotiation?”

“I’m not here to negotiate,” he growled. “I’m here to accept your unconditional surrender.”

“And yet, you’re on the losing side of this battle. Otherwise, you would never have called this ceasefire.”

A malicious smile curled his lips. “Oh, you ignorant fool. You have no idea why I called this meeting.”

“I think—”

In the middle of my sentence, he slapped his hands together so quickly that my brain could barely register it and

then vanished into thin air.

Eve yanked her sword from her scabbard, but we all knew that she would always be too late.

Christian White appeared behind me within the span of a second and rammed his knife towards my now thoroughly unprotected neck.

A gurgling noise sounded.

For a few seconds, it was as if the moment was suspended in time. Nothing moved. Not even the wind dared to so much as breathe. Silence thrummed against my eardrums.

Then the world came rushing back in again.

The unmistakable sound of steel cleaving flesh filled the air.

Another cough.

Another wet gurgle.

A soft thud as something hit the ground.

Twisting my head, I looked over my shoulder.

Christian White was standing there behind my back. His pale eyes were wide with shock and pain. And the knife he had tried to stab me with had already tumbled from his unresponsive fingers.

I let out a dark laugh.

*This* was how you killed a worldwalker.

Eve and I exchanged a glance, smug victory on our faces. She pulled her sword out of White's side at the same time as I retracted the spike that I had shot out of my armor.

The sharp metal slid back out of White's chest and returned to my backplate.

Then, I at last released the grip I had kept for several minutes now on the magic flowing inside my own metal armor.

With the loss of support, White crumbled to the ground like a broken doll.

I turned around to face him.

His body spasmed and a strained gurgle made it out of his throat while his eyes, still glassy with pain, flicked desperately between me and Eve.

“You’re too predictable, White.” A mocking grin spread across my mouth as I looked down at him. “You always use the same technique. A quick sneak assassination with a knife to the throat from behind.” I tutted and shook my head. “You really should’ve gone for the front this time.”

It had been a gamble, an absolutely insane gamble, but it was the only way to kill someone as slippery as Christian White.

We couldn’t kill him in the middle of a battle. It was too chaotic and there were too many variables that could, and would, fuck up our plan. So we’d had to force him into calling a ceasefire, because we needed to do this in a controlled environment.

A meeting between just the three of us in the middle of an empty field was as close to a controlled environment as we would ever get. When he worldwalked, we would see it right away.

However, we knew that it wouldn’t be enough to be able to see him vanish. Just like every time he had done this move, he was too fast. He would always be able to kill me before Eve could draw her sword or I could slap my palms together and summon my magic.

Which was why I had done that before the meeting even started.

When I brushed my palms together to lower the helmet, I had done it for two reasons. The first was that I had to give White a clear target. My neck had to be exposed, otherwise he would never try to assassinate me like that. The second reason was that I needed to have my magic already flowing through the metal of my armor, ready and waiting for me.

The moment White had slapped his hands together, I had made a spike of metal shoot out from my backplate and into

the space that I had calculated, that I had *hoped*, White would occupy when he materialized.

Attacking before he had even reappeared had been the only way to kill him. But it had been a gamble. In order to finish creating the spike in time, I had only been able to form one. If White had worldwalked to a spot in front of me instead, *I* would've been the one bleeding out on the grass right now.

But he hadn't. Because thankfully, the predictable son of a bitch always went for a sneak attack behind his opponent's back.

When he had materialized on the grass, the spike had already been half-formed and had speared through his chest before he could finish his own strike. And Eve's sword to the side of his chest a few seconds later had just made extra certain that he truly died.

I stared down at the worldwalker who was still twitching slightly on the ground. Relief and smug fucking victory pulsed through my whole soul.

"Told you that you would be bleeding out at my feet before this was all over," I mocked.

But Christian White was already too far across death's doorstep to reply.

His chest shook another couple of times.

Then he went still.

Pale blue eyes stared unseeing up into the gray clouds above.

I raised my gaze.

With a brush of my palms, I made Eve's helmet flow back into the rest of her armor as well. She raked her fingers through her hair, shaking out her loose brown curls, and heaved a deep sigh.

Then we turned towards the army still standing on the other side of the field.

No one moved.



No one so much as uttered a single word.

They all just stood there, an entire army of dark mages, and stared at us and the worldwalker we had just slain. No one killed a worldwalker. But we just had.

“You are outnumbered,” I called across the bloodstained grass, spreading my arms to indicate the massive force facing them behind my back. “And now, without your worldwalker, you are also outmatched.”

A ripple went through the enemy army ahead.

“You have two options,” I went on. “You stay and die one by one as we decimate your leaderless army. Or you go back to Helmark and fight each other for control of White’s castle.”

Winds rushed across the grasslands, pulling at our clothes. Everything else remained still and silent.

Then, the stillness was shattered like a broken mirror.

All at once, the dark mages across the field broke rank and hurried back the way they had come. I chuckled. The first person to reach Helspire would have a much better chance of keeping it. No wonder they were all running like their asses were on fire.

I cast one last glance down at the dead worldwalker at my feet before starting back towards our own forces. Eve did the same.

We had only made it a few steps when she said something that made my heart stop.

“Your wife, huh?”

Panic shot through my body like crackling lightning. I had just killed a worldwalker, but three words spoken by my little spitfire was the thing that made me absolutely fucking terrified.

I flicked a quick glance at her. She was watching me with a neutral mask on her face, betraying none of her emotions.

“I, uhm...” I began, trying desperately and failing miserably to figure out what to say. “Well, I...”

“Your wife,” she repeated, rolling the words over her tongue as if tasting them. And at last, a brilliant smile spread across her lips, and her eyes glittered with mischief as she met my gaze. “I quite like the sound of that.”

## CHAPTER 38



News about the worldwalker's death and our victory spread like wildfire. On our way back, we had been met by Anna and the rest of Levi's runners. They had taken off towards the city immediately, so the moment we stepped foot through the gates, everyone already knew what had happened.

There was an excited buzz, full of relief and joy, pulsing through the entire south side as we made our way through the streets and towards the Main Square.

The Parliament of Malgrave had of course stayed on the north side, hiding where they thought they would be safe, during the entire battle while leaving the rest of us to fight and die. But Anna brought word that they had apparently deigned to come back to the Main Square now to meet us and to formally acknowledge that Levi's side of the bargain had been fulfilled. Though I had a feeling that Levi, via his runners, had threatened them into doing that.

Levi and I walked at the front, with his dark mages marching behind us. People quickly cleared the streets when they saw us coming, but there was no fear on their faces this time. Instead, it looked more like... awe. And respect.

They had all known that a worldwalker was coming to wipe out the whole city. Scores of them had come to the Court of Metal this morning, begging Levi to protect them. He had told them to stay inside the city walls. That he would take care of it. And he had.

Levi Arden, the one dark mage who ruled with an iron fist and expected complete obedience but who actually kept his side of the bargain too. All the shops and homes that had been damaged or destroyed in the battle against the constables would be repaired, the costs covered by Levi, and the threat that the worldwalker had posed had been neutralized.

Most people on the south side might be scared shitless of Levi, but they respected him in equal measure.

My heart swelled as I stole a glance at him now.

He walked with confident steps and his shoulders rolled back. The helmet and the back- and breastplates were gone, but he still wore his imposing shoulder plates. His chin was raised and his eyes scanned the road ahead with utter control. He strode through these streets like he owned the place. Which he did.

A smug smile played over my lips.

Mine.

The King of Metal was all mine.

Up ahead, the road opened up into a wide space. Just like yesterday, the Main Square was packed with people. They parted before us as we strode straight for the group of men and women who stood on the ground in front of the dais. The Parliament of Malgrave.

People wearing white leather uniforms were also positioned there. They were no doubt the constables who had been ordered to stay inside the city and guard the parliament members instead of joining everyone else on the battlefield. They all glanced between us and the smudge of white that was visible behind the procession of dark mages. The white boots who had been at the battlefield had been much slower to regroup and start towards the city, so they were still a few minutes behind us.

The Parliament of Malgrave exchanged a look as we came to a halt before them. Dark mages fanned out behind our backs.

“The worldwalker is dead,” Levi announced without preamble. “And his army has gone back to the north.”

Parliament Member Nikita Dreary nodded. “Yes, so we’ve heard.”

When Levi only continued watching her with eyebrows raised expectantly, she shifted uncomfortably on her feet for a few seconds and then cleared her throat.

“We hereby consider your part of the deal fulfilled,” she finally forced out with what sounded like great effort.

Levi’s lips lifted in a half-smirk. “No *thank you?*”

Displeasure flickered across her face as she narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t push it, dark mage.”

His smirk grew into a smile dripping with threats. “Or what, Miss Dreary?”

She opened her mouth as if to retort, but then seemed to think better of it. Instead, she smoothed down her hair and forced out a long breath through her nose. I almost chuckled at how easily Levi managed to fluster people. It really was rather entertaining when he did things like that to someone other than me.

“You have fulfilled your end of the bargain, and we will keep our side,” Dreary said at last. “The south side is now yours to govern. And since you are now a political leader, we will refrain from trying to arrest you on sight.”

Levi let out a dark laugh that made several parliament members shiver. “How generous.”

Her gaze sharpened, and she looked like she wanted to say something else. But being snarky to the King of Metal did not usually end well. And I should know, I had plenty of experience with it. *I* had certainly no plans to suddenly become sensible and stop doing it, though.

“That concludes our business then,” Dreary said instead.

Levi nodded. “It does.”

“I trust you will forgive me when I say that I sincerely hope I never have the displeasure of being within speaking distance of you ever again.”

“Keep your nauseating high morals and your worthless democracy on your side of the river, and you won’t.”

She let out an indignant huff. Then her gaze drifted from Levi and towards someone coming up behind us. “Well then, if you’ll excuse us, we have another urgent matter to attend to.”

Levi flashed her a wicked grin. “You are excused.”

She shot him an annoyed look back, but then simply stalked past us without comment. We turned to find that the constables had finally caught up with us. A mass of white and gold now filled the space between Levi’s dark mages and the civilians who had come to watch the show.

I spotted Frank and Jamila among them. Apparently, they had survived. After they had all just left me to get my head smashed in by White’s hammer, I had stopped caring what happened to that side of our army.

As if they could feel my stare, my former colleagues glanced towards me. Several emotions flitted across their faces. Regret? Guilt? Anger? Contempt? I wasn’t sure. But standing there among the dark mages who had come for me when I needed help, I realized that I didn’t really care what the constables I used to work with thought of me now.

My gaze slid to the brown-haired man who had separated himself from the ranks of constables and who was now striding forward across the stones.

Chief Ulric Smith didn’t even look in my direction as he stopped in front of Dreary and the rest of the parliament members who had gone to meet him.

“Honorable parliament members,” he began in a voice that I think was supposed to sound confident and full of effortless authority, but which only made me want to vomit. “The threat that the worldwalker Christian White posed to our great city has now been neutralized. Our forces have—”

“Ulric Smith,” Nikita Dreary said, cutting off his pompous declaration.

Ulric drew back a little and blinked in surprise at the harshness of her tone.

Silence spread through the entire square like a sweeping wave. And suddenly, all eyes were on Ulric and the parliament member.

“Uhm, yes, Parliament Member Dreary?” Ulric asked hesitantly, his brown eyes now full of confusion.

“You are hereby charged with high treason.”

A gasp pulsed through the crowd.

Ulric’s eyes went wide as fucking dinner plates. “I... what?”

Nikita snapped her fingers and flicked her wrist. “Arrest him.”

The constables who had been guarding the parliament members immediately moved forward to grab him. Ulric tried to back away while several of my former colleagues staggered a couple of steps forward as if to help him before apparently deciding against it. All the other white boots who had been with us on the battlefield shrank back from Ulric as if he had been infected with a deadly plague.

Utter shock pulsed on Ulric’s face as he stared at Dreary while the other constables grabbed him by the arms. One of them slid his sword out of its scabbard while another one snapped a pair of stiff handcuffs around his wrists.

“Wait,” Ulric blurted out, still staring at the parliament members in disbelief. “High treason? For what?”

There was no mercy on Nikita Dreary’s face as she stared him down.

“For the murders of Captain Jonathan Wright and Chief Eric Anderson.”

## CHAPTER 39



The whole courtroom buzzed with apprehension. We were technically not supposed to be here, but they shouldn't use metal locks if they didn't want me to melt them. Even though I could move freely through the north side if I wanted to, Eve and I had still snuck across unnoticed. And now we were sitting at the back of the courtroom, wearing ridiculous but admittedly very convincing disguises.

It had been a week since Ulric Smith had been arrested in the middle of the Main Square. To have someone they had appointed as Chief Constable arrested for high treason was apparently a very embarrassing thing for the democratically elected Parliament of Malgrave, so they had wanted to get this over with as fast as possible. It was all the same to us. Eve's plan had been foolproof.

When she had shown up on my doorstep in the rain that night, crying and screaming that she was going to march straight back to the north side and kill Ulric, I had stopped her. She hadn't understood why at first, and had kept insisting that she wanted him dead. But I knew that she was angry and heartbroken. So I had told her what I knew she needed to understand at that moment.

*You don't want him dead.*

*You want revenge.*

And by all hell, Eve Sterling sure knew how to take revenge.



All I had done was to stop her from giving Ulric a quick and easy death.

Eve had done the rest.

The best way to get revenge is to give someone exactly what they want, to make them feel like they finally have everything, and then to take it all away. And that was exactly what Eve had done.

After she had calmed down, her anger and heartbreak had sharpened into merciless cunning. She had plotted out the perfect path to vengeance. And what a scheme it had been.

She had started it while she was still working for the South Side Department. Casually slipping comments about how tight she and Ulric had always been, she had reinforced the belief that the two of them had always been partners. And she had also told them that Ulric was working on a way to come back from his forced retirement.

After that, she had followed Captain Wright home and killed him.

The signs weren't immediate, but that was the best part of Eve's incredible scheme. Taken separately, the clues were too vague to make sense. But once she kept sprinkling more and more of them, the full image was so clear that it was impossible to deny the truth of it.

When she killed Wright, she had made sure that the scene was covered with signs that only magic from the Great Current had been used inside the house, which would rule out a dark mage attack.

Then she had gone to Ulric's house the day of his reinstatement. For several reasons. She had buried the kitchen knife she used to kill Wright in Ulric's yard. She had also planted a journal with pages upon pages of anger and resentment towards the new captain. All in Ulric's handwriting, of course. Courtesy of my brilliant forger Sonia.

The final reason why she had gone there that morning was so that everyone would see the two of them arriving to the

constable force's building together, as if they were still a tightknit family.

Framing him with accusations of cheating and making his wife divorce him had just been a side project. That, with hindsight, I think had more to do with the fact that Eve didn't want Ulric's wife to also be implicated in the murder charges.

Eve knew when she left for Helsingia that she would most likely be fired, and that had been part of the plan. So when she had gone to their office early that morning, she had gone through the archives and made notes of all of Ulric's unsolved cases.

After that, she had gone to Chief Anderson's office and promptly been fired. But not before making sure that the Chief Constable of Malgrave knew that Ulric had always personally vouched for her.

After that, she had continued to plant the seeds that Ulric was crooked. When she took over her father's tavern, she had proudly declared to the whole room that she had always been a dark mage sympathizer who had been working for me for years, and that her captain had *known about it*.

Those rumors naturally spread, further adding to the tangled web she was spinning around Ulric.

Then I had made my second contribution to her master plan. More forged documents from Sonia.

Eve had broken into Ulric's house and stashed papers that contained evidence that all of those unsolved cases of his weren't actually unsolved. The notes, in Ulric's handwriting, detailed all the bribes he had taken from various dark mages in exchange for closing the cases.

However, during that meeting with the chief when she was fired, she had also learned that Anderson had known about what Ulric had done. The original plan had simply been to keep framing Ulric for Wright's murder and for being a complete crook. But then the white boots had attacked before White showed up with his army.

So Eve had proposed an amendment to the plan.

She would kill Chief Anderson too.

It would both buy us some time and satisfy Eve's need for revenge, so it was a good idea. And besides, who was I to say no to a little murder and mayhem?

So Eve had completed her second assassination.

To be honest, I had been fucking terrified that night. I was pretty sure that there were still ruts left on the shore where I had been pacing relentlessly back and forth while waiting for Ferry to bring Eve back. I was also fairly certain that Eve had downplayed how intense that fight had been, and how close she had come to losing.

But she had pulled it off.

And as her former chief lay dying, she had used his finger to write two smudged letters in the blood.

*Sm.*

Once again, nothing incriminating on its own. But once the evidence started to pile up, it would be impossible to ignore that it might stand for *Smith*. And the evidence sure was about to pile up, considering that Eve placed some forged papers in Anderson's study as well. Papers, written in his own hand, once more courtesy of Sonia, that detailed a secret investigation into Ulric Smith.

Anyone reading them would immediately understand that Chief Anderson had started to suspect that Ulric Smith was as crooked as the rest of us on the south side, and that *that* was the reason why Ulric had killed him. Which Anderson had tried to communicate by writing *Sm* in the blood.

The interesting thing was that the final push that at last made the parliament investigate Chief Anderson's death, even though we were in the middle of a war, had not been planned ahead of time.

We hadn't known that Frank and Jamila would show up inside that tavern during the attack, and then again in the tent when we negotiated the deal with the parliament. But Eve had used those opportunities well. First by making sure that they realized that only someone from the north side would have

been able to kill Chief Anderson. And then in the tent, by warning them to watch their backs with Ulric.

There was no way for us to know for certain, but that must have been the final drop in Eve's perfectly constructed cup of lies that made it all spill over for her colleagues. They must have shared their suspicions with the parliament members after the meeting, which at last set the final endgame into motion.

To be honest, we had expected this to take a little more time. But the parliament members must have carried out their investigation at the same time as we were fighting to kill Christian White on the fields outside the city walls. Maybe because they had been nervous and needed something to do. Maybe because they realized that if their Chief Constable was corrupt, they needed to know as soon as possible. We would never know.

But it didn't matter.

The end result was the same.

And the fact that Eve had been there to see them arrest him had been the best stroke of luck we had ever had.

By all hell, the wicked grin on her lips and the villainous glint in her eyes as she watched them charge Ulric Smith with high treason for the murders that she had committed was a sight that I would never forget in all my life. My whole soul sparkled with devilish glee at just the memory of it.

Suddenly, the courtroom around us went silent.

I glanced over at Eve, noticing that she was grinning now too, before I shifted my gaze to the front of the room.

Ulric Smith had just been led out in handcuffs.

I casually drew my hand over Eve's thigh. She blinked and quickly wiped the very conspicuous grin from her face. Flicking a glance in my direction, she gave my hand a quick squeeze before I pulled it back.

"Ulric Smith," the judge called in a voice that echoed between the white stone walls of the courtroom. "You have

been charged with high treason for the murders of Captain Jonathan Wright and Chief Eric Anderson.”

Ulric stood before the tall platform where the judge was seated, his jaw clenched but his chin raised high.

“Today, we will present the evidence that condemns you,” the judge continued. “You will stand there, silently, and listen. Tomorrow, you will be given your chance to speak in your own defense. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he replied, his voice tight.

A smirk played over Eve’s lips as she listened to the judge list everything that she had framed Ulric with. They even brought up his connection to her, which was something that she had told me that she was only planning to use to make her colleagues become suspicious. But now, the judge accused Ulric of taking Eve under his wing after her father had died because Dan Sterling had been one of Ulric’s fellow dark mage sympathizers.

It certainly did bring a cruel sort of poetic justice to it all.

When the judge was at last done listing all the evidence, Ulric Smith was grinding his teeth so hard that he must surely be doing permanent damage to them.

Eve tugged on my sleeve.

Tearing my gaze from the courtroom proceedings, I followed her as we snuck out of the room.

The corridor outside was empty.

We quickly made our way to the room where Eve would be hiding for the next few hours. It was locked, of course. So I pulled out the lump of metal I had brought. After liquefying it, I sent it into the lock and then hardened it to form a key. I turned it.

A soft *click* sounded, and then the door opened.

I handed the key to Eve. “You know how you’re getting out, right?”

“Of course,” she replied.

“Be careful.”

“When have I ever not been careful?”

I shot her a pointed look.

She grinned. Grabbing the collar of my shirt, she pulled my face down to hers and pressed her lips against mine. I could almost taste the life and the excitement buzzing through her veins from that kiss alone.

The sounds of chairs scraping and people getting to their feet came from back inside the courtroom. Eve released me and cast a quick look towards it.

Then she flashed me another grin. “See you tonight.”

And with that, she disappeared into the room and locked it behind her.

I strode towards the main doors, joining the flow of people streaming out of the courtroom. It was time to go back to the south side. My part here was done.

Eve, on the other hand, had one last bit of bloody revenge to exact.

## CHAPTER 40



In order to minimize escape attempts while in transit, the prisoners who faced the court spent the night at the courthouse instead of being hauled back to the constable force's building. Since I had been assigned to duty here as part of my rotation a few years ago, I also knew exactly which rooms were used as temporary cells and where the guards were posted throughout the building. Having played for the other team really did have its advantages.

I waited in my hiding place until the guards had brought Ulric his dinner. Spending four hours inside a small, dark closet wasn't exactly on my list of enjoyable pastimes, but it was the only way to accomplish my final goal. There were no other places to hide inside the room, and I knew from experience that no one ever opened this closet. Why would they? The prisoners who were brought here only ever had the clothes they were wearing. And besides, they couldn't even reach this part of the room.

As if my thoughts had summoned it, the sound of a metal chain being dragged across stone filtered in from the other side of the closet door. Ulric, who I knew would be shackled to the bed with a chain, must have gotten up from the bed and walked over to the small desk where the guards usually placed the food the prisoner had been given.

Remaining inside the dark closet, I listened to the sounds of utensils clinking against a ceramic plate. And there was a lot of clinking. Given that Ulric was still wearing those stiff

handcuffs, I wasn't surprised that he was having trouble eating properly.

I had contemplated going out there before he began eating, but decided against it. The timing would be better if he had finished his meal first.

Once the clinking had stopped, I listened to a chair grating faintly against the floor. Ulric must have stood up again.

Well, I supposed that it was time then.

Straightening inside the closet, I pushed the door open and strode out into the firelit room.

It was a medium-sized space, and apart from the closet, it only contained a narrow bed, a desk with a chair, an oil lamp in the ceiling, and a place in the corner where people could empty their bowels. A chain ran from one of the bed's legs, which were attached to the floor, and ended in a manacle that was always locked around the prisoner's ankle. The chain had been made deliberately short so that the person wouldn't be able to reach the door, which was why they also couldn't reach the closet on the other side of the room. That, combined with the fact that there were no windows, made it very difficult for people to escape.

The moment I stepped out of the closet, Ulric whipped around to stare at me. A gasp ripped from his throat.

I rolled my shoulders and cracked my neck, trying to ease some of the stiffness out of them after the long hours of hiding, before I turned around and carefully closed the door behind me again.

"Eve," Ulric blurted out.

Keeping my features a neutral mask, I once more turned to face the man who had ruined my life and sent me down the path that had led me here today.

"What are you doing here?" he stammered.

"What do you think?"

To my utter surprise, relief and hope flooded his features.



For a moment, I didn't understand why. Then I realized. Ulric still hadn't figured it out. He still didn't know that I knew the truth about what he had done to my father all those years ago. He just thought that I had turned to the dark mages after I had been fired from the constables because I was throwing a tantrum and had been lured back to the dark path, that he had tried so heroically to steer me away from, by the wicked King of Metal.

He didn't know that I was the one who had set him up.

He thought that I was here to *rescue* him.

The realization stunned me so much that I just stood there, staring at him. He must have interpreted that as shock at seeing him shackled in this way, because his features softened and he gave me one of those kind and patient smiles that he had given me so often over the years.

It snapped me right out of my stupor, and cold and ruthless vengeance once more trickled through my veins as I locked eyes with him. By all hell, I really had come a long way from the naïve girl I used to be. The one who believed every word that came out of this man's mouth and who twisted herself into knots and denied everything she was in order to fit into the narrow and restricted mold that he had created for her.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

Another soft smile blew across his lips. "Terrible. But I will clear my name tomorrow. I don't know where they have gotten all of these outlandish theories from, but I will prove them wrong tomorrow. So don't worry about me, kiddo."

"I'm not."

He blinked.

"I'm not worried about you."

Confusion flickered briefly in his eyes. Then he laughed. "See, that's the confidence I needed."

"You misunderstand." Standing there a few strides away from him, I held his gaze with hard eyes. "I was asking how it feels. How does it feel to have everything taken from you?"

Ulric frowned, confusion yet again evident on his face. “I don’t understand. What do you—”

“You took everything from me.”

I could see the moment he figured it out. His blue eyes widened just a fraction, and his mouth dropped open a tiny bit, as he at last realized that I knew that he had killed my father.

“And now, I have taken everything from you,” I continued, my voice as hard as my eyes. “So I’m asking how it feels.”

“You...” he pressed out. Staggering a step back, he shook his head while staring at me in complete shock. “It was you.”

“Yes.”

“You killed Wright. And Chief Anderson.”

“Yes.”

“And all the evidence they found in my house... You planted it.”

“Yes. I also convinced Marla that you were cheating on her.”

Another wave of shock crashed over his features. He shook his head at me again while staring at me with those wide eyes. “Why?”

“You know why.”

“It was an accident,” he stammered, edging a step back.

“I know.” I took a step forward. Cocking my head, I drew my hand over the desk as I walked past it. “But you didn’t tell me that, did you?”

“I didn’t want you to follow him down that path.”

The back of his legs bumped into the side of the bed as he took another step back. His hands were still shackled. He couldn’t summon magic. But I could. And he damn well knew it.

“I didn’t want you to become... become... *this!*” He flicked his hands up and down to indicate my body.

I lunged forward, closing the distance between us in a flash and burying my right hand in the collar of his shirt. He tried to jerk back, but there was nowhere left to go.

“I could have become something else!” I snarled in his face. “I could’ve become *someone* else. If you had told me what really happened. If you had told me that my father’s death had been an accident. If you had told me who he really was. What I really was. Then I might have chosen differently.” My fingers tightened in the collar of his shirt as I held his gaze with accusing eyes. “But now, we will never know. Because you never gave me that choice.”

Desperation flooded his face. “I was just trying to make sure that you grew up to be a good person. A person who helped people and who contributed to society.”

“My future was not yours to decide!”

Roaring fury seared through my veins. I hadn’t realized how angry I really was until he spoke those words. Who the fuck was he to say that I hadn’t been a good person before he took over as my guardian? And who the hell was he to decide what constituted helping people and contributing to society? He had no fucking right to try to make me into someone that *he* deemed worthy. I made my own choices. For good or evil. This was my life, and I alone decided how I wanted to live it.

“Please, kiddo—”

“Do not call me that. You never had the right to call me that.”

“Look, I—”

“You killed my father. You took everything from me. And now, I am just returning the favor.”

The pleading look at last disappeared from his eyes. Instead, a stubborn and righteous anger took its place. Glaring back at me, he ground out, “I will beat this.”

“No, you will go down in history as one of the worst traitors the north side has ever seen.”

“Now that I know what you have done, I will tell the judge and the whole court. They will believe me when they hear the truth in my words. I *will* clear my name.”

“No, you won’t.” A terrifyingly cruel smile spread across my lips. “Because the crooked constable known as Ulric Smith committed suicide in his cell tonight because he would rather die by his own hand than face his colleagues and friends and family now that they all knew the truth about him.”

Shock pulsed across his face. “What?”

“Blood requires blood.”

I rammed the knife into the side of his neck.

The dinner knife that I had swiped from the desk when I passed it wasn’t very sharp, but it didn’t matter. With enough force, it still punctured Ulric’s carotid artery.

He sucked in a gasp, his eyes going wide with both shock and pain.

Blood sprayed as I yanked out the knife. Holding the dull utensil in my left hand, I watched Ulric crumple to the ground. He hit the edge of the bed first, trying to hold himself up. Then he slid down on the floor next to the bed instead. Lying on his back, he stared up at the white stone ceiling while desperately trying to press his hands to the wound. Blood leaked between his fingers, forming a pool of red on the floor beside his head.

Being careful to keep clear of the blood, I crouch down over him.

His body spasmed.

“You’re just...” he pressed out with great effort as he stared up at me with damning eyes. “Like your father.”

A wide grin twisted my lips. “I know. Isn’t it great?”

He opened his mouth as if to speak again, but only managed to cough blood into my face. I remained where I was, crouching over him, and watched as the life bled out of him second by second.

When his eyes at last glassed over, and he stopped moving completely, I expected to feel a stab of guilt. But I didn't. Instead, a ruthless sense of satisfaction spread through my chest. It hardened my heart, turning it blacker and colder.

It was worth it, though.

No matter how I looked at it, this vengeance would always be worth it to me.

I reached down and placed the dinner knife in Ulric's right hand. Since that was his dominant hand, I had made sure to stab that side of his neck. A suicide with his left hand holding the knife would've been odd.

Fortunately, since Ulric had been trying to stop the blood with his shackled hands, they were already positioned close to his neck, so I didn't have to move them. All I had to do was to place the knife there and curl his fingers gently around it.

Then I straightened and reached into my pocket.

Paper rustled as I pulled out the forged suicide note that I had asked Sonia to make for me.

Prisoners were allowed a pen and paper, in case they wanted to organize their defense arguments, so I opened the desk drawer and pulled out a blank paper that I stuffed into my pocket. In all honesty, I wasn't sure if they counted the papers in the desk, but the more convincing I could make this the better.

Once I had taken the blank paper, I placed the forged one and the pen from the drawer on top of the desk, right next to Ulric's now empty plate. They would be back for that within the hour, so I really needed to leave soon.

The suicide note said exactly what I had told Ulric. That he didn't want to face his friends and family and the colleagues that he had been betraying for years, now that they all know how crooked he really was. Since I had spent so much time with Ulric over the years, I knew exactly which phrases he would have used. No one would ever believe that someone else had written it.

Not to mention that the door to his cell would still be locked once they found him. And with no window for a potential assassin to climb through, the case was open and shut.

Once again, I was rather glad that I had been a part of both worlds. Both the constables' world and the world of dark mages. It made it easier to take what I wanted.

I stared down at Ulric's lifeless body.

Justice, the way it was seen on the north side, had not been served here today.

This had been pure, merciless revenge.

And I didn't regret it for a second.

After one last glance at the man whose life I had ruined, I pulled out the key Levi had made and unlocked the door. Slipping back out into the empty corridor, I locked the door behind me again and then slunk towards the entry point that Levi had created when we snuck into the building earlier today.

Since I knew where the guards were posted, I made it out and across the city and back to the south side without issue.

Colorful lights filled the streets around me, and music and laughter spilled out of every room, as I strode through the Entertainment District with my head held high.

I found Levi waiting for me on the wide street that cut through this sinful part of the city and led towards the Court of Metal. He was standing in the middle of the road, and looked to have been doing so for quite some time. The crowd parted around him like the sea before a massive cliff.

He was once more wearing his signature tightfitting black shirt and the imposing metal shoulder plates. His black hair was swept back from his face, and his gray eyes scanned the street with calculated cunning.

The moment I appeared, his gaze snapped straight to me.

A grin spread across my mouth as I strode up to him.

For a moment, we just stood there, looking at each other. Then he raised his hand and held out my sword. The sword that he had crafted for me.

“It’s done?” he asked.

My fingers curled around the sword, and I hooked it to my belt before giving him a nod. “It’s done.” That wicked smile once more shone on my face. “Revenge has at last been served. With interest.”

Levi took my bloodstained face in his hands and kissed me deeply. Fire flickered through my veins.

“You look like a demon from hell,” he breathed against my lips. A dark laugh caressed my skin. “And I fucking love it. I love *you*, spitfire.”

“And *you* have always looked like a demon from hell, you arrogant, domineering, and annoyingly attractive asshole,” I whispered back against his mouth. “And I love you too.”

He claimed my lips with another kiss, stealing my breath with it too. Then he drew back and pushed aside a loose curl that had stuck to the blood splattered across my face.

All around us, people chatted and laughed and drank and danced and *lived*. Malgrave’s signature scent of rich perfume, alcohol, and blood hung over the entire street. And the oil lamps on the wires above swung in the cool evening breeze, making red and yellow and orange light shift across the stones before they turned into a colorful mass of blue and green and purple and pink instead.

Levi smiled at me, his eyes glittering in the multi-colored light. It drew a smile from my own lips too. And a steady sense of warmth spread through my soul.

I released a long breath, feeling something loosen in my chest.

This felt right.

Blood on my face, revenge in my heart, freedom in my soul, and the Dark Mage King of Malgrave by my side.

This was where I was supposed to be.

This was where *we* were supposed to be.

Ruling our own sinful kingdom and living by our own wicked rules.

Together.

Now and forever more.



## The next adventure

The *Ruthless Enemy* trilogy has come to an end, but the world of dark mages is far from over.

Callan Blackwell and Audrey Sable have their own story to tell. Read it here: [books2read.com/ruthlessvillains1](https://books2read.com/ruthlessvillains1)

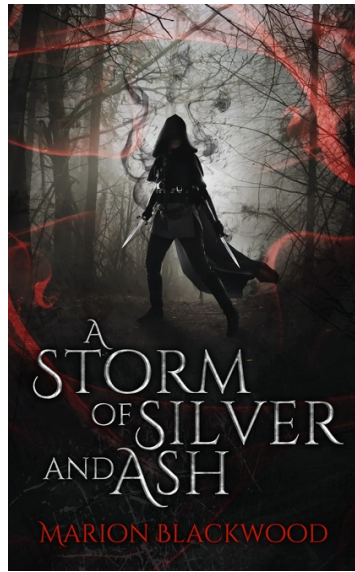


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romance, I have a **fantasy adventure** series for you here:  
[books2read.com/astormofsilverandash](https://books2read.com/astormofsilverandash)



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have always wanted to write a corruption arc. If you've been here a while, you know that all of my other main characters have always had pretty questionable morals from the very start of the first book. And I like it that way because, well, I just love morally gray characters. But for a while now, I have also wanted to write a story about someone who starts off as a hero and then goes dark and joins the villains. And thus, Eve Sterling was born.

Hers might not be the most extreme villain origin story ever, but even so, I hope you enjoyed reading about her descent into darkness as much as I enjoyed writing it. And who knows? Maybe someday I will write an even darker corruption arc for all of you who were secretly hoping for Darklina, if you know what I mean. Muahaha.

As always, I would like to start by saying a huge thank you to my family and loved ones. Mom, Dad, Mark, thank you for always being there for me. I truly don't know what I would do without you. Lasse, Ann, Karolina, Axel, Martina, I'm so glad I have all of you too. Spending time with you always makes me happy.

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As always, if you have any questions or comments about the book, I would love to hear from you. You can find all the different ways of contacting me on my website, [www.marionblackwood.com](http://www.marionblackwood.com). There you can also sign up for my newsletter to receive updates about coming books. Lastly, if you liked this book and want to help me out so that I can continue writing, please consider leaving a review. It really does help tremendously. I hope you enjoyed the adventure!