



# LUST

THE DAMNING BOOK 6

KATIE MAY

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*To everyone who struggles against their inner demons. You'll  
defeat them. I promise.*

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## FOREWORD

Lust contains scenes that readers might find triggering. These include—torture, death, an unwanted kiss, past rape and murder (not shown on page), and manipulation.

Lust is book six of a seven book why choose series, meaning the FMC will not have to choose between her love interests. There is no MM or FF within the harem. There is also no bullying, abuse, or cheating from any of the love interests. They're one hundred percent devoted to their girl.

This book will end in a cliffhanger and be completed in book seven, Wrath.

## RECAP OF PREVIOUS BOOKS

When Z wins the Damning—a competition that pits the best assassins against each other—her world is overturned. Suddenly, she's forced to be the assassin for the exact kings she wishes to kill.

Fortunately, she has the seven princes to help her with the tasks ahead, each prince one of the seven supernatural species descended from the Seven Deadly Sins...and her fated mates. There's a prophecy surrounding the seven princes that states they'll either save the world or destroy it. They despise their parents and their inhumane treatment of humans.

At the end of the first book, Z is poisoned by a competitor of the Damning named Zack at the order of Aaliyah. Her mates are completely unaware that she's been poisoned...and that the poison is slowly killing her.

The kings assign seven tasks, seven games, Z has to complete to prove her loyalty. Despite her hatred for them, a spell administered by the mage king prohibits her from harming any member of the royal family.

She completes the first task, assigned by the mermaid king. In the process, Dair kills his evil older brother, Tavvy, who attempted to rape and kill Z. Just before he dies, Tavvy tells

Dair that he and the rest of the Z's mates weren't born—they appeared out of thin air.

Meanwhile, a mysterious female named Aaliyah is sending extinct supernatural creatures after Z, including a gorgon, kraken, and fae. She instructs her monsters not to kill Z but to bring her to Aaliyah alive.

At the end of book two, Z discovers that Jax, her vampire mate, has gone missing.

The kings assign Z her next task—find Jax and return him to the capital in five days. If she fails, she dies. If she succeeds, the kings will have a special reward waiting for her. The kings force Axel, their former assassin, and T, a member of the Alphabet Resistance who has been taken prisoner, to accompany them.

While in the Vampire Kingdom, the inn they are staying at is lit on fire and Z is kidnapped and brought to the Bloody Carnival—a macabre event where vampires and other nightmares prey on humans. She meets a young boy, Miles, who she instantly feels protective of.

During a confrontation at the Bloody Carnival, Miles is killed, a fact that devastates Z. Axel agrees to search for Miles's younger sister while Z and the other freed humans bury the bodies.

The gang discovers that Aaliyah has been keeping Jax prisoner. Through her connection with Jax, Z knows he's been forced to feed on blood regularly, losing himself to the bloodlust and madness.

Aaliyah arrives with her pet gargoyles and Jax. She tells the group that she's Z's sister and a demon. A fight ensues. During the battle, Jax is stabbed and killed. Aaliyah disappears

before anyone can stop her. Z, in her grief, pours white light into Jax, bringing him back to life. In the process, the poison coursing through Z's system catches up to her and she collapses.

Meanwhile, Axel finds Miles's sister and discovers she's the first nightmare-human hybrid to exist.

T reveals to have been the one to give Z's location up to the human traffickers at the Bloody Carnival in exchange for S's—his brother and Z's ex-boyfriend—soul.

At the end of book three, S is alive and well and demanding to know Z's whereabouts.

In book four, Z struggles to survive the poison coursing through her bloodstream and her mates are desperate to find a cure. When Z's condition worsens, the men must separate in order to save her life—Devlin and Lupe return to their fathers while the others decide to visit Bash's eccentric grandfather, Paco.

While at Paco's cottage, the group discovers that the spell to save Z's life will only work once she's dead.

Z is visited in her dreams by Aaliyah, who tells Z she's an angel named Gabrielle. Aaliyah reveals that she herself is a demon who was once in love with the Seven Heavenly Virtues before she murdered them on behalf of her sister. Z begins to suspect that the monsters attacking her have been brought through a portal that leads to hell.

At the capital, Lupe and Devlin discover that Ryland's father—the shadow king—is a spy for the resistance. The other kings throw him into the dungeons for his crimes.

Meanwhile, an army of humans—led by the ex-assassin Axel—arrives at Paco's house and claims to be followers of

Z.

Z proves herself to the humans when she saves a group of them from a trafficking ring. In the process of doing so, Z succumbs to the poison. She passes away, but her mates are able to save her life and rid her body of the poison once and for all.

Lupe and Devlin, however, do not know that Z survived and feel their mating bonds break. Lupe goes feral, and Devlin leaves the capital to get revenge on Aaliyah.

Z and her mates return to the capital and discover that she is now engaged to Axel as a reward for finding Jax and bringing him home.

While at the capital, the group finds out that Ryland's father the shadow king—Seth—is a member of the resistance. After this revelation came to light, the other kings chose to lock him in the dungeons. Lupe is also imprisoned, having lost himself to his bear once he felt Z die.

Devlin, meanwhile, is meeting with a trusted source who tells him that Aaliyah has taken up residence at Lake Meade in the Shifter Kingdom.

Seth tells the gang that he brought the resistance to his kingdom and hid them in a series of caves. To enter, they'll have to cross through the Forest of Monsters and Beasts.

The kings task Z with finding Devlin, which she does so by entering his dreams using the mating bond and convincing him that she's still alive. He agrees to meet with her once he wakes up but is stopped by Aaliyah.

The group, minus Devlin, arrive at the forest, and Axel offers to remain behind with a still-feral Lupe. They make it

through the forest and come face-to-face with B, the leader of the resistance and Z's mentor.

B takes them back to the caves. He tells them they need to find a hell dagger, which is forged from the fires of hell itself. He believes that the dagger will be the only way to drain the kings' excess power. Z perceives B's words as a threat and, due to the spell placed on her after she won the Damning, attacks him. B stabs her in the neck, which Lupe feels all the way across the forest. It's revealed that B had discovered a way to counteract the kings' magic by using the bones of past kings. Thus, when B stabbed her, he also freed her from the compulsion that forces her to protect the kings at all costs.

A coherent Lupe and Z finally reunite.

B sends the group away with copies of his research, but when they arrive back at the forest edge, they see that Aaliyah has joined them with a captured Devlin. Aaliyah offers the group the dagger they've been looking for, much to Z's confusion, and then leaves.

Z and her mates return home, only to discover that they walked right into their own wedding. Z will be forced to marry Axel, while the seven princes will each marry a woman of their fathers' choosing.

Z stabs the mermaid king with the hell dagger, drawing all of the dark magic out of the seven kings. However, things don't go as planned when the dark magic enters Z instead of dissipating.

Aaliyah arrives, and the guys realize that this was her plan all along. Aaliyah creates a portal, and Z—now consumed by dark magic—willingly goes with her after killing all of the nightmares in the throne room (aside from the kings, Atta, and her mates). Killian tags along as well.

When Z steps out of the portal, she sees that her childhood friend T is there, as well as her ex-boyfriend S. Z kills T for his part in betraying her in the Vampire Kingdom. S tells Z that they need to get rid of the incubus if they have any hope of being together. Z responds with, “This should be fun,” and advances on Killian.

### **CHARACTERS:**

**Z** — Member of the Alphabet Resistance that advocates for human rights, assassin, mate to the seven princes, and winner of the Damning. She was poisoned at the end of book one but saved at the end of book four by “dying” and coming back to life. She’s now possessed by dark magic and willingly followed Aaliyah through a portal.

**Dair** — Z’s mate, mermaid, and descended from Envy. Like all mermaids, he’s forced to live as a mermaid for twelve hours a day and a human the other twelve. His father constantly cuts his legs off, grows them back, and then cuts them off again each night. Paco provided him with a potion that will allow him to walk, though he only has a little bit of it left now. B believes that he might be able to heal Dair permanently using the bones of past kings.

**Devlin** — Z’s mate, genie, and descended from Greed. He trapped S’s soul inside of his magic lamp until it was freed by T in book three. He was Z’s childhood sweetheart. At the end of book four, he left the capital in order to avenge Z and murder Aaliyah. He reunited with Z in book five.

**Killian** — Z’s mate, incubus, and descended from Lust. As a child, he was forced to watch his father rape and kill his nanny. He willingly traveled with Z and Aaliyah at the end of book five to an undisclosed location.

**Lupe** — Z's mate, shifter, and descended from Wrath. His father implemented the first human concentration camp. He prefers to fight with words rather than violence. At the end of book four, he lost himself to his wrath after feeling Z die. He was finally able to come back to himself at the end of book five.

**Ryland** — Z's mate, shadow, and descended from Pride. He hides his face in his shadows to hide his hideous facial scarring. He was the first to know all of the princes were mates with Z. His father was thrown into the dungeons at the end of book four after being revealed as a spy for the resistance.

**Jax** — Z's mate, vampire, and descended from Gluttony. He's facing madness because he refuses to drink human blood and is only coherent around Z. Currently, he's engaged to Atta. He was kidnapped by Aaliyah at the end of book two but was rescued in book three. During his time as a captive, he was forced to consume an endless supply of blood, exacerbating his insanity.

**Bash** — Z's mate, mage, and descended from Sloth. He initially distrusted the mate bond and what he perceived as a lack of free will, so he struggled with his affections for Z. However, they finally confessed their love to each other in book four.

**Atta** — Shifter and descended from Wrath. She's Lupe's younger sister and the mate to Mali but is currently engaged to Jax.

**Mali** — Vampire and descended from Gluttony. She's Z's best friend who unwittingly betrayed her, leading to the death of their mage friend, Diego. Mate to Zack (now dead) and Atta. She unwillingly works for Aaliyah now.



**Diego** — Mage and descended from Sloth. Z's best friend and mate to HH. He was murdered by Zack protecting Z after Mali betrayed them.

**T** — Z's friend from the Alphabet Resistance and brother of S. He traded Z to the Bloody Carnival in exchange for his brother's soul. Z murdered him at the end of book five while Aaliyah and S watched.

**S** — Z's deceased ex-boyfriend and T's brother who was killed by shifters. It's discovered that Devlin had his soul inside of his lamp until he lost it. T made a deal with human traffickers to retrieve his soul, thus bringing him back to life. He is currently working with Aaliyah.

**B** — Leader of the Alphabet Resistance.

**A** — Z's former mentor before he died.

**Aaliyah** — Main antagonist of the series who wants to capture Z for unknown reasons. She revealed herself to be Z's sister and a demon at the end of book three. She confessed that she was once the lover of the Seven Heavenly Virtues before she killed them. She gave Z a dagger designed to draw the dark magic out of the kings. The dark magic entered Z and corrupted her.

**Zack** — Mage and evil assassin who killed Diego and poisoned Z. He was Mali's mate, but now he's dead.

**Axel** — Shadow and ex-assassin of the kingdoms. He's currently engaged to Z at the urging of the kings. He found a half-human, half-mage child, Mary-Lynette, and has adopted her as his own.

**Slippy** - A kraken Aaliyah sent after Z and her mates in book two. Slippy is now Z's beloved pet.

ONE



# LUPE

I half wondered if this was a dream.

No, not a dream.

*A nightmare.*

Somehow, I'd been transported to a world where nothing made a lick of sense and the ground beneath me was constantly shifting and shaking.

Z was...gone.

Gone, and consumed by dark magic.

I could still see her eyes a second before she stepped into that portal with Aaliyah and Killian. Her brilliant blue pools had been completely transformed, turning as dark as hematite and just as hard. There was no love or warmth in her gaze.

Only raw, unbridled hatred and anger—aimed at me and my brothers.

My heart cracked down the center, becoming two jagged blocks of cement, as I rushed to think of a solution. That was my job, after all. I preferred to use my words instead of my fists, my brain instead of my body. If I couldn't come up with a way to save Z, then nobody would.

She was...gone.

Just like that.

One second, she had been standing before me, a vision of ethereal beauty in an intricately embroidered white dress with her loose curls tumbling around her, and the next, she had disappeared.

Devlin released a roar of rage from beside me, his violet eyes flaring with the force of his anger. Bash, on my other side, simply gaped soundlessly at the spot we last saw Z and our brother. Jax had gone stock-still, as if his brain had put up an *Out of Order* sign and then closed itself down for the night.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The shadows in the corner of the room rippled and danced, clueing me in to where Ryland was. The shadow prince stepped forward, only his icy-blue eyes visible amongst the abyss of darkness. He practically seemed to float through the air as he traveled to where six of the seven kings were sprawled across the raised dais.

My father being one of those men.

I held my breath as Ryland's dark fingers materialized from the shadows and came to rest on the nearest king's neck.

"Still alive," he intoned in a steady, emotionless voice.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Dair ran his hands repeatedly through his golden-blond hair, for once not looking like the story book prince everyone knew him to be. The raw fury and distress emitting from him was almost palpable and made my own heart race even faster. "What the fuck do we do now?"

"That lying bitch!" Bash raged, his hands forming into tight fists by his sides.

Magic swirled up his arms, the green a startling contrast to his pale skin, before he took a deep breath and forced his magic to retreat.

That lying bitch, indeed.

Aaliyah—the demoness who claimed to be related to Z—had finally gotten what she wanted all along.

My mate at her side.

“We can’t panic,” Ryland said in that same emotionless voice he’d used before. I couldn’t see his face with so many shadows surrounding him, seeming to emanate from his pores, but the fury tinging each syllable he spoke was unmistakable. “Panicking won’t bring Z back to us.”

“What do you suppose we do?” Devlin hissed, repeatedly scraping his fingers through his dark, curly hair.

He moved towards the mermaid king and bent down, retrieving the strange dagger Z had used to stab him with. Despite being plunged into the king’s heart, there wasn’t a speck of blood to be seen. The curved blade looked as it had before everything went to hell.

B had been the one to tell us about the dagger, but Aaliyah was the woman who supplied us with it. She had promised that it would eliminate the dark magic inside each of the kings. What she failed to mention, however, was that magic, that power, that *darkness* would funnel right into the person wielding the weapon—my mate.

“That dagger is capable of drawing dark magic out of somebody,” I pointed out, speaking up for the first time. That fact seemed important somehow, but try as I might, I couldn’t pinpoint why.

I could barely breathe past the tightness in my throat. The sluicing of blood in my ears, exacerbated by the desperate and relentless pounding of my heart, threatened to drown out every other sound. Only my little sister's hand on my arm kept me grounded to the present when all I wanted to do was spiral.

Z...

Fuck, what was Aaliyah doing to her right then as we spoke? Was she safe? What about Killian?

Fear for the woman I loved and my brother threatened to consume me. I could feel my bear clawing at me, wanting to escape, encouraging me to embrace the wrath percolating in the center of my stomach.

But the last time I gave in to the enticing pull of wrath, I lost myself to my beast. When Z had needed me, I hadn't been there for her, and I refused to allow that to happen again.

Bash's angry voice dragged my attention back to the present. His eyes flared hotly with unbridled rage as he began to pace. "If we stab Z with the dagger, all of that dark magic will enter whichever one of us stabbed her."

"And would that be a bad thing, if it meant she was okay?" Devlin whispered softly.

A combination of self-loathing and self-deprecation shadowed his face as he stared blindly at the dagger still clutched in his hand. His olive complexion had turned almost ashen, the flickering flames of the nearby candles somehow emphasizing the dark circles underscoring his eyes.

Losing Z threatened to destroy me, but Devlin... I couldn't help but believe it had already *eviscerated* him. He had believed Z to have been dead only recently. And after days of

separation, he had finally gotten her back...only to immediately lose her again to her conniving bitch of a sister.

“Don’t say shit like that,” Dair barked, surprising all of us with the anger in his voice.

Even after all of the shit Dair had endured at the hands of his father and brothers, he’d never lost that spark that made him perpetually joyful and optimistic for the future. So to hear him snap at Devlin...

Z had only been gone a few minutes, and we were already spiraling. It made me wonder how any of us had survived before Z came into our lives, sharp-witted, dangerously beautiful, and bursting with fiery passion.

“If you don’t mind the interruption...” a familiar voice interjected, the statement punctuated by his hand waving in the air.

All six of us turned to stare at Axel, the ex-assassin who was enlisted by our parents to marry Z.

He straightened the lapels of his jacket, seemingly unconcerned or oblivious to the death glares being hurled his way, and said, “Perhaps we should discuss how to fix Z *after* we get her back, hmm?” He lovingly caressed the machete strapped to his back. “Mary, here, is more than willing to fight for our little sister wife.”

“Don’t call Z that,” Atta snapped from where she stood beside me. My little sister’s face was nearly as pale as Devlin’s, but her eyes were fierce and determined. “But the crazy assassin is right. We can focus on saving Z from herself *after* we save Z from Aaliyah.” She took a few steps forward to garner the others’ attention, her chin hefted imperiously,

looking every inch the elegant princess I knew her to be.  
“Aaliyah has taken too much from us already.”

I knew her mind had traveled to Mali, Z’s best friend and Atta’s mate, who had been recruited-slash-kidnapped by Aaliyah to do her bidding. I couldn’t imagine the type of pain she must have been in, to know her mate was out there but unable to help her.

I would burn the world for Z, and I knew Atta would do the same for Mali, despite her transgressions.

And I had a feeling we were going to need to if we had any hope of freeing the women we loved from the devil herself.



TWO



# BASH

**I**t was surprisingly easy to get the kings down to the dungeon. What wasn't easy, however, was avoiding the guards who still traversed the capitol building. My brothers and I believed ourselves to have numerous supporters, but it would take years to weed out the friends from the foes.

Years we didn't have.

Hell, we barely even had a day. All of us were desperate to get on the road and find Z before—

I shut that shit down quickly. No. I couldn't think like that. Z was okay; she had to be.

The cells deep beneath the capital were dank and grimy, constructed out of solid stone with bars serving as the only door in and out. Each cell had a piss-soaked mattress, a bucket to hold waste, and what was probably supposed to be a pillow but instead resembled a slab of cement. I supposed such a room was fitting for the six men who had made our lives a living hell.

The kings were still unconscious, a small mercy for the time being, but I had to wonder what would happen when they finally woke up. They no longer had the dark magic coursing through their veins that made them immortal, but they were still powerful supernaturals in their own right. Powerful

*nightmares*. Their bloodlines weren't the only reason they became kings of this world. They could squash anyone underneath their boots who dared to rise against them, hence why the seven of us never chose to make a stand.

Until now.

Until *her*.

Fuck, we needed to get Z back, and soon. I wasn't sure how much longer I could remain here, pretending everything was okay, when all I wanted to do was release my magic and destroy the very building we were currently standing in.

Not that I would even shed a tear if this building and everyone in it went up in flames. It was nothing but a graveyard. Ghosts of my past haunted these tiled halls...and I was sure those ghosts were going to be joined by others sooner rather than later.

There were over a dozen dead bodies still in the throne room—guests for the royal “wedding” and the seven women our fathers chose for us to marry—but none of us dared to move them. Perhaps a better man would have given them burials or consulted their families, but I supposed we truly had our fathers' blood in our veins. I couldn't even muster an ounce of sympathy for the people who'd witnessed the spectacle our fathers created and hadn't voiced a word of protest to stop it.

I still remembered the cunning smile warping Z's beautiful face as she'd lifted her hand, snapping her fingers...and then, with no fanfare whatsoever, all of the men and women in the room had slumped over, dead.

She'd killed them.

Dozens and dozens of nightmares.

Dead.

Because of Z.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My stomach twisted and tightened into a dozen intricate knots, but not for the obvious reasons. I wasn't worried about the repercussions of Z's actions. Yes, the nightmares she'd killed were high-ranking loyalists and nobles of the kingdom, but we could easily placate their families with promises of power and riches.

I was terrified of what all of this would do to the girl I so desperately loved. It would destroy her to know she'd killed people who, for all intents and purposes, were innocent in this battle. They were assholes, but they hadn't physically harmed her. They were merely witnesses to a wedding that Z hadn't consented to.

Did that warrant their deaths?

Those questions tumbled through my mind as I watched Ryland lean beside a familiar figure, now resting outside of his cell, his features slack with sleep.

Seth. The shadow king. Ryland's father.

And a member of the Alphabet Resistance.

I didn't think anyone was more shocked than Ryland when the truth was revealed about his father. For years, he thought Seth to be nothing but an aloof and distant father figure. Not abusive like Dair's father or domineering like Lupe's. Just... impassive. Apathetic, even, though he had moments where he regarded Ryland the way a normal father would a son.

We'd discovered only days ago that Ryland's father had been working for the human resistance all of this time,

sheltering them in the mountains deep within his kingdom and providing them with crucial information concerning the other nightmares.

A stab of jealousy pierced my chest before I could stop my instinctive reaction.

How was it fair that he got the loving father while I got...a piece of shit who would happily sleep through torture sessions of his own son? Fuck.

I shoved that irrational emotion to the side, sweeping it beneath the proverbial rug.

“What are we going to do with them?” a familiar voice rumbled.

Lupe’s eyes shone amber in the waning light of the dungeons, a sure sign that his bear was close to the surface, as he surveyed the six cells which now contained the disgraced kings. I half wondered if we should just kill them and end it all, but I knew shit was way more complicated than that. Despite their crimes against humans and their own sons, they were still the kings, still the leaders of this chaotic and fucked-up world.

We couldn’t afford to think with our blades for this battle.

The shifter glanced at Ryland’s father before immediately refocusing on his own father, still lying unconscious.

“Is Seth okay, at least?” he asked gruffly, his voice slightly raspy as if he hadn’t used it in a while.

And I supposed, all things considered, he hadn’t.

“He’s breathing,” Ryland replied simply, stepping away from his father and crossing his arms over his chest. Dark

shadows oscillated along his skin as he struggled to control his emotions.

“I vote we kill these fuckers right now and find Z,” Devlin growled, taking an ominous step towards his father.

Surprisingly, it was Jax who stopped the genie prince, leaning forward and placing a hand on his shoulder.

Jax looked...well... He looked like shit. His light-brown hair was wildly tousled, as if he had repeatedly run his hands through the strands, and his eyes were glazed and unfocused. No doubt, it was an accumulation of hunger combined with his worry for Z and Killian.

When had he last eaten?

I remembered Killian mentioning that Jax had fed on Z when we visited B at the Alphabet Resistance’s latest compound, but that was...how many days ago? Fuck if I remembered.

This entire shit show felt like an eternity.

“We can’t kill them, brother,” Jax said with surprising calmness. “You know we can’t.”

“Nobody would even notice if we just stabbed them a little bit,” Ryland interjected, swirling a blade around and around in his hand. “Just a teeny, tiny, itty-bitty stabbing.”

“And risk a war?” Lupe crossed his bulging biceps over his chest. His glasses had slid down his nose, but he didn’t lift a hand to push them back into place. I could tell he was thinking through every possible scenario, formulating an answer before we could even think of a question. That was what Lupe was best at, after all. “There are still thousands and thousands of nightmares loyal to our fathers.”

“And they don’t deserve to live either,” Devlin snapped harshly. His violet eyes flared hotly, two blazing beacons in the darkness.

“You need to calm down, Dev.” Dair scratched at his jawline, keeping his gaze fixated on his father’s still form. Out of all of us, he had the most reason to hate the kings. What his own father had done to him... “You’re normally the most level-headed of us all.”

“How the fuck can I be level-headed when our mate and brother are who the fuck knows where, enduring who the fuck knows what?”

I winced nearly imperceptibly at his unspoken accusation.

*How can you guys be so calm when Z and Killian are both in danger?*

But this wasn’t calmness. Not really. This was the eye of a storm, when the winds were just beginning to pick up speed, ripping shingles off houses, and causing trees to sway. The damage wasn’t absolute yet, but it had the potential to be devastating.

“Aaliyah seems to think of Z as a sister,” Dair reasoned, though his voice was strained.

“And Killian?” Jax questioned softly.

All of us went still.

Our incubus brother had willingly traveled with Z and Aaliyah to God only knew where. I didn’t know what my brother was thinking—

Actually, I did. It was the same thing tumbling around in my own brain.

If Z was going to leave, then I'd be damned if I didn't go with her.

But who was to say Aaliyah hadn't killed the incubus prince the second he stepped through the portal? Who was to say that Z wasn't so lost to the darkness that she allowed something to happen to Killian?

She claimed to have spared our lives only for sentimentality's sake, but I had to believe it was more than that. She was our fated mate, the woman destined to be ours, and a part of her must have sensed that, even with the darkness swirling through her.

I had to believe she wouldn't allow anyone to harm Killian.

I had to.

The alternative was too much for me to even consider.

Devlin reluctantly pulled his gaze off our fathers. "We'll need to have some of our most trusted guards watching these prison cells around the clock. We can't risk even one of them escaping confinement until we figure out what to do with them."

"We may need to get the council involved," Dair reasoned, though he sounded as if he would rather swallow a poison-laced dildo than do any such thing. "If they deem the kings unfit to rule..."

"Then we'll be next in line for the thrones." Jax's lips twisted in what I could only describe as distaste, and I couldn't blame him.

The thought of taking control of the very kingdoms I'd grown to hate...



It wasn't the most appealing career path for me either.

Devlin cleared his throat. "When I thought Z was dead, I met a shadow who believed to have found Aaliyah. He claimed that there were strange creatures surrounding this woman's property and that the townsfolk had given her house a wide berth because of it." He scratched at the stubble grazing his chin.

"And where exactly is Aaliyah believed to be hiding out?" Ryland queried, though his voice suggested he already knew the answer to that question even before he asked it.

Devlin's expression turned grave. "The shifter kingdom. Near Lake Meade."

In other words, one of the most dangerous areas in the entire world, where gangs ran the streets, magical storms ravaged villages, nightmares hunted other nightmares, and humans were eaten for fun.

The nightmares there wouldn't care that we were the princes of the realm. They wouldn't care that we held more power in our pinkie fingers than they did in their entire bodies. No, they would see us as nothing but leverage—as a way to get ahead in the world. They would sell us to the highest bidder if it meant they could get a single gold coin.

And to save Z, we had to head right into the heart of it all.

Fuck.

THREE



# KILLIAN

I swallowed convulsively as Z advanced on me, her eyes pitch-black and a cold, sardonic smile tugging up her lips. I knew there were others in the room too—and one dead body on the ground—but I couldn't focus on them.

Fuckity shit sticks. Fuck.

What had I been thinking?

*You weren't thinking.*

I wasn't worried for myself. No. I was worried about what would happen to Z once she returned to normal and realized she had hurt me.

So...I couldn't let her hurt me.

Obviously.

Fucking dick anus shit.

I held my hands up placatingly and took another step backwards. Aaliyah's lilting laughter reverberated through the room, but I didn't dare pull my attention off of the woman I loved.

"We need to get rid of the incubus if we have any chance of being together," the man beside Z repeated, his narrowed eyes fixed on me.

This man...

He looked familiar, though I couldn't pinpoint where I had seen him before. Not that it was important when he obviously wanted me dead.

No thank you.

I was very much happy being alive.

"You don't want to kill me, Z," I pleaded as I continued to back away. "You want me for...sexy times, right? I'm super good at all that sex stuff. It's the incubus in me. It makes me super good at sex. All of the sex you can think of. And, um, other sexy things."

*Stop saying sex, Kill. For the love of God, stop!*

I shushed my mental voice and continued retreating.

I hated the way my heart pounded against my breastbone. Hated it—because it meant I was afraid.

Of Z.

Of my mate.

Of the woman I loved more than life itself.

I didn't want to fear her, but there was no sign of the woman I'd come to care for and adore in her dark eyes, as fathomless as the deepest part of the ocean. There was a calculating glint to those midnight orbs that pulled the breath from my lungs and had every muscle in my body locking together.

"Sex. Think of the sex, Z. Think of it," I insisted, unable to hide my desperation even if I wanted to.

"For the love of all that is holy, will you shut up?" Z finally moved to stand in front of me, and her black eyes

consumed the entirety of my vision.

I gulped yet again as she trailed a finger down my chest and stopped at the waistband of my pants. I shouldn't feel any arousal given the situation, yet goose bumps peppered on my skin, and my cock twitched to life in my pants. My body always seemed to betray me when Z was near.

*Curse you, cock! Curse you to the deepest pit of hell.*

“Z, what are you doing?” The strange man—human, but also...not human—took a step forward, his eyes flaring with possessiveness and jealousy.

“Shut up, S.” Z didn't pull her eyes away from me as she addressed the other man.

Wait...S?

As in...her dead ex?

T's brother?

Instinctively, my gaze flitted to the dead body on the ground, his head at an unnatural angle due to his broken neck.

T.

Z's friend.

S's brother.

Dead.

Yet the two people who should have cared about him most of all barely acknowledged his corpse.

“I don't want you touching him,” S snarled, his hands balling into fists. Red liquid wept from his palms, as if he'd dug his fingernails in deep enough to draw blood.

“You don’t get a say in what I want,” Z dismissed, still keeping her gaze fixated on me.

Did she recognize me?

Obviously, she knew who I was, but did a part of her soul remember what we meant to each other? Did a tiny piece of her still love me, despite the dark magic cascading through her veins and tarnishing her light?

Yet there was no love in her gaze.

Only lust and avarice.

“Let my sister be, S.” Aaliyah’s airy voice pulled my attention to where she stood on the opposite end of the room, watching Z with an indecipherable expression.

S’s scowl deepened. “You promised me—”

“I promised you nothing.” Aaliyah whirled on the human, her eyes flaring, and then raised a finger to jab it in the air in front of S’s chest. “If Z wanted to be with you, she would. But it seems as if she’s still addicted to the incubus’s dick.”

Those crude words made me wince almost imperceptibly. That icky feeling in the pit of my stomach intensified when Aaliyah turned her gaze onto me, her eyes darkening with lust.

“Of course, if Z is willing to share the incubus...” She fiddled with the neckline of her dress, revealing a hint of cleavage, as horror filled me.

I would rather cut off my own dick than put it anywhere near Aaliyah. Or any other woman, for that matter.

Dark magic or not, Z was it for me. Always and forever.

Z snarled, the sound more animal than human, and moved to stand protectively in front of me.

“Mine,” she hissed at her sister, her body trembling with unencumbered rage. “No one is allowed to touch him. *No one.*”

S looked as if he wanted to rip my damn head off after Z’s public claiming, but Aaliyah just appeared...curious. She tilted her head to the side, her orange hair falling over one shoulder, and blinked repeatedly. There was no surprise in her gaze, however, only grim acceptance.

I realized then that she had never actually wanted me. She had simply wanted to test Z.

But why?

And did Z’s answer mean she’d passed or failed?

If there was one thing I knew from my limited interactions with Aaliyah, it was that she believed she loved Z in a twisted and depraved sort of way. She wanted my brothers and me out of the way so she could have Z all to herself.

Would she kill me to do just that?

I would like to believe that Z would protect me from her sister, but Z wasn’t...Z. She was a different version of the woman I’d fallen for, and I had yet to uncover the differences between the two. Did the darkness inside of her twist the love she once felt for me into blind hatred? Did it draw her to Aaliyah?

There were so many questions and so few answers.

“Z, please...” S’s voice turned almost pleading as he scratched at his head.

A strand of limp brown hair dislodged itself, though S quickly shoved it in his pocket before Z could see it.

Another question—what the hell happened to him?

“You can’t trust the princes,” S continued.

Though I couldn’t see Z’s face with her back to me, I could tell she stiffened at his words. Believing him, perhaps? Or did she disagree with S’s assessment? I didn’t dare even breathe, afraid that making a single sound would sign my own death warrant.

“Do you know what your genie prince did to me?” S asked.

“Devlin?” Confusion rippled through that one word.

“He trapped me in his lamp because he wanted you. He wanted me out of the picture.” S took a step forward, anger distorting his features into something unrecognizable. He didn’t look like his brother just then or even a human; he resembled a monster. “He sent those shifters after me, and when I was on my deathbed, he made a deal with me. He stole my soul to keep me from you.”

Even before S had finished speaking, Z was shaking her head. “No. He wouldn’t do that.”

Hope momentarily flared to life in my chest.

Z was defending Devlin. Did that mean she was still there? That I hadn’t lost her completely?

And then Z continued, “He’s a spineless coward who left me. He didn’t want me back. If he did, he would’ve come for me years ago.”

Anger coated her words. Anger and...betrayal.

Is that what this dark magic was? Did it prey on her insecurities and twist her emotions until they were unrecognizable? Z knew how much Devlin loved her. She had to know.



“It’s the truth!” S threw his hands up in the air. “The princes don’t care about you. They’re just using you.”

“All right. Enough of this.” Aaliyah stepped forward gracefully until she was in between the two of them. She smoothed a hand down her gown before absently studying her talon-like nails. “S, why don’t you go and check on our... project?”

Project?

An ominous chill worked its way down my spine.

What project could they be working on?

I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out.

S muttered something inarticulate, glared at me, and then sent one last longing look in Z’s direction before heading down a separate hallway.

“Mali?” Aaliyah turned towards the trembling woman hovering in the corner of the room.

I had nearly forgotten Mali was even here.

Z’s old friend looked unnaturally pale, her eyes outlined with purple. She twisted her hands together as she shifted her gaze between Aaliyah, Z, and then finally me.

“Why don’t you show our guests their rooms? Z, I’m assuming you would like the incubus to stay with you?” Aaliyah smirked as if she already knew the answer and just wanted to hear Z admit it.

I felt my mate’s hand on my wrist a split second before she tugged me forward. I stumbled over my own two feet, internally wincing as pain reverberated through me.

For a human, Z was *strong*.

“He’s mine,” she snarled again, the possessiveness in her voice unmistakable.

“Yes.” Aaliyah gave me a look I couldn’t quite read but definitely didn’t like. “Yes, I suppose he is.”

FOUR



## Z

**T**he incubus intrigued me.

Maybe that wasn't the right word—hell only knew I wasn't the most articulate person—but that was the only one I could come up with.

Intrigue.

Whenever I stared at him, I felt a flicker of...something in my chest, migrating to my belly. Something warm and foreign exploded within me like errant fireworks set off one after the other. Heat rushed through my veins, setting me alight, and my stomach muscles tightened deliciously.

But then that sensation would fade, leaving me feeling oddly bereft.

There was something I needed to remember...

Something in regard to the striking incubus with reddish-brown hair, startling brown eyes, and a myriad of colorful tattoos...

The fleeting thought was there and gone too quickly for me to grab ahold of, slipping through my fingers like trickling water.

What could I possibly have to remember? I was where I was supposed to be—with my sister who loved me, in the

mansion she had created for us. The incubus being here with me was just an added bonus.

The incubus.

Killian.

A strange tremor worked its way through my body.

I furtively glanced at him over my shoulder, noting the disheveled state of his garnet-colored hair and the purple shadows beneath both of his eyes. His worry sat on my chest like a stone, but I pushed the ridiculous sensation away and focused on following Mali down the twining hallways of my sister's manor.

It was exactly what I would expect from Aaliyah—gothic and stunning, with dark stone walls, candlelit hallways, and heavy oak doors with ornate brass knobs. The carpeting beneath my feet was a dark, all-consuming red.

As red as blood.

The thought curved up my lips.

“Z...” Mali's hushed voice pulled my attention back to her, where she walked slightly in front of me. She stopped in the middle of the hallway and spun to face me, her hands immediately going to the hemline of her dress to fiddle with the fabric there. Labored breaths stumbled their way through her chest. “I can't believe you're here. I missed you so much.”

I squinted at the petite woman and canted my head to the side.

Why was she staring at me with such...love? She'd betrayed me, betrayed Diego, and she deserved to pay for her sins. But alas, it seemed as if my beloved sister needed her

alive for some nefarious purpose. I would just have to wait until I could exact my vengeance.

What a shame.

Perhaps I could discuss it with Aaliyah...

“Mali, don’t,” Killian warned softly from behind me.

His low, almost husky voice sent a shiver rippling up my spine. I knew it was his incubus powers eliciting such a reaction from me, and yet...

I could almost feel his hands on me, worshiping my flesh, teasing me, wringing every ounce of pleasure out of my sweat-soaked body.

Anger quickly sliced through my strange thoughts.

“You don’t talk unless I tell you to,” I snapped at the incubus, whirling around to glare at him. I was still gripping his wrist tightly, but if my hold hurt him, he didn’t let it show on his face.

“This isn’t you, Z.” Killian hefted his chin up resolutely, refusing to break my stare. “And deep down, you know it.”

“Shut the fuck up before I hurt you,” I growled, feeling something dark and insidious slither beneath my skin.

This power... It wanted an outlet. It wanted to feed—to feast—on the striking man before me. All I needed to do was let my magic slip...

*No! Don’t hurt him!*

I internally winced at the mental voice. Anxiety burrowed deeply in my chest as tension coiled around my throat.

What the fuck *was* that?

Why was I defending this incubus?

He was nothing but a toy for me to use and discard. He wasn't my family. Aaliyah was.

And yet...

"You'll never hurt me." Killian continued to hold my stare, trying not to show a single sliver of fear. Even still, I could hear how desperately his heart was beating, the sound almost deafening in the quiet of the hall. The vein in his neck pulsed wildly. "We're mates, Z. I love you—"

"Stop." I shook my head vehemently as that one word clattered around and around in my brain, demanding my attention.

Mates.

Mates.

My...mate.

But no.

I didn't have mates, and even if I did, I wouldn't want them. Mates were only tools the universe put on this Earth to have power over you—to forge you into a monster and then smash you into a thousand intricate pieces. I refused to bend and break to the will of these men.

Besides, having "mates" would just take away from what was truly important—Aaliyah. She gave up her mates for me, and if I had to do the same for her, I would.

Thoughts of my sister sent that strange magic dancing inside of me. It was dark and almost insidious, reminding me distinctly of fog slithering over a graveyard in the dead of night, when the moon was just barely visible amongst the clouds. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before. A part of me knew to be cautious and wary, but the rest...

This magic would never hurt me. It was a gift from Aaliyah, and Aaliyah loved me.

Then why did it taste like chalky ash on my tongue? Why did raw fear increase the tempo of my heart?

Why did this power feel so...malevolent?

Almost as soon as I had that transgressing thought, the dark power inside of me shoved it away. Banished it.

It didn't want me to think of it as evil.

Was it strange that this magic felt almost...sentient? I swore it had a mind and will of its own. Its silky voice whispered to me, coaxing me, reminding me of my purpose.

This power felt like kindling ready to burn at the first suggestion of heat, and I was a living, breathing fire about to set it aflame.

"Come on," I snapped, turning away from Killian more quickly than I wanted to.

The last thing I needed was for him to see that he rattled me.

Because he did.

That one word he said kept replaying on a continuous loop in my head—this discordant key on a broken piano pressed repeatedly.

Mates.

Mates.

Mates.

Mali sniffed but continued walking, stopping only when we reached a room at the very end of the hall. She didn't immediately open the door, however. Instead, she stood there,



one of her hands on the knob while the other fisted the long, purple skirts of her dress.

“I never wanted this for you, Z. Believe it or not, everything I’ve done has been to try and protect you.”

I scoffed before I could stop myself. “Is that what you believe? I honestly can’t say I felt *protected* when Diego sacrificed himself for me. You remember Diego, don’t you? Our best friend? Who was killed by your mate? Because of you? No, the only person who has ever protected me is Aaliyah.”

She winced, the move nearly imperceptible, before swallowing hard. She looked as if she wanted to say more but quickly decided against it.

Smart move.

If she were to speak badly about my sister, I would have to kill her.

Without any fanfare or flourish, Mali pushed open the door to the room and stepped aside.

“This will be where you’ll be sleeping for the time being.” She turned to address Killian behind me. “Both of you.” And then, under her breath, she added, “Unless you decide you want Aaliyah to have a turn with your mate.”

The javelin of jealousy that pierced my chest at just the *idea* of Killian with another woman took me by surprise. I knew I shouldn’t feel this strongly about the shy prince, yet...

If anyone were to even look at Killian, I would stab them in their eyeballs. Even if that person was Aaliyah.

But no.

I shouldn't think like that about my sister, right? I loved her, didn't I?

Even still, I knew I couldn't share Killian with her.

He. Was. *Mine*.

I only realized I was gripping Killian's wrist too tightly when he let out a grunt of pain. I instinctively released him and whirled around, just in time to see him rub at his reddened skin, where five crescent-shaped indents marred his pale flesh.

Seeing him hurt fostered something inside of me.

Something warm.

Something foreign.

Something—

The magic inside of me swept all of those soft emotions away, replacing them with anger.

“Mali, leave,” I growled at the vampire, not tearing my gaze away from the incubus.

Killian swallowed.

“Z...” Mali began, her tone bordering on desperate.

“Leave. Now!” The last word was practically a snarl, and Mali choked back whatever retort she wanted to make, hurrying away.

I took a step backwards into the room, and Killian instinctively ventured a single one forward. The door behind him slammed shut.

“Z?” His brows slanted into a frown.

When Mali said my name, I felt nothing but annoyance and an almost elemental fury.

But when Killian said it...

Every nerve ending in my body went into a frenzy.

“You’re here for a reason, incubus,” I purred, reaching behind me for the strings on my dress.

Killian just continued to watch me with a confused expression.

“Z, we really need to talk.” He swallowed yet again, his eyes flaring with pain, and the tide of emotion that swept over me then at the sight threatened to batter down my composure.

But just like before, the dark power inside of me built it back up and reinforced it.

“I don’t want to talk.” I undid the last string on my dress.

“Then what do you want to do?” He threw his hands up in the air with an exasperated huff just as I allowed the blood-splattered wedding dress to fall at my feet in a discarded bundle.

I was standing before him in only a lacy white bra, white thong, and thigh-high stockings. I didn’t know where my heels had gone—probably still at the capital with all of those dead bodies.

The thought brought a tentative smile to my lips.

“Z...what?” Killian couldn’t quite decide where to look. His pupils dilated with lust...before he quickly snapped his head up, focusing on the ceiling. “No. You’re not yourself. I’m not going to take advantage of you when you’re like this.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at the young incubus’s naïveté. As if he could possibly take advantage of *me*...

Silly, silly boy.

“What if I want you to?” I reached for the back of my bra and unhooked it, allowing the straps to slide down my arms and land beside the dress.

My nipples were already hard and ready for his mouth. I wanted him to touch me. Everywhere.

“No, Z.” Killian shook his head rapidly even as his cock strained against his trousers.

He still wouldn’t look at me.

I had to try something else.

Biting down on my lower lip, I took a step closer and fingered the waistband of his pants.

“If you don’t want me, maybe I’ll find someone who does.” I stared at him through my lashes as I unzipped his fly and then slowly began to inch his pants down his legs.

His cock sprang free, a pearl of precum already glistening on the tip, and I didn’t waste any time wrapping my hand around his hard length.

Killian’s eyes snapped to mine at the threat, and the anger I saw in them nearly broke through the dark haze clouding my mind.

“Don’t you dare,” he growled with a possessiveness that was startling coming from my sweet, timid mate—

Wait. Not mate.

No.

Killian grabbed my ass and yanked me against him, until his hard cock was rubbing against my stomach. Unable to continue touching his length in this new position, I pushed up

onto my tiptoes and ran my fingers through his orange and red hair, the color of autumn itself flecked with yellow and brown.

“I don’t care how lost to the darkness you are,” he continued in that low, growly voice that had heat pooling low in my stomach and my thighs clenching together. “You don’t touch anyone who isn’t one of us.”

“One of us?” I blinked at him as his words stirred the beginnings of a memory.

“One of your mates,” he hissed. “One of your seven.”

And then he slanted his lips over mine, and coherent thoughts left me.

FIVE



## Z

**M**y heartbeat sped up as Killian roughly grabbed both of my breasts and pinched my nipples. It was a punishing sort of touch, but one that had flames burning through me all the same.

I tried to tell myself that this was just lust, just need, just want...

But the fluttery sensation in my stomach couldn't be dissuaded. I tried to strangle each and every one of the butterflies that popped up inside of me even as I deepened the kiss, tilting my head to grant Killian better access.

I hadn't had time to survey the room before I practically jumped the incubus, but Killian seemed to have no such problems. He expertly gripped me underneath my ass and walked us to the four-poster bed seated in the middle of the spacious room. I barely had time to see a canopy draped overtop—the curtains blood-red—before Killian was hovering over me, his face consuming the entirety of my vision, his red hair tickling my cheeks with each desperate press of his lips to mine.

A sharp crack wheedled through my chest as strange feelings bombarded me.

Why did I want to pull him closer?

Was it just sex?

No.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

The familiar claws of panic raked up my spine as I struggled to make sense of the inner workings of my own mind, but Killian stopped my thoughts with another toe-curling kiss.

“No thinking,” he whispered harshly as he lowered his lips to my jawline, then my neck, and then finally my breasts.

He pulled one into his mouth, his tongue laving over my aching nipple, and kneaded the other one with his hand. I moaned and writhed on the bed, desperate for more.

Desperate for him.

This desperation didn't seem unfamiliar, yet I couldn't remember ever feeling it before.

“I need you to remember me, Z.” He planted a chaste kiss to my right nipple before moving his tongue and lips to the other. “If I have to pry you open and carve my name into your heart, I will.”

Said heart picked up speed.

“I remember you,” I told him firmly. “You're the incubus prince.”

I knew that for a fact.

Killian growled something I couldn't quite understand as he continued to rain kisses down my stomach, and then he stopped when he reached my tiny white thong.



“You know that’s not all I am to you.” His hot breath wafted against my most sensitive area, and a moan lodged itself in my throat as I allowed my eyelids to flutter shut.

Even still, my heartbeat sped up, tripping hastily over itself.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No?” He seemed almost angry as he shoved my thong aside and stuck a single finger inside of me. I was already so wet for him, practically dripping. “Are you telling me you’ve been this turned on before? This desperate? No. You haven’t. Not for anyone who isn’t your mate.”

“You don’t know that,” I growled as he continued to fuck me with his fingers.

I stared down the length of my body as his eyes darkened even further, like the sun shrouded by a cloud.

“I know every spot that makes you moan, Z, and it’s not just because I’m an incubus. I watched you. Studied you. Learned from those little noises you make when one of us is touching you.” His teeth grazed the inside of my thigh, and my hips instinctively jerked off the bed. “Like that.”

I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Just fuck me,” I snapped as I thrust my hips against his face, desperate to get his tongue on me. “I don’t need you to overanalyze every interaction. This means nothing.”

“This means *everything*.” The angry growl was hissed against my core as he brought his lips to my clit, sucking on it.

His fingers continued to piston in and out of me, stroking my G-spot, as I resisted the urge to scream his name.

I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“Do you feel how wet you are for me?” When he lifted his head from my pussy, his lips were dripping with the evidence of my arousal, his eyes wild and fevered. He grabbed ahold of my hand and guided it to my wetness, rubbing it around my juices. “You don’t get this wet for anybody but your mates. Now let me see you touch your pretty pink nipples while I continue to eat your pussy. Can you do that, Z? Can you be a good girl for me?”

I whimpered, the noise escaping me before I could swallow it back. But I wanted what Killian was offering. No, I *needed* it. It was an all-consuming, desperate sort of need that had me gasping. My pleasure was just within arm’s reach, a snowball gathering momentum as it rolled down a steep hill.

I began to pluck at my nipples, forcing them to stand at attention, smearing my arousal across the perky mounds in the process.

Killian watched me from where he knelt between my legs, his eyes hooded with desire and wanton need.

“Killian,” I cried out. “Touch me. I want your cock inside of me. Now.”

He chuckled, the noise low and dark and somehow throwing gasoline onto the already roaring flames.

“I’m not going to fuck you until you tell me you love me, Z.” He smiled wickedly, not a hint of the shy, timid man I’d come to love—

No, not love.

Fuck.

“I don’t love you.” I desperately gyrated my hips, my clit rubbing against his chin with every thrust. But it wasn’t enough.

Was I desperate enough to say those three words, even though they were a lie? I didn't love Killian. I didn't love anyone but Aaliyah.

Yet...

He chuckled wryly and stuck his finger back into my soaked pussy.

“But don't worry, my love. I won't leave you wanting. Just because I'm not going to fuck you doesn't mean I won't let you come.” His dark, unmerciful smile was all I saw a second before he dipped his head between my legs once more.

His hands cupped the backs of my thighs where my stockings ended and hefted my legs over his shoulders so he had better access to my aching core.

I continued to pluck at my nipples as his tongue swirled inside of me and his fingers scissored in a way that had me seeing stars.

“I'm so close,” I whimpered as I rode his face.

“You're mine, Z. Mine and my brothers. And you're going to remember that.” He bit down on my clit. Hard. And then he said the magic words that had me falling off that cliffside, spiraling head over heels into the abyss of the unknown. “Come for me, my love. Come for your incubus.”

I shattered, falling apart and knowing in the depths of my soul that Killian would always be there to put me back together again.

But even as I thought that, another surge of that dark magic rushed through me.

No, Killian wouldn't put me back together again.

None of them would.

I could only rely on myself and my sister if I ever hoped to survive this cruel world.

SIX



## DEVLIN

I could barely hear Ryland's footsteps as they whispered across the floor a few paces behind me.

The dungeons were unnaturally cold—a product, I was sure, of magic—and the air held a stale quality to it that had me desperate to run outside. The farther we walked, the scarcer the light became, until the monotony of blackness was only broken apart by intermittent torches of fire.

“Remind me why we're doing this again when we should be on our way?” Ryland's voice was dry and airy, though I detected an undercurrent of wariness to it that he couldn't hide.

I wiped cobwebs off of my suit jacket as I moved farther into the bowels of the council's dungeon.

“Because I made a deal.”

Ryland went silent as he floated after me, dancing from shadow to shadow, his form never taking shape longer than a second or two at a time.

“Is this about your lamp?” he asked softly, and I stiffened.

“You know?” It wasn't a question, though I found myself phrasing it as one.

Of course Ryland would know. He knew everything when it came to the inner workings of the royals. There was a reason why most shadows became esteemed spies, after all.

Ryland didn't answer, either content to allow me to stew in my thoughts or finding that my question didn't require a response.

"I couldn't let him die," I whispered when I felt as if I was going to suffocate—and not just because the air was becoming thinner and thinner with every step we took.

Ryland, once again, remained silent.

I didn't think of S often, but when I did, it was always with a pang of sadness and grief. The human had been there for Z when I couldn't be—when I'd been forced to stay away—and he hadn't deserved to die the way he had, ripped to pieces by volatile and angry shifters.

When he had been on his metaphorical deathbed, weeping softly and crying out for Z, I had made him a deal. I'd owed him the world...and I still did, if I was being completely honest. Even now, I felt no jealousy over his relationship with Z. I was just grateful she had someone at her side when the entire world seemed to be against her.

All S had wanted was Z's protection, and I'd granted him that wish easily. After all, I'd been protecting Z from the shadows for years by then. And I'd planned to protect her the rest of my life.

His body had failed in that clearing—a carcass of blood and ripped flesh—but his soul... His soul had become *mine*. Trapped in my lamp.

And then my lamp had been stolen.

A fellow genie, Laurel, had retrieved my lamp for me. Despite the fact that S's soul had been stolen by some unknown foe, I had become indebted to her.

Which was why I was here, in the dungeons, about to free an unknown shifter.

My magic was quite literally battering at my rib cage, demanding I uphold my end of the bargain.

The problem was, I had no idea who the fuck I was releasing into the world. It wasn't as if our fathers kept meticulous paperwork of their captives. This shifter could be a rebel, a prisoner of war, a murderer, a rapist, a common thief, or even a normal guy who just spoke poorly about the ruling monarchs.

Indecision warred in my gut, but even as I thought about resisting, my own magic rebelled against me, propelling me forward. I was nothing but a puppet held up by taut strings.

Fuck.

Labored breaths lumbered their way through my chest, and fear burrowed deep within me. I hated this feeling—hated not knowing all of the facts. How could I decide what to do next when my knowledge of the situation was limited at best?

“Am I doing the right thing?” I asked Ryland, running my fingers through my dark-brown hair.

I'd never felt more like a fraud than I did then. No amount of fancy suits or slicked-back hair or polished shoes could hide the fact that I wasn't a leader... I was merely a scared boy. Losing Z had crippled something fundamental inside of me. The so-called “man with a plan” was now desperate to have someone take the reins and tell him he was making the right decision.



“You don’t have a choice,” Ryland responded carefully.

No, I didn’t.

And that just made everything worse.

All I wanted to do was get on the road and find Z, but I couldn’t. Not until I did this one thing.

However, the skin on the back of my neck couldn’t help but prickle, as if my own body was warning me against freeing this prisoner.

My polished loafers sounded ominously loud as I stomped against the concrete ground, but no prisoners lifted their heads to stare at me. This far away from the entrance, the prisoners were emaciated shells of their former selves—sunken eyes, pale skins, jugged cheekbones, and slender skeletons. It was as if time itself had forgotten about them, leaving them behind to rot and wither away.

“Once this is done, we can get back to Z,” I told Ryland, praying more than anything that I was telling the truth.

The combined smells of piss, blood, vomit, and shit were even more prominent at my final destination.

All I could see was a limp form on the yellowing bed, tangled hair obscuring his features from view.

My heart hammered like a snare drum in my chest as I reached for the huge bronze key I kept in my pocket.

Was I trembling? *Why* was I trembling?

I was the prince of genies, for fuck’s sake. People feared me, not the other way around. No matter what I faced in this cell, it couldn’t be worse than losing Z to Aaliyah.

That thought bolstered my resolve, and the hand holding the key steadied.

Yes, I could do this.

The sooner I freed this shifter for Laurel, the sooner I could begin searching for Z. My brothers were relying on me to devise a plan. Lupe was in the library, poring over books in a desperate attempt to find any information about the dagger and dark magic. Dair was packing for our trip, and Bash was brewing potions to help us in the battle to come. As soon as I returned to them, I could help formulate a plan.

Save Z, kill Aaliyah, claim our thrones.

I slowly put the key in the padlock and gave it a sharp twist.

The padlock clattered to the ground, and the cell door slid open on silent hinges.

“Today’s your lucky day,” Ryland retorted dryly to the prisoner from where he stood in the hallway, seamlessly blending into the shadows. “You’re free.”

The figure didn’t even twitch.

I wondered belatedly if I should check on him but figured that wasn’t a part of my job description. His cell was open. He was free to leave.

And if he chose to stay here? Well, would that be a bad thing?

I was just about to exit the cell when the shifter slowly lifted his head.

His eyes met mine, and the world went still.

SEVEN



# JAX

**T**he walls were bleeding.

Red, red, red.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I shifted on the bed until I was upside down, but now it looked as if the blood was floating upwards, defying the law of gravity itself.

Pretty, pretty blood.

So much blood.

And the voices...

I heard them calling for me, screaming at me, yelling at me. The louder they got, the more incessant they became, and I feared my brain would explode from the overwhelming onslaught of it all. It felt as if a thousand tiny needles were being jabbed into my head simultaneously.

Z...

Z made the voices go away.

She made the walls stop bleeding.

But she wasn't here.

Gone.

Gone.

Gone.

I placed both of my hands over my ears and released a roar of rage. Anger and fear intermingled in my chest to create a potent mixture.

I knew I was losing my shit, but more than anything, I needed to make sure Z was okay. I had been Aaliyah's prisoner before, and I knew firsthand how malicious she could be. I didn't necessarily trust the others' assessments of the devil.

They believed she wouldn't hurt Z.

I knew the truth.

Aaliyah wouldn't hesitate to slit Z's throat if she believed it would benefit her in some way.

Soon, the walls would be painted red with Z's blood... unless I could save her.

Like she saved me.

I squeezed my eyelids shut to stop the bombardment of images battering at my defenses.

Z...

I needed to reach Z.

I needed to find her.

Still, the voices screamed on.

EIGHT



## Z

**I** woke up in the strong arms of my incubus.

No...not my incubus.

*The incubus.*

The incubus I'd slept with.

Though...I supposed I hadn't *actually* had sex with him.

I peeled my upper lip away from my teeth in disgust.

How could I have been so stupid? I knew I needed to resist these nightmares' charms, yet I had fallen into bed with the first one who'd shown me even the slightest bit of attention. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

These monsters were trying to take me from my sister. I couldn't allow that to happen.

I grabbed the arm that was wrapped around me, held it in the air, and then slowly slid out from underneath it. My heart rate spiked when the incubus released a low moan, the noise almost pained, but I hardened the traitorous organ quickly. All I needed to do was remind myself of how dangerous these men were, and then any and all warm thoughts concerning them dissipated.

I hated Killian.

*Hated* him.

Even if my body did respond to his in a way that was completely visceral, almost unnatural.

My pussy throbbed as if it were trying to remind me of how good we were together. I swore I could feel his touch even now, hours later. There would no doubt be bruises on my thighs from where he'd held my legs in the air, but I didn't mind.

Wait. No.

I minded.

I definitely minded.

Fucking incubus.

His powers caused this reaction in me. That was all. If he had been a normal nightmare or a human, I wouldn't have looked at him twice.

Yes. That made sense.

I placed a fist to my forehead as if that could somehow quell my growing migraine.

Aaliyah.

I needed to see Aaliyah.

Fortunately, there was a robe inside of the closet, so I slipped it on before hurrying out of my room.

I didn't find Aaliyah in the kitchen or the dining room. However, my gurgling stomach told me that I needed to eat before I searched for her further. Orgasms took a lot out of me.

Even ones given by scumbags.



After scarfing down a banana and toast, I moved from room to room, getting the lay of the land while also searching for my sister.

Aaliyah had truly outdone herself. Each room I entered was more gorgeous than the last. Through each window, I could see the edge of a cliffside leading down to a rippling lake far below. White froth broke against craggy rocks as the water ate at the shore before retreating. Something about that sight niggled at me...

Had I been here before?

I shook my head to dismiss such an absurd thought. I certainly would remember if I'd stepped foot in the home Aaliyah had created for us.

I found my sister in the fifth room I checked, in what appeared to be a lounge with a grand piano. The carpeting was blood-red, and it contrasted greatly with the black walls and matching leather furniture. A simple loveseat sat opposite the grand piano, and the window was open, allowing the fish-scented breeze to drift inside.

Aaliyah sat at the piano with her back towards me, facing the window, her fingers moving rapidly over the keys as she swayed. I didn't recognize the song, but a feeling of contentedness and peacefulness rippled through me. I slowly inched towards the loveseat and perched daintily on the edge, closing my eyes as the music flowed through me.

My heart lurched like a baby bird taking flight for the first time.

This song...

Where had I heard it before?

“You used to be amazing at the harp,” Aaliyah murmured, her voice pulling me out of the daze I found myself in.

I snapped my eyes open to see that she had stopped playing and had twisted slightly on the piano stool to face me.

“Me?” I scoffed and shook my head. “I can’t play an instrument to save my life.”

A tiny smirk tugged at the edges of her ruby-red lips. They were almost the exact same shade as the carpeting. I was beginning to believe my sister had a favorite color.

“Maybe now. But the old you... She could play the harp better than anyone I know.” A wistful sigh escaped her, and I felt an answering pang tug at my own heart in response to her obvious pain.

“I’m not her anymore, Aaliyah,” I whispered, fiddling with the tie of my robe. “I’m not Gabrielle or even Gabriella.”

I didn’t know if I believed Aaliyah when she’d claimed I was a reincarnated angel. I knew she was my sister and I loved her, but reincarnation? Angels? Demons? That was almost laughable.

And yet...

Questions rattled around in my brain, each one demanding my attention, but I didn’t know which one to settle on. I had too much I wanted to ask.

Aaliyah shifted slightly so she was once again facing the piano. She began to play the song I’d heard before, only at a much slower pace. It made the music sound eerie instead of enchanting, ominous instead of melodic.

“I don’t want you to be Gabrielle,” she answered. “Gabrielle died.”

“I just don’t understand...” I brought a hand to my forehead and rubbed at the skin there, gently massaging the muscle. “Everything’s so confusing.”

“All you need to know is that you’re my sister, I love you, and I won’t lose you again.” Anger seeped into my sister’s voice, darkening each word until she sounded almost unrecognizable.

Goose bumps glided down my spine, though I didn’t understand why. I told myself I should be comforted by her words, yet the part of my brain that housed my fight-or-flight response became triggered.

I shifted uncomfortably on the leather seat.

“Is it true that we’re...reincarnations of an angel and a demon?” That question had been haunting me for weeks now, since I was first told the truth by Aaliyah.

Back then, I had scoffed. But also back then, I had been under the control of my so-called “mates.” Now, the shutters had been peeled away from my eyes, and I could see everything clearly.

Aaliyah’s fingers slowed over the keys, though she didn’t quit playing. I watched her silky red hair fall over one shoulder as she bent her head. Silence descended, and for a long moment, she didn’t move, a statue frozen in time. But then she heaved out a labored breath and straightened, pushing her shoulders back and hefting her chin.

“There’s something you should see,” she said at last, standing gracefully and smoothing a hand down her dress.

Somehow, despite the sun having barely risen above the tops of clouds to start the day, she looked as perfect as ever, a vision in red. There wasn’t a single hair out of place, and her

makeup was meticulous. I felt like a ruffled shit show with my mussed hair and bathrobe.

Inadequate.

Unworthy.

Useless.

“What is it?” I eyed her warily, but not because I didn’t trust her. I trusted her more than anyone else in my life. She was my sister, my best friend, my soulmate.

I knew she would never hurt me—not like my mates would.

“You need to know where we came from to understand the past.” She extended a perfectly manicured hand towards me. “You need to know where *I* came from to understand the past,” she corrected after a moment.

“I don’t understand.”

“Come on.” She grabbed my hand and hauled me to my feet. “There’s a lot we need to talk about. And to do that, I need to show you my basement.”

NINE



## Z

**W**hen Aaliyah said she wanted to show me her basement, I didn't know what I expected.

Bodies strewn from the ceiling like macabre, bloody streamers? Torture devices lining the walls? Dank, suffocating air permeated with the stench of sweat and decay?

It was none of that.

I would almost describe the basement as cozy, though even that descriptor felt wrong. It certainly was different from the rest of the mansion, with its cream-painted walls, floral furniture, and light-gray ash wood floors.

If the upstairs was a gothic paradise, the downstairs was a historian's wet dream. A lot of these appliances hadn't been used in hundreds of years—since well before the nightmares took over the world and marginalized us humans.

“This place is my sanctuary,” Aaliyah said, noting the direction of my gaze. A leather sectional sat in front of what was once called a television, though the screen had become cracked with age, now resembling a dozen intertwined spiderwebs. “It's...calming. Peaceful. Don't you agree?”

“Humans used to have it so easy,” I murmured almost absently, thinking of the “before” time.

Before nightmares declared themselves as supreme rulers of the world.

Before humans were enslaved.

Before resistance factions sprouted in every major city throughout the world and fought back against their oppressors.

“They did,” Aaliyah agreed.

Her tone was almost absent as she studied a bookshelf. Though it wasn't wide, it was nearly two times as tall as my sister, displaying row after row of carefully placed spines, all of varying colors and sizes. One would need to use a ladder if they had any hope of reaching a book on the highest shelf.

Fortunately, it was a book near the middle that Aaliyah wanted—an unassuming, red tome with faded gold script down its spine. She tugged at it, but instead of flying off the shelf, it merely tilted at an odd angle.

The bookshelf swung to the side, revealing a secret staircase hidden behind the towering structure.

“Woah.” I stared at my sister in awe, stunned once again by her sheer brilliance.

A secret staircase behind a bookshelf?

Yeah. My sister was a total badass.

Pride blossomed within me, and I had to hold in my budding smile.

Aaliyah grabbed a lit lantern off a side table and held it into the opening, illuminating the stone staircase that seemed to descend downwards into a pool of inky blackness. The sight had the fine hairs on the back of my neck turning into spikes. An uneasy feeling reverberated through me.

A little voice in the back of my head, the same voice that seemed drawn to that damn incubus, warned me against going down that staircase.

I shushed the voice, straightened my spine, and then moved to follow my sister. I practically preened when she gave me a tiny nod of approval.

Now, this... *This* was what I expected when Aaliyah mentioned a basement.

Dark, creepy, and covered in cobwebs.

I suddenly wished desperately I had remembered shoes or even slippers. The concrete beneath my feet was unbearably cold, almost like ice. I had to hold in my wince with every step I took.

“You’re probably going to have more questions once we reach the bottom,” Aaliyah said, not bothering to look over her shoulder to address me.

The flickering flames created strange, unnerving shadows on the stone walls that twisted and writhed like red and orange snakes. Seeing those shadows conjured up an image of icy-blue eyes and a scarred, handsome face...

“I already feel as if I have a million questions,” I said, desperate to think of anything but the men who claimed to be my mates. “I’m afraid my head might explode if I don’t get some answers.”

“We wouldn’t want that, would we?” I heard the smirk in her voice, and I just knew her blood-red lips would be twisted in a rictus grin.

“I rather like my head connected to my shoulders, thank you very much.”



We finally reached the bottom of the staircase, and Aaliyah guided me down a small hall and into a spacious room at the very end of it.

There wasn't a doorway—only a large arch where a door once resided—so I saw S a second before he spotted me.

My ex-lover was standing with his back to us, scratching absently at his head. Clumps of hair fell to the ground with every drag of his fingers against his scalp.

In front of him was a large, bottomless pit. Strange, gray sparks seemed to be emitting from the abyss, zapping S repeatedly as he stood there, oblivious to our presence.

Aaliyah cleared her throat doggedly, and S spun around, his eyes bloodshot and tired. They immediately homed in on me, and a slow smile curled up his lips. I didn't want to say it was a cruel smile, but something about it raced pinpricks of panic down my spine. Fear seemed to grip me by the throat and shake me back and forth like a rag doll.

“Z...” he breathed, the awe and reverence in his voice a dagger to my heart.

A part of me vaguely remembered what he once meant to me, but the rest...felt absolutely nothing. No lust. No love. No respect.

Only terror.

Even with Killian, a nightmare I was sure I hated, I felt the stirrings of arousal whenever I stared into his honey-brown eyes.

Honestly, S's attention was beginning to become a little annoying. I would need to talk to Aaliyah about him, and sooner rather than later. Perhaps she would agree that he had served his purpose.

I ignored my ex-lover and focused instead on the pit.

Peering over the side, I expected to see craggy rocks—perhaps resembling the cliff face our mansion resided on—but instead, the walls were smooth, polished stone. The hole seemed to go on and on forever, no end in sight, just a direct pathway to the middle of the Earth.

“Careful,” Aaliyah warned from behind me. “I don’t want you to fall in.”

“What is this?” I furrowed my brows as I crouched down beside the opening.

On closer inspection, I could see tiny grooves marring the dark stone. Grooves that almost looked like they came from... fingers.

“This, my dear sister”—Aaliyah moved to crouch beside me, following the direction of my gaze—“is a portal to hell.”

She paused after dropping that bombshell, only her eyes shifting to gauge my reaction.

I was frozen, stunned speechless, my head throbbing as I struggled to understand her words.

A portal...to hell?

I knew that Aaliyah was somehow resurrecting extinct supernatural creatures, and we suspected she had access to hell somehow, but I didn’t expect *this*.

Not a literal hole in the ground that seemed to go on and on forever.

“W-what?” I stuttered, fumbling over my words.

My brain raced through a game of connect the dots.

“And it’s also the hole I crawled out of to get to you,” she continued softly, brushing a strand of orange hair behind her ear. Pain splayed across her face, and she swallowed heavily, a muscle in her throat bobbing. “It took me hundreds and hundreds of years to dig myself out of hell, but I did it. For you, Z. To avenge you. To make things right.”

Those grooves...

They must have come from her fingers as she’d pulled herself out of this pit.

My heart thundered wildly in my chest. I could scarcely breathe. The strange roaring between my ears—reminiscent of howling wind raking its skeletal claws down a window—drowned out every other sound.

“But then I discovered you were here...” She squeezed her eyelids shut, and a single tear tumbled down her cheek and settled on her lower lip. “That you had been reborn as a human. As Gabriella.”

“No.” I shook my head as a lump materialized in my throat. “Don’t call me that. Gabriella died when my parents did.”

That was the name they’d given me. But when they’d passed, I took on a new one—Z.

Z was an assassin, a rebellion leader, the esteemed Liberator who humans followed and believed in.

Gabriella was weak and defenseless.

Z was strong and conniving.

I would never be Gabriella again.

“Gabriella... Gabrielle...” Her lashes fluttered open, her eyes appearing pained. “They’re so similar. I wonder if your

parents subconsciously knew the truth about you.”

She took a deep breath and then straightened, extending a hand for me to take. I took it without thought and allowed her to pull me to my feet. Almost as soon as she released me, a coldness settled into the hollow of my bones, piercing my sensitive flesh.

“I don’t think anyone has ever loved me as much as you do,” I whispered, unable to peel my gaze away from the hole in the ground.

“No one has,” Aaliyah agreed. She took another step toward the edge and peered down. “Which is why I need to show you the truth. I need to show you what really happened.”

“How—?”

Aaliyah placed her palm on my forehead, and a searing pain ricocheted through me. Bright light consumed my vision, prisms of color that distorted my surroundings. I wasn’t sure if I screamed or if I merely cried out in pain, but the next thing I knew, Aaliyah was there, hugging me to her, stroking my hair as she attempted to console me.

“You need to see, my dear sister. You need to know the truth.”

My body felt tight, like a coil ready to spring.

The world shifted, and I knew then that I was no longer on Earth in Aaliyah’s home. Hell, I wasn’t even in my own body anymore.

I was in Aaliyah’s.

And I was watching myself die.

TEN



# AALIYAH

**T**he handsome man with white wings and the beautiful woman with ebony hair were talking about us again.

I held Gabrielle's hand even tighter as we stood in the middle of the immense room lined with stained-glass windows that reflected the Great Battle.

Our tutor had told us about the Great Battle—when angels had fought demons for dominion over Earth. It all came to a standstill when the leaders decided to make a treaty that prohibited any species from entering the realm of the humans. That treaty was signed and then solidified by the mating of the two rulers.

Mommy and Daddy—though I wasn't allowed to refer to them as such, at least to their faces.

“What's happening?” Gabrielle whispered, sidling even closer to me.

Despite being my twin sister, we looked nothing alike. Gabrielle was small, whereas I was tall, even at the age of six. Her blonde curls fell in waves around her heart-shaped, angelic face. My own hair always volleyed between blood-red and orange, depending on the way the sun shone.

And my face? It definitely wasn't of the heavenly quality. It was too sharp, too chiseled, too...mean. At least that was what my tutor always said.

"Shhh." I squeezed her hand again, trying to infuse warmth and comfort into that one touch. "I'll protect you."

And I would. I'd always protect her. It was my duty as her older sister.

Yes, I might have only been a few minutes older than her—at least according to our parents—but there was something about Gabrielle that seemed so incredibly vulnerable. Soft. Sweet. Pure. She glowed with an inner radiance that put all other angels and demons to shame.

"We need to separate them," Mother snarled, shooting the two of us a look that had Gabrielle cowering.

I simply met my mom's stare with a defiant one. I refused, absolutely refused, to show her even the slightest hint of my own fear.

"They're too powerful together."

It became a contest of wills then, the air between us practically crackling with untempered power. Every second that passed only amplified my mother's anger, her scowl deepening and her eyes transforming into thin slits.

My mother's words belatedly registered to me then.

*Separate...?*

No.

No!

Horror squeezed my heart in an iron vise. Red danced along the edges of my vision.

Surely, she couldn't mean what I thought she did. She wouldn't take me away from my sister, would she? Gabrielle was the only being in the universe who loved and cared for me. Losing her would be the equivalent of having one of my limbs severed.

The ground began to shake, and the beautiful stained-glass windows cracked down the middle before exploding outwards, raining down on us. I threw my body over Gabrielle's and shielded her the best I could. Pain reverberated down my back from where a few shards lodged themselves into my skin, but I bit down on my whimper. If Gabrielle knew I'd injured myself on her behalf, she'd be devastated.

Mother and Father both gasped, their arms coming up above their heads to protect their faces against the onslaught of glass.

*What did I just do?*

Tremors rocked my body as I slowly lifted my head and surveyed the devastation. Father's throne room had been completely obliterated. Glass was *everywhere*. On the ground. On his golden throne. On the pews.

My parents were going to hurt me, hurt Gabrielle, separate us...

A tiny hand connected with mine, and my trembling eased.

Gabrielle's soft, lyrical voice reached me as if from the opposite end of a long tunnel. "It'll be okay, my dear sister. I won't allow them to take me from you. I won't ever leave you. Ever."

There was such confidence and hope in her voice that I didn't have the heart to refute her.



But I saw the look in our parents' eyes as they regarded us—disgust and fear.

I just didn't know which emotion would win over the other.

---

“COME ON, LEE!”

All I saw was Gabrielle's white dress and her cascade of golden curls before she skirted around the nearest building, disappearing from view.

“Slow down!” I huffed, picking up my black dress so it didn't drag through the dirt.

Gabrielle simply giggled in response.

I loved the days that we were allowed to stay with Father. His home was significantly nicer than Mother's, nestled near the edge of a waterfall that appeared almost pink in the morning light—though that could be the pink stones beneath the watery surface.

Angel rocks, I believed they were called.

I hurried across the cobblestones, and despite the fact that my feet were bare, I didn't feel any pain. I never felt any pain when I was here.

“Hurry!” Gabrielle hollered as she turned another corner, ducking behind a mammoth cathedral.

It was my favorite place in all the land.

Two gray spires pierced the clouds above. The color was slightly darker than the white that made up the rest of the building—not a single blemish or stain to be seen. I once

placed my hand in mud and then laid it on the stone wall, directly below one of the numerous stained-glass windows, but to my utter astonishment, the wall merely *consumed* the muddy, brown handprint. Heaven forbid that the cathedral be anything less than pure and perfect.

I picked up speed, infusing my limbs with a little bit of power. I was faster than the average angel and demon. Stronger, too.

I'd just turned the corner when I ran face-first into a hard, muscular chest. I immediately ricocheted off of him and fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs. My orange-red hair dropped in front of my face, and I pushed the strands away impatiently, peering up at my father.

He glared down at me with untrammelled distaste.

“What are you doing running around, child?” he snapped, not bothering to extend a hand for me to take.

Quickly, I scrambled to my feet and worked to make myself look presentable. There was a tiny tear in my dress from the fall, but there was nothing I could do about it now. I just had to hope Father wouldn't notice, and if he did, he wouldn't care enough to punish me.

“I'm sorry.” I bowed my head in submission, even as a thread of anger uncoiled deep within my chest, twining around my rapidly beating heart.

“It's my fault, Father.” Gabrielle's trembling voice preceded my sister as she rounded the corner, wringing her hands together. Her blonde curls were disheveled, and there were numerous dirt stains adorning her white dress. Still, our father's face instantly softened when he caught sight of her. “We were playing.”

“Yes...well...be careful.” He cleared his throat, nodded at me dismissively, and then unfurled his brilliant wings before taking into the sky.

Soon, he was nothing more than a blip, a tiny dot barely distinguishable from the clouds.

“He hates me,” I murmured to Gabrielle as she immediately hurried forward to wipe at the dirt staining my clothes.

“He doesn’t hate you,” she protested...as she always did when I stated the truth.

“They both do.”

And it was true. Our parents resented me, and they didn’t even bother to hide it. Father believed me to be too “impure” for his precious kingdom in heaven. And Mother simply hated everyone, the darkness inside of her prohibiting her from feeling true, genuine love.

Gabrielle, on the other hand, was our father’s greatest achievement.

Beautiful, pure, ethereal, compassionate...

Even Mother couldn’t help but soften when she was in my twin’s presence. A little bit of her constant anger abated, and more than once, I saw her actually smile at one of Gabrielle’s jokes.

My parents cared for my sister and hated me.

That revelation had once filled me with an immense amount of jealousy, but over time, that feeling had dissipated, replaced by understanding.

I always knew Gabrielle hung the moon. It was just a matter of time until others realized it too.

I just prayed my sister wouldn't forget about me when that happened.

"Come on." Gabrielle flashed me a bright smile and tugged on my hand. "Let's play."

---

I COULDN'T FIND my sister.

She was supposed to meet me in front of the cathedral, but that had been hours ago. Fear and worry braided themselves together in my chest, making it hard to breathe.

Where was she?

Was she okay?

I'd been asking myself these same questions for months now.

Things had been...difficult lately.

Mother and Father had decided that it would be best to separate us. According to Mother, we were too powerful when we were together.

The bitch was just scared we would try to overthrow her and claim her throne.

Didn't she understand that we didn't want power? All we wanted—all we *needed*—was each other.

I smoothed a hand down my favorite red dress, one Gabrielle made me for my birthday last year.

*Our* birthday.

"I can't believe we're finally sixteen," she had gushed as I'd held the dress up to my chest, oohing and awwing over the

beautiful creation. “Do you think Father and Mother will allow us to visit Earth now?”

“Doubt it,” I’d said with a derisive snort. “They only allow their precious creations to have that privilege.”

Technically, the treaty prohibited either of them from sending their troops down to Earth, but I knew both of our parents bent the rules when they needed to.

You could never trust an angel or a demon.

“I really want to see Earth,” Gabrielle had murmured with a wistful sigh. Her eyes had taken on a faraway, wistful glint then, as they always did when we discussed the human realm. “Do you know that there are more humans than angels and demons alike?”

“I did know that.” I had to bite down on my lip to hide my growing smile.

“I wonder what they’re like...”

And so Gabrielle had spent the next hour hypothesizing about the humans while I’d listened intently. She had never even been to Earth, and she was already obsessing over the species that inhabited it.

The memory of my last birthday brought a smile to my face, but it quickly faded when I scanned my surroundings and still caught no sign of Gabrielle.

Where was she?

Leaving my spot beside the pearlescent building, I hurried the way I’d come from, stealthily sidestepping angels as they moved about in a daze.

Had Father called Gabrielle away?

Had Mother demanded she return home?

The two of us were only allowed to see each other once a week. During the rest of the time, we were separated—one with Mom and the other with Dad.

Lilting, musical laughter pulled my attention to the large fountain in the center of the square. A buzz of excitement at the prospect of seeing my sister again chased away the lingering panic.

I made an immediate beeline in that direction, but my steps slowed when I realized why Gabrielle hadn't met with me like she was supposed to.

She was...preoccupied.

My sister sat on the edge of the fountain, looking more beautiful than the marble statue rising from the water behind her. She crossed her legs as she smiled at the angels surrounding her. They laughed at whatever she'd said, and her smile broadened, causing her eyes to practically shine.

Something pierced my chest then.

Something strange and foreign and so fucking painful that I keeled over.

It took me a moment too long to realize what that emotion was.

Jealousy.

These angels were fawning over my sister. They were taking her attention away from me. *This* was why she hadn't come to meet me. Because of them.

I clenched my hands into tight fists and tried to remember how to breathe.

---

I WAS eighteen when Mother and Father first discussed the need for balance in the universe. They didn't know I was listening, hidden on the balcony above them.

Then again, they never noticed anything I did, content to pretend I didn't exist.

That would be their own undoing.

Mother was perched on a black canopy while Father leaned against the far wall, his arms crossed over his chest and his wings folded into his back.

They hated each other.

Always had and always would.

Even now, when they were supposed to be civil and discuss the fate of all three realms, they could barely hide the disgust that twisted their features.

Today, they were in Mother's palace, deep in hell's bowels. Comparing hell to heaven would be like comparing blackened pewter to shimmering gold. Both were beautiful in their own right, but only one was coveted.

"They're getting too powerful. When they're together, they can amplify each other's powers," Mother continued in that clipped, no-nonsense voice of hers. "We have to do something. The universe needs balance."

Father's upper lip pulled away from his teeth in a snarl. "What do you suppose we do? Kill them?"

My blood turned to ice. Every joint in my body locked into place, frozen. Fear pressed against the boundaries of my brain,

demanding my attention, but I shut that part of myself down, refusing to give it leeway.

“We can’t allow them to see each other anymore.” Mother took a delicate sip from her gold chalice, her lips turning blood-red in the process. “You know what happens whenever they get together.”

I trembled so badly, I wouldn’t be surprised if they could hear the clattering of my teeth.

No.

No, no, no.

I couldn’t hear this.

I refused to.

“Aaliyah won’t accept this.” Father blew out a tired breath.

He had Gabrielle’s golden hair, though his was somehow duller than my sister’s, almost tarnished in appearance. Still, I could see the resemblance between the two of them with just one glance.

I didn’t look like either of my parents.

“Aaliyah will be the problem,” Mother agreed with a nod. “But I don’t think we’ll have to worry about Gabrielle.”

I furrowed my brows at that.

What did they mean? Of course Gabrielle would be upset if we were separated. She loved me.

Father’s gaze softened just the slightest bit, as it always seemed to do when he talked about my twin sister. “She’s been acclimating well. Has made a lot of friends.”

Mother’s lips twitched, though it never quite reached the status of a smile. “Is she still asking about visiting Earth?”



“Of course.” Father chuckled. I honestly believed it was the first time I had ever heard him laugh before. “That girl is obsessed.”

“Allow her to go to Earth.” Mother waved a hand in the air dismissively. “She won’t even bother asking about Aaliyah then.”

What? No. They were wrong.

A heavy boulder settled in my gut, and tears pricked the backs of my eyes.

They had to be wrong.

---

THE SECOND GREAT War happened when I was twenty-two years old.

Mother no longer allowed me to visit Father anymore.

And I could no longer see my sister.

---

IT TOOK me years to find Gabrielle.

“My love, are you sure this is a good idea?”

Humility wrapped his arms around me from behind, but I slid out of his embrace, stepping closer to the tree line that currently obscured me from view.

“Of course.” I barely spared my mates a passing glance. “She’s my sister.”

And she was the one person in the world I still cared about.

Years of war and bloodshed had broken something inside of me—something irreparable. Mother had decided my “talents” were best served on the front line, slaughtering angels left and right in a desperate bid to consume control over Earth and everyone in it.

I personally knew some of the angels I’d killed. I had met them when I used to come and visit Father, before he banned me from heaven. Some of them had even been Gabrielle’s friends.

But I supposed it didn’t matter. The only reason I accepted Mother’s offer of leading my own army was because it brought me one step closer to finding my sister. The last I heard, she had been on Earth when the battle broke out.

I originally had no idea what had become of her.

Had my father pulled her back to heaven?

Was she fighting on the side of the angels?

But then one of my mates, Diligence, received word that a beautiful woman by the name of Gabrielle had settled in a small village on Earth. Apparently, she had been healing humans who had become unintentional casualties of this fucked-up war.

Trust my sister not to take heaven or hell’s side in the battle.

The thought brought a tentative smile to my lips, though it was quickly doused.

All of the pain and anger over the last few years had converged into an engorged tick that stuck to my skin. No matter what I did or how hard I pulled, I couldn’t remove it. It remained there, an immensely irritating sensation, a stark reminder of all I had done in my quest to find Gabrielle.

What if she didn't want to see me?

What if she turned me away?

What if all of the lives I'd taken had been for nothing?

My insecurities played on a loop in my head.

"Sweetheart, I'm not sure..." Gratitude placed a hand on my shoulder, but I barely gave my lover a passing glance.

All of them were wary about finding Gabrielle and having me reunite with her. They weren't sure what had become of her in the last few years. But I knew my sister, and I knew her soul—it was the purest thing that had ever existed. She wouldn't have become tarnished by the bloodshed and death.

Not like I had.

A part of me also wondered if my mates were afraid of what would happen if anyone discovered the truth about our relationship. They were the Seven Heavenly Virtues—my father's best warriors, turned my lovers. They were supposed to be my enemies, but somehow, they had become more than that.

I didn't love them, not like they loved me, but I did feel a pull towards them, an incessant tugging in the center of my chest.

And despite being the purest entities in heaven, they definitely knew how to make a woman feel good.

Patience pressed a kiss to my temple, but I pushed him aside. They all knew I hated when they touched me like that.

The town Diligence had indicated was small, with mushroom-like roofs peeking through the canopy of trees. Humans in mud-stained clothes traversed the streets, carrying barrels of food and other supplies. It was apparent that this

area hadn't been torn apart by the war yet. At the very least, there were no mass graves, and the majority of the structures seemed to be intact.

It was then that I saw *her*.

She stood in front of a small wooden hut, her features pinched with concern as two village men stepped towards her, holding a stretcher between them. She desperately gestured for the men to take the sick woman into the hut.

Here.

She was here.

Radiant.

An iridescent pearl in the darkness.

*Here.*

Tears pooled in my eyes.

A man I hadn't noticed before stepped forward and wrapped his arm around my sister's waist, pulling her against his chest. He had garnet-colored hair, the red strands interwoven with gold and brown, and was strong and muscular. He stared at Gabrielle with such tender anxiety, with such love, that I had no doubt they were together.

Patience sucked in a horrified breath from behind me. "Lust."

I spun to face him. "Lust?"

As in...one of my mother's top generals?

Patience kept his gaze trained on the redheaded man.

"This must be where the Seven Deadly Sins have disappeared to," Chastity added, his voice rife with disbelief.

The Seven Deadly Sins was the battalion my mother created to counter my father's forces. They included seven of Mother's top demons. No one knew what happened to them. One day, they had been fighting on the front lines against the angels. The next, they had...vanished. Mother assumed they had perished in the battle, but I had never been so certain.

Apparently, I was right.

Patience and Chastity exchanged a loaded glance.

"Is that Wrath?" Temperance pointed to a burly, brown-haired man who was carrying a log over his shoulder.

He dropped it onto a pile of firewood in the center of town, rubbed his hands together, and then returned to the forest.

"They're all here." Charity's lips parted. "I can't believe it."

"They must be her lovers," I murmured in awe.

And for some inexplicable reason, my mind drifted back to my parents' discussion years ago.

*Balance*, they had said.

The world needed balance.

Was that what this was? Did Gabrielle's soft, gentle nature need to be countered by the volatile tempers of the Seven Deadly Sins?

Was that why I was destined for the Seven Heavenly Virtues, my opposites in every way that mattered?

I was dimly aware of my own mates speaking behind me, their voices hushed and worried. It was only when they said Gabrielle's name did I tune back in to the conversation.

“We need to tell him,” Temperance said anxiously, scrubbing his fingers through his light-brown hair.

“My father?” I whirled around to gape at him. “You want to tell my father?”

“If we can take the Seven Deadly Sins out of commission, we’ll have a chance to win this war,” Chastity told me, his voice gentle. “We can stop the demons for good.”

“They haven’t been fighting on hell’s behalf in years! Besides, I’m one of those demons you want to stop,” I hissed, but even before I’d finished speaking, they were already shaking their heads.

“You’re nothing like them,” Patience said resolutely, reaching forward to cup my cheek.

Usually, I tolerated their touches, but just then, it felt like an iron brand against my skin, scorching my flesh. I jerked away from him and scowled.

“You’re more angel than demon, Aaliyah. You just don’t see yourself clearly yet.”

But he was wrong.

I saw myself more clearly than he did.

More clearly than anyone besides Gabrielle did.

---

“NO! PLEASE, NO!” I thrashed in Diligence’s arms as tears rained down my cheeks.

This couldn’t be happening.

No. No. No.

Father's eyes were dark and impassive as he stared down at his favorite child, though the warmth I usually saw when he looked at her was absent.

"Please, Father. Please." Gabrielle sobbed as she peered up at the man who was supposed to love her above all else.

That was how fathers behaved on Earth, after all.

But there would be no forgiveness, no redemption, no second chances. I could see the decision in Father's gaze even before he spoke. His eyes seemed to harden with every passing second, and I knew he was shutting himself down, refusing to feel the pain of this moment.

When he sentenced his own daughter to death.

I screamed and thrashed, crying Gabrielle's name.

Diligence's grip simply tightened around me. "I'm so sorry, my love. I'm so sorry."

But I didn't want to hear his apology. He did this. He told my father about Gabrielle and her lovers.

He'd sentenced her to death.

The scream that ripped from my throat then was one of pure, unbridled rage. My heart was cracking down the center.

My sister...

My twin...

My other half....

Was going to be killed in front of me.

"Please don't do this," the man I knew to be Sloth screamed from where he stood, chained to a pillar in the center of heaven's square. Directly behind him was the cathedral—

the same one Gabrielle and I used to play at when we were kids. “We’ll tell you everything you want to know. Please.”

“Gabrielle betrayed her own people.” My father’s face was tight with rage...and pain.

Only someone who knew him as well as I did could see the agony swimming in his eyes.

“I’m half demon as well, Father.” More tears trickled down Gabrielle’s cheeks, but her voice was steady when she spoke. “Or did you forget that you fucked the Queen of Hell herself?”

“Shut up.” One of the angels—a man who had been one of Gabrielle’s closest friends when they were children—backhanded her across the face.

Her mates roared as if they felt the pain as keenly as Gabrielle did.

“Let me go,” I whimpered, struggling to free myself yet again.

“I’m not going to let you sacrifice yourself,” Gratitude hissed in my ear from where he stood beside me. “Not for her. Not when she wouldn’t do the same for you.”

“Don’t you dare talk about my sister like that,” I snapped as hot tears spilled down my cheeks.

“It’s the truth,” Humility interjected, not even bothering to keep the disdain out of his voice.

So...I watched.

I watched as Father lowered his head in defeat and stepped away, unable to bear witness to his own daughter’s death.

I watched as the angels ripped at my sister’s clothes until she was naked before them.



I watched as they forced her to the ground in front of her mates and raped her, one after the other.

And then I watched as they cut her head clean from her body. Blood erupted in all directions, but when the splatters hit the side of the cathedral, they were immediately absorbed as if they'd never been there to begin with.

The only sound in the clearing were the screams of her mates...and my own sobs.

---

I KILLED my own mates that very night.

They didn't suspect a thing as I used my magic to rip them apart. It was so easy—as easy as breathing. I simply snapped my fingers, and...poof. They were nothing but blood and dismembered body parts.

But that wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

The entire world would know my name by the time I was through with it.

---

I FREED Gabrielle's mates from their prison only hours after I killed my own. I was still covered in blood and guts, the dark liquid staining my dress, but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything except for avenging Gabrielle.

Her seven men stared at me with blank expressions, not moving from where they sat in their tiny cages. There was no life in their eyes.

They might have still been breathing...but they were already dead. Their souls had died when Gabrielle had.

At first, I felt a sort of kinship with these seven demons. They could understand my pain more than anyone else on this Earth. They loved Gabrielle nearly as much as I did.

But then that empathy was washed away in a tidal wave of anger.

They should've protected her, looked after her, kept her safe. How could they have allowed this to happen?

All of my rage, fear, and pain exploded out of me in a torrent. I wanted them to hurt the way I was hurting. Their deadened stares and vacant eyes weren't enough for me. Nothing would be enough.

“She’s dead because of you! Because you couldn’t protect her!” I screamed in their faces.

They didn’t even flinch.

“I hope you all suffer for the rest of your lives. You did this to her. You killed her!”

And then I left, not bothering to close the cell doors behind me. They could leave if they wished to, but I had a feeling they would be content to rot away.

It was only later that I learned they *had* left their prison—to travel back to Earth to protect the humans Gabrielle had grown so fond of.

They had each sacrificed their magic to make the humans stronger, faster, smarter. Capable of surviving the war between heaven and hell.

These new creations were called nightmares.

In the process, the Seven Deadly Sins died.  
Good fucking riddance.

---

ALL I KNEW WAS blood and death.

Red.

Everything was red.

My hair, my blood-splattered clothes, the ground at my feet.

Nobody survived my wrath. Not angels, not demons, not even humans.

But they weren't my target.

I would only stop when my father and mother were dead at my feet.

---

MOTHER WAS the one who captured me—after I had just massacred an entire host of angels on Earth.

She took one look at my bloody face and then smirked, a slow, calculated twist of her lips.

“Maybe you're more like me than I ever imagined you to be.”

But that sentiment wasn't enough to acquit me.

She locked me away in the deepest pit of hell and threw away the key.

I didn't allow that to deter me, however. I knew I would find a way to free myself, and when I finally did, the world would pay for what it had done to my sister.

I would murder the angels, the demons, the humans...and finally, my mother and father.

No forgiveness.

No redemption.

No absolution.

*Gabrielle, I'm sorry...*

*I'll make things right.*

*Or die trying.*

ELEVEN



## Z

I was wrenched out of Aaliyah's head with a gasp, my heart racing and my palms slick with sweat. There was a horrible twisting sensation in my stomach, like all of my internal organs had been knotted together. Combined with the pounding in my head, like someone had taken a sledgehammer to my skull, I worried I was going to pass out.

“What in the...?”

“Now you understand.” Aaliyah's tone was uncharacteristically grim as she stared at me.

That foreign feeling from before screaming at me there was more I needed to understand, more I needed to see, wriggled its way through my rib cage and settled in my throat, sharp and heady, as if I'd just swallowed a barrel of battery acid.

I dashed to the side and vomited all of the meager contents of my stomach. But it felt as if I'd never empty myself enough.

What I'd seen...

What Aaliyah had been through...

What *I'd* been through...

My sister placed a hand on the small of my back.

“Everything will be okay, my dear sister. We’re together now. No one will take you from me this time.” She gently brushed at my hair, pulling it away from my face as I continued to dry heave.

There was nothing left inside of me to throw up, but that didn’t seem to matter to my aching, weary body. God, everything hurt. It went beyond physical, transforming into something I felt in the depths of my soul.

“Tell me what you need, Gabrielle.”

“I need...”

Time to process everything.

Time to understand what I’d just seen.

Time to detangle my own emotions.

Aaliyah must’ve heard my silent request because she straightened, her hand leaving my back. All I could see through my peripheral were her hands nervously running down the length of her dress. It was strange to see my sister *fidget*. It wasn’t something she did often, if at all, and was the only indication she wasn’t as calm and composed as she appeared on the surface.

“I’ll be in my room if you need me,” she said after a moment of silence.

I had no idea how she truly felt about my request—her voice gave nothing away—but I was honestly relieved when I heard her retreat. The air that had been siphoned from the room with her presence returned, and I greedily inhaled.

All too soon, my moment of peace shattered when a new hand came to rest on my back. Shivers raced down my spine,

but they weren't the pleasurable kind. These were laced with revulsion and fear.

S.

He pulled me against his muscular chest, and I immediately grew stiff. Even my heart had turned frozen in my chest, a blob of pure ice.

“There, there, my love,” he soothed as he caressed my hair the way a pet owner would a dog.

The fear from before amplified, skirting down my spine and bringing with it a cold chill.

Why hadn't I remembered that S was in the room with me? I supposed it was because he had been so silent that my consciousness seemingly forgot he was even around.

But that was my mistake. One should *never* forget when they were in the presence of a predator—and that was what S felt like as he stroked my tangled hair. I didn't feel any comfort or warmth in his embrace, only a suffocating terror.

A part of me wished Aaliyah had called S away when she left. I didn't want to deal with him.

What made everything even worse was that I could remember loving him. I could remember the electricity that sparked across my skin as his hands trailed down my sides before settling on my rib cage. I could remember the rapid pounding of my heart when I stared into his arresting, beautiful face. I could remember the love that seemed to permeate the air whenever he was nearby.

But even though I remembered all of that, I couldn't bring myself to replicate those feelings and emotions.



I couldn't bring myself to love him. Hell, I wasn't even sure if it was possible to love him anymore. This S certainly wasn't the same man I knew years ago.

His touch right now made me think I was betraying someone—or multiple someones.

And when he brushed his lips across my neck? I thought I would vomit yet again.

Hurriedly, I crawled out of his arms and jumped to my feet, purposefully avoiding his piercing gaze. I didn't want to see the love in his eyes. And I definitely didn't want him to see the disgust in my own.

“Is everything okay?” he asked tentatively, taking another step closer.

“I have something I need to do,” I replied stiffly, already shouldering past him and hurrying up the staircase.

I didn't stop there, though. I kept running until I exited the basement completely, spilling out into the hallway just outside the kitchen.

The handsome, redheaded incubus was there, his features pinched with worry and his eyes tight. When he saw me, the wrinkles crinkling both his eyes disappeared, and the tension seeming to ride his broad shoulders abated. He took a step closer, his relief at my appearance evident.

“Z...” he breathed, reaching for me. “I was so worried when I woke up and you weren't there. Are you okay?”

A part of me—a part I despised—wanted to run into his arms and seek comfort in his embrace.

I knew it was ridiculous and irrational, but I could still see the anguish on his face when I died. Well, the anguish on

Lust's face when Gabrielle died. He had looked as if he truly loved her.

But that was a lie, wasn't it? He didn't love her, just as Killian didn't love me. It was all an illusion designed to trap me. He wanted me to be his prisoner.

Even still, my body responded to Killian in a way that was unnatural. The heat between my legs intensified, aching and pulsing in time with my heartbeat. I wanted to tongue surf down his perfect, chiseled abs, tracing all of his colorful tattoos. I wanted to kiss his plush, sensual lips. I wanted to run my fingers through his hair. I wanted him to hold me.

I shook my head vehemently, willing myself to escape the lustful haze I'd found myself in.

"What happened? Where did you go? Are you okay?" Once again, Killian reached for me, but this time, I didn't step away.

His hands landed on each of my upper arms, holding me steady, grounding me. My mind twinkled like a sequined quilt as pleasure sparked in my most sensitive regions.

The magic inside of me swept forward, almost frightening in its intensity. It replaced everything that glimmered with cloying darkness. The metaphorical stars twinkling in my mind's eye were snuffed out one by one.

Lies.

Everything I felt for him was a lie.

I pulled away from him with a hiss. "Don't you dare use your incubi powers on me!"

Horror twisted his features, and his mouth dropped open in surprise. "I'm not!"

“You are,” I insisted, taking another step backwards. I felt as if I could never get enough distance between us. Even if I were on the opposite side of the world, it would still be too close. “Stay away from me.”

“Z, stop—”

“Stay away from me!” I repeated.

Before he could lure me back in—enticing me with sweet words and promises—I whirled on my heel and ran away as fast as I physically could.

But it would never be fast enough.

TWELVE



# RYLAND

**W**e had to exchange our vehicles for horses before we could enter the town of Meade.

According to my father, Meade had the highest population of homelessness in all of the kingdoms. Poverty ravaged the tiny town, which was one of the reasons why nightmares and humans alike chose to resort to violence and coercion. The last thing we needed was to draw attention to ourselves by having expensive cars.

I rubbed a hand down my mare's silky gray coat. Her name was Felicity, and according to her owner, she had once drawn wagons full of food into and out of the city. She was an old creature, but that was okay with me, since I got her for half the normal price.

"I don't like the look of this place," Bash murmured from beside me, his customary scowl twisting his features.

He handled his own brown horse with an expertness that hinted this wasn't his first time riding. One of his hands held the reins as he peered into the distance, where gray mist seemed to slither over every surface.

"You don't want to take your next vacation here?" I jested as I squinted, trying to see through the cloying fog. Even Bash seemed to be consumed by the shadows, his features murky

and indistinct, despite being right beside me. “I personally love spending my time in creepy, murderous towns. Talk about a relaxing getaway.”

“I think Z would love to visit here for our honeymoon,” Dair teased from where he rode slightly behind me.

I chuckled, and the levity was a welcome distraction from what we were about to do.

Survive a dangerous town.

Find Z.

Kidnap her.

Somehow free her from the dark magic holding her hostage.

All at once, reality reasserted itself, and my humor dissipated. My laughter quite literally got stuck in my throat, refusing to move an inch more. It felt almost...wrong to laugh when we didn't know what was happening to Z and Killian. Unease and trepidation chased away that brief moment of joy and replaced it with sorrow.

Logically, I knew that Z wouldn't want us to wallow, but it was hard not to. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw Z's face distorted in anger, her blue eyes now entirely black. Then the vision changed, and I pictured her crying out for me, bruises adorning her perfect body, blood marring her cheeks, wounds covering her arms and legs.

My stomach tightened painfully.

I told myself repeatedly that I didn't know for sure Z was hurt, that she was a survivor, that she would protect Killian. Even still, my fear persisted unencumbered.

My brothers seemed to sense the change in mood, and they immediately sobered as well.

Devlin rode his horse in front of mine and disappeared into the murky fog. All I could see was his broad silhouette—nothing but blurry lines and indistinct features. His horse paced back and forth in front of me before he pulled to a stop, close enough now for me to see his expression.

“I don’t trust this,” he said at last, straightening in his saddle to spear us with a look befitting that of a prince.

A king.

Even though he had changed out of his customary suit, he still looked as imperious as always. The power that seemed to radiate from his pores took even *my* breath away, despite being a powerful prince myself.

I was just grateful that the Devlin I knew and loved was back. *That* Devlin had a plan in place. That Devlin had a solution for any problem that might arise. That Devlin was capable of freeing Z and stopping Aaliyah once and for all.

Thank fuck. I was beginning to worry I would have to lead this ragtag group of princes. I was more of a stab-first-ask-questions-later kind of prince. Leading was more Devlin’s speciality.

We had left the capital only a few hours earlier and had driven nonstop until we arrived at a stable just on the outskirts of town. There, we exchanged our cars for horses and rode for another hour. Axel and Atta had remained at the capital to keep an eye on our prisoners. We couldn’t afford for the kings to escape until we could come up with a solution on how to handle them.

And, despite their flaws, we trusted Axel and Atta to do what was best for the kingdom. Axel, at the very least, appeared to be loyal to Z.

It was difficult for me to place my trust in anyone who wasn't one of my brothers or Z, but what choice did I have? None of us were willing to stay behind, not when Z and Killian were in danger. Our only choice was to put our trust in the deranged assassin and Lupe's sister.

"We need to continue forward," Lupe declared with a taut frown.

He had been having trouble controlling his horse for the last hour. I believed the creature sensed the beast inside of Lupe...and was terrified of it. Bears and horses didn't get along. Still, Lupe forged ahead, refusing to turn around and retreat even when the horse tried to buck him off.

"I agree," I said after a moment.

For some inexplicable reason, I felt as if we were running out of time. My heart sounded like sand falling through an hourglass, a distant timepiece counting down the seconds.

We needed to get to Z, and fast.

If that meant traveling through a creepy-ass fog in the middle of a creepy-ass town?

Well...

I tugged my sword out of its sheath and held it at the ready. Out of all of my brothers, I was the most prepared to fight if the need arose. I had been trained by some of the highest generals in my father's army. Dad believed I needed a way to protect myself, especially after what happened to me when I was a young boy...



Instinctively, my free hand moved to my scarred face, feeling the numerous puckered wounds beneath my rough palm. I'd once thought these scars were hideous and grotesque, but Z never looked at me with anything less than desire. She might not know the truth about what happened to me, but she still loved me, scars and all.

"I'll lead the way," I told my brothers as I urged the horse forward.

Felicity struggled slightly, almost as if she could sense the danger in the air, but she obeyed after only a few moments. Her hooves sounded deafeningly loud in the sudden silence.

I could no longer see my brothers—not with the mist so thick and cloying it seemed to envelop me in its icy embrace—but I could hear them.

Bash was to the right of me, and Devlin was to my left. Dair, Lupe, and Jax were directly behind me. I sensed their presence the way I would a limb—an intricate part of me as vital to my being as a heart.

With every step forward, my unease grew, twining around my neck until it became hard to breathe. I gripped the reins even tighter and willed my horse to pick up speed.

We hadn't even entered the town of Meade, yet I knew something was amiss.

Something was lurking in the darkness.

Watching us.

Hunting us.

That thought had just flitted through my mind—a swallow flying from branch to branch—when a mammoth figure materialized out of the mist and lunged for me.

Chaos immediately descended.

THIRTEEN



# DAIR

I didn't consider myself a fighter or a peacemaker.

I wasn't like Lupe where I could use my words to stop a brewing argument. I couldn't materialize out of the shadows the way Ryland did to cut the throats of my enemies. I couldn't even use magic like Bash.

I hated the word "useless." Always had. My father had referred to me as such more times than I cared to admit during his torture sessions.

*"Why do you have to be such a useless piece of shit? Why couldn't you be more like your brothers? This is why I have to hurt you. I need you to be stronger, Dair. You have no one to blame but yourself. Useless. You're fucking useless."*

I hated that word with everything that I was.

Z had made it her mission to remind me every day that I wasn't useless, and I never would be in her eyes. But it wasn't just her, however, who had changed my viewpoint.

Over time, I began to analyze my strengths and weaknesses. I might not have been as strong as Lupe or as deadly as Ryland or as fiery as Bash, but I wasn't useless. And I never would be again.

I could make any of my brothers smile with just a word. I could soothe Z's internal turmoil by touching her shoulder. I could listen to the ones I loved for days and offer advice, if that was what they needed.

I wasn't useless.

However, that dreaded word was the one to tumble through my brain as the figures emerged from the darkness, one after the other.

Useless.

I felt fucking useless.

Shifters. Vampires. Genies. Shadows. Mages. Incubi. Mermaids.

They were a mismatched group of supernaturals. All of them wore ratty clothes riddled with tears and stains. The one at the very front of the group was missing a few teeth—a vast improvement to the yellow ones that remained.

But their appearance only registered with me belatedly. The rest of me was internally screaming, “Holy fuck, we're under attack!”

Bandits.

I had heard about gangs made up of various supernaturals hiding at the edges of towns, using mage magic to create a primordial mist to obscure their movements. I never thought I would come face-to-face with one of these groups before.

Fuck.

An incubus with golden hair rushed at me with his dagger extended, aiming for my shoulder. I stealthily spun out of the way. My heart raced unnaturally fast in my chest as fear grabbed me by the throat.

“You’re a pretty boy, aren’t you?” the incubus asked in a deep, husky rasp.

While all the rest of the supernaturals present appeared as if they’d been through the meat grinder, this incubus was still abnormally handsome. His skin seemed to glow as if someone had lit a candle beneath the surface. Blond hair framed a face that would make angels weep—all sharp angles, high cheekbones, and full lips.

That was the incubi gift, after all. It was nearly impossible for them to be unattractive. I still remembered when Killian reached puberty and developed his powers. One second, he was tall and lanky, with a scatter of acne across his forehead. The next, he was muscular and flawless, tattoos coloring his skin.

The incubus’s next words dragged me back to the present. “Give us your horses, and we’ll let you live.”

His sexual powers pulsed around him.

For someone who hadn’t lived his life surrounded by the most powerful incubus of all time, I might’ve been overcome by lust. But this incubus had nothing on Killian’s powers, or even Killian’s father’s gifts. I barely even flinched as his subpar magic enveloped me, poking and prodding at my defenses, searching for entrance.

“I’m afraid that won’t work on me,” I said lightly, flashing the incubus a grin. “You see, we need these horses to get into town in order to rescue two people we care deeply about. So... I’m gonna have to refuse your rather generous offer.”

Apparently, I turned snarky when under attack. Who would’ve thought? I certainly didn’t have this sass when my father cut off my legs.

Belatedly, I realized that my brothers were engaged in their own battles. Ryland was disappearing and reappearing at will, slashing at the throats of the nearest nightmare without so much as a hint of hesitation. I was pretty sure the shadow was actually enjoying it, if his manic grin was any indication. Crazy bastard.

Bash used his wispy green magic to toss foes away, while Lupe fought with his bare hands. Devlin moved with an agility and precision that made him both feared and revered in the nightmare world. He wasn't as skilled with a blade as Ryland was, but years of being "Susan's" lover had made him competent.

Even Jax was zipping from enemy to enemy, his fangs extended, his eyes blood-red with hunger. He didn't feed, however. He merely tore at the throat of his prey before moving to the next monster.

Then there was me, with one enemy who was very much still alive.

*Useless.*

A sinkhole opened in my stomach.

The incubus seemed utterly unaware of the massacre occurring behind him. If he did, I imagined he wouldn't be as confident as he was right then.

"A pretty boy like you would catch a handful of gold coins," he continued, leering. "Blonds always sell well."

Behind him, I could see Devlin beginning to make his way towards us, his bloody knife held expertly in his hand.

But I didn't want him to come save me. Not now. Not ever.

Years of being trapped in that damn wheelchair haunted me. I'd never felt as helpless as I had while I was that chair's prisoner.

Now, I was free—at least for the time being. And if B came through for me the way he'd promised, I might be free forever. No more wheelchairs. No more helplessness. No more feelings of inadequacy.

Rage bubbled in my bloodstream, raging and hissing like water in a kettle. I took a step closer to the incubus and glared.

Some of his bravado began to falter. He took a hesitant step back.

I reached out with my senses and felt something I'd never noticed before.

Water.

Only, it wasn't the water I normally felt. Not ocean water or lake water or even river water.

What the fuck was this?

It felt thick and oily, sticky almost...

My magic tugged at something inside of me, demanded my attention, pierced my skin until I had no choice but to bleed.

Yes...water...

There for the taking...

Power crawled up my throat, sharp and heady, as if I'd bitten my tongue. I shot my magic forward in a way I'd never done before, and I felt it slither and wiggle inside of the incubus, spreading through every crevice like butter on bread. Then, I gave it a sharp, incessant tug.



And all of the blood in the incubus's body rained down on me. It splattered my hair, my face, my clothes. Even Bash, who stood slightly behind me, did not escape the onslaught of the dark-red liquid.

In front of me, the incubus fell to the ground, his eyes vacant and unseeing.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” Bash exclaimed as he desperately wiped at his face, attempting to remove some of the blood.

Devlin simply blinked at me in stunned silence.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the dead nightmare. The nightmare I'd, evidently, drained of all blood with only a thought.

With a trembling hand, I reached up to brush at my cheek, unsurprised when my golden skin came back red in the process.

My hand shook.

“Well...” Ryland appeared from the shadows, lazily swinging his sword around and around like one would a baton. He was the only one who didn't seem overly upset or even surprised by what had just occurred. “This is an interesting development.”

“What the fuck?!” Bash repeated.

He accepted an extra shirt from Devlin—the genie must have grabbed it out of his pack—and began to desperately wipe the gunk from his face.

When Devlin moved to me, I couldn't lift my hand to accept the proffered clothing. I simply stood there, staring, my mind reeling.

What the fuck had just happened?

Had I...killed the incubus?

How was that even possible? As far as I knew, tugging the blood out of someone wasn't a power a mermaid possessed.

My knees shook, threatening to give out, and I couldn't peel my gaze away from the white corpse.

“What the fuck?” Jax said numbly.

At first, I believed he was just repeating Bash—or perhaps having a delayed reaction to the dead body at my feet, one devoid of any blood.

But then I realized that he wasn't even looking in my direction.

He stared in disbelief at his stomach—where a dagger protruded from just underneath his rib cage. He staggered a few steps forward, his face twisted in pain, before abruptly collapsing.

I only just managed to catch him before his eyelashes fluttered shut.

FOURTEEN



# KILLIAN

**O**peration *Get Z to Remember and Fall in Love With Me* was well underway.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop thinking about Z's beautiful face when she returned from wherever Aaliyah had brought her. There had been absolute anguish in her black eyes—anguish...and confusion, as if she were holding the pieces to a complicated puzzle in her hands and wasn't sure how to connect them.

I was desperate to know what had transpired between the two of them but also understood that I wouldn't get any answers. Z was a steel vault, and Aaliyah was a conniving, murderous bitch. The only person I could consider talking to was Mali, but I hadn't seen her since she'd first led Z and me to our shared room.

I prayed that nothing had happened to her.

I moved swiftly through the hallways of Aaliyah's palace, desperately searching for my mate. At first, I found it odd that Aaliyah allowed me free rein of her home, but then I came face-to-face with a few startling truths.

First, even if I could escape, I wouldn't. There was no way in hell I was leaving Z here, even if I hadn't come willingly.

Second, all of the rooms Aaliyah didn't want me to open were locked.

And finally, I didn't see a single other person aside from Mali and occasionally S. There was no one for me to use my powers on. No one for me to seduce in order to do my bidding.

So...I wandered—a dandelion seed drifting in the wind, never settling, never stopping, always rushing from one place to another.

The darkness of Aaliyah's home was beginning to make me depressed. I wasn't particularly fond of the capital or even my own home back in the Incubus Kingdom. However, there was something about the monochromatic shades of gray and black here that made me uneasy.

The knots already present in my stomach—the knots that had developed the very first day and had refused to unwind since then—wound together in a tight ball, making it impossible to untangle.

I missed the sunlight on my face and the breeze ruffling my red hair. Yes, there were numerous windows lining the walls, but it always seemed as if the sun never breached this particular area. The sky outside was gray, raveled here and there with bloated storm clouds. The water battering the cliffside far below us drowned out all other sounds. Even my own thundering heartbeat was background noise, nothing but a distant thrumming.

“Z-z?” I inwardly cursed myself when my stutter returned, as it always did in stressful situations.

And was there anything more stressful than being taken hostage by your mate's evil sister? Holidays were going to become so freaking awkward.

My body always seemed attuned to Z. Whenever she was in the general vicinity, I would be led to her, drawn into her magnetic orbit, a willing participant in the chase.

Okay, correction.

My *cock* always seemed attuned to her.

That bastard had a mind of its own, and it seemed to think about only one thing—Z. Always Z. I thought making love to her that one day with Jax would lessen my attraction to her. At the very least, I assumed I'd no longer be perpetually hard in her presence.

But nooope.

Little Kill seemed determined to follow her around like a besotted dog. I half wondered if I should invest in a collar and leash if my cock was going to do all the leading around here.

*Why do you have to be such a horn dog, Kill? Why can't your cock be a normal cock that does normal cock things? Curse my incubus genes. Curse my incubus cock. Curse my—*

I was quite literally punched out of my internal musings.

My head reeled backwards as pain exploded behind my eyes. I brought a hand up instinctively to my nose, wondering if it was broken. Even if it were, it would heal in less than a day—heaven forbid incubi be anything less than perfect and immaculate.

I brought my hand to my nose in a desperate bid to stop the steady onslaught of blood as I sought out my attacker. Unerringly, my gaze met S's, where he stood a few feet away from me, his features distorted in malice, his eyes sparking with an unhinged, manic energy that made me instantly uncomfortable.

My entire perusal of him only lasted a second before he was on me once more, throwing me against the nearest wall. My head ricocheted off the plaster, and one of the portraits lining the hall shook before falling to the ground, the frame cracking.

S's rancid breath blew across my face, and it took everything I had within me not to gag. Even still, I had to twist slightly to escape that putrid, decaying smell.

I wasn't going to say I was intimately familiar with dead bodies—that would be creepy as fuck—but if I *were*, then there would be no denying the similarities between corpses and S. Both smelled like stale meat. Both had bloated, decaying skin. Both had clumps of hair missing.

Was that what was happening to S? Was he turning into a...zombie-human hybrid? Was he dying?

Fuck, I didn't know, and a part of me didn't dare to find out. I had a feeling I wouldn't like the answers to those questions.

“Stay away from Z,” S hissed in my ear as he pushed his body even farther against my own.

He grabbed a fistful of my hair and banged my head against the wall once more. Pain exploded through me as my already bruised nose became intimately familiar with the plaster.

Again.

And again.

And again.

After the fourth shove, I'd had enough of being—no pun intended—pushed around. With a growl more befitting of a

shifter, I spun around, grabbed his wrist, and twisted it. He glared at me, his eyes burning with an almost incandescent fury.

This close, I could see the changes between the S from even a day before and the S now.

He had a bald spot.

It wouldn't be noticeable unless you were as close to him as I was, but I could see an area of pale skin, no matter how he tried to comb his messy brown hair. His skin appeared gaunt over his skeleton. How was it physically possible for him to lose even more weight in the few hours since I'd last seen him? I couldn't help but gape at his jaundiced-yellow skin and the dark bags underscoring both of his eyes.

You know that saying, "You look like shit?"

Well, S was what you got if a piece of shit looked like shit. It was shit times two. A shit-ouble. A shit-uplet. A pair of shits. Twinshits.

"Stay away from Z," S continued in that growly, almost indecipherable voice.

His teeth seemed to be longer, too. Sharper. They sat in a face that was already too lanky, too thin, too...stretched. Yes, that was an adequate description. His features appeared stretched—too long teeth, too large forehead, too oval eyes.

"You're not yourself," I said resolutely.

This S was most certainly not the S that Z had once loved.

S blanched as if I'd physically slapped him before he smoothed his features over. "Just... Just don't talk to Z anymore. I don't think I'll be able to handle myself if you do."



His words were both simultaneously a threat and something I would consider a plea.

Was he...warning me?

Unease writhed and danced my gut.

I lowered my voice so as to not be overheard. I hadn't seen anyone in the castle, but that didn't mean there weren't eyes and ears everywhere. I wouldn't put it past Aaliyah to have her guards peeking through the eyeholes of the paintings lining the hallway.

Note to self—buy googly eyes and place them on every portrait as soon as possible.

“I d-d-don't know what h-h-happened to you, but I believe you love Z, don't you?” Damn my stutter.

And damn my nerves. They seemed amplified in S's presence, as if a part of me recognized the predator prowling directly beneath S's skin.

S seemed confused by my statement. His head canted to the side as he peered at me with unnaturally white, almost milky eyeballs.

“Of course I do,” he said simply. “She's my entire world.”

My pulse spiked. “Then you know she can't stay here. It's not safe—”

Anger grabbed hold of his features. “She's safe with me.”

“You're not yourself.”

He lifted his balled fist as if he meant to punch me, but I grabbed his wrist before he could make contact.

I'd had enough of being punched in the face for one day, thank you very much. My nose still hurt like a bitch, even

though I suspected the swelling had already gone down and the coloring was returning to normal.

“Don’t talk about shit you don’t understand,” he raged.

His eyes were glazed, glassy, unfocused. They seemed to be sweeping over my face without ever sticking on any particular feature.

Years ago, I’d gone looking for Bash and found him in a whorehouse, high out of his mind on some new type of drug. That was what S reminded me of now.

High as fuck.

Drugged out of his mind.

Confused.

“What did Aaliyah do to you?” I immediately regretted my question as soon as I asked it.

His features that had already been twisted in anger distorted even further. Lines marred his skin that I’d never noticed before, making him appear years older. *Centuries* older.

“She gave me life,” he hissed. “She saved me.”

“She destroyed you.” I released his wrist with a disgusted huff and then used my now free hand to wipe at the blood on my face.

Fortunately, my nose seemed to have stopped bleeding. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was completely healed as well. The pain hadn’t entirely abated, but it no longer felt as if a thousand little elves were using picks to mine my nostrils.

“Power comes with a price.” S’s eyes narrowed. “And I would give up everything for Z.”

“Even the parts of you she loved?”

He flinched and staggered a step away from me. “She loves me the way I am. Don’t you still love Z, even with all of her darkness?”

Even before he had finished speaking, I was shaking my head. “It’s not her darkness. It’s the kings’. It’s Aaliyah’s. It’s that damn dagger’s.”

Z wasn’t perfect, but her natural darkness didn’t make her evil. Not even close.

“And you think that this darkness is mine?” He sounded agitated as he ran his fingers through his hair. He lowered his hand and stared in dismay at the brown chunks in his palm. “This was the only way I could stay with Z.”

Was I mistaken or did tears well in his eyes?

“Aaliyah said Z could be mine if I helped her with the gate. I didn’t have a choice. But the gate...” He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, his eyes wide and frantic, his lips shaped in a perfect O. “It changes you.”

“The gate?” My heart seemed to be battering my rib cage. Each throb almost hurt.

“The portal... The hole...” A muscle in his jaw clenched. “The one to hell.”

My heart hung in my chest, suspended, and an earthquake rumbled through my being.

“Is that what happened to you?” I spoke slowly, carefully, afraid to spook the emaciated man in front of me.

I was finally getting answers, but I knew that if I said something S didn’t like, he would clam up. I had to be patient and speak to him like I would a small, frightened child.

“I had to watch the portal and help the creatures Aaliyah summoned,” he whispered, pain emanating from his eyes. “But the energy... It did something to me. I know it did. I can feel it here.”

He placed a fisted hand against his chest and banged it once, twice, three times.

I didn't know how to reply to his revelation.

Aaliyah had a literal portal to hell? And S was in charge of...guarding it? Helping monsters escape?

I thought of the gorgon and fae. The kraken and gargoyles. They were extinct supernatural creatures that had secretly existed on this Earth long before the nightmares came to rule it. Aaliyah had found a way to quite literally lure these monsters out of hell—and then command them to do her bidding.

Just what other creatures could she conjure?

An army of magical monsters?

The thought had me shaking with unease.

“I'll help you, S.” I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder, the way I would with one of my brothers, but I resisted, knowing that any touch would be unwelcomed.

He would probably cut off my limb if I so much as twitched in his direction. Still, the vow escaped me before I could even consider pulling the words back—not that I even wanted to.

Z had once loved this man, and if there was even a small chance I could save him? I would do just about anything. For her. For the man he once was. For T, who was six feet under.

For everyone who had ever loved S before Aaliyah and hell itself corrupted him.

“I don’t need your help.” His upper lip curled away in a snarl. “I just need Z.”

I took a deep breath, collecting all of the love I felt for Z and dispersing it in my chest, before allowing it to release.

“You may not want my help, but you have it.” I forced myself to meet his eyes, forced myself not to flinch when I saw the sunken shape of them. “And then, you can help me help Z.”

Because nothing else mattered except her.

Nothing.

And if that meant I had to make a deal with hell’s slave? Then so fucking be it.

FIFTEEN



## Z

**M**y mind couldn't stop spinning.

I'd never believed in past lives before, but now? It was impossible not to.

The vision or whatever it was had felt so *real*. Even now, when I inhaled deeply, I could smell the blood that stained the streets and cathedral.

*My blood.*

Tears pricked the backs of my eyes, but sheer stubbornness and willpower held them at bay.

I didn't want to start sobbing like a damn baby, but this was too much, even for me.

Watching what those angels did to me...

Hearing Aaliyah's scream of utter agony and despair...

Seeing the vacant expressions on my past lovers' faces...

The magic inside of me howled in disgust and anger. I could feel it clawing at my chest, demanding for me to release it, wanting to make the world suffer. Vengeance carved itself into my rib cage.

“Z?”

The tentative voice made me freeze in the middle of the long hallway. My heart jumped in my chest and landed somewhere in the general vicinity of my throat.

Why was he here?

*How* was he here?

Slowly, almost methodically, I pivoted to face the intruder.

Jax stood at the opposite end of the hall from me, his features so striking that he looked like a statuesque, marble relic. His brows pinched the longer he stared at me, as if he were just as confused as I was with his presence here, before they smoothed out. His smile slowly expanded into an infuriating, teasing wave.

I didn't know why, but I searched his body for any injuries. I blamed it on the vision Aaliyah had just shown me, nothing else.

I hated him. I hated all of them.

I needed to remember that.

And yet...

"Z..." he repeated.

There was such love and reverence in his tone that a part of me wanted to run to him, to wrap him in my arms and never let him go. But almost as quickly as that thought arrived, my magic pushed the need away, hiding it in the deepest crevices of my brain.

I swallowed.

"Why are you here, Jax?" I kept my voice stiff and impersonal, afraid that if I tried to infuse my words with any emotion, I'd start to sob and plead for him to never leave me.



I hated Jax.

So why did I crave him?

It felt as if I was throwing a dart in the dark and praying that it didn't kill anybody.

I was so damn confused...but more than that, I was scared. Lonely. Needy. Inexplicably, I knew that if I were to just give in and allow Jax to hold me, some of the tension inside of me would dissipate.

But why?

Why would I feel this way about my enemy?

I countered Jax's steps forward with continuous ones backwards. My teeth actually rattled as I slammed against the wall. I hated the way my heart raced. Hated it...because it wasn't racing in fear but desire.

"Why are you here?" I repeated, folding my arms over my chest just to put some distance between us.

He was too close to me. I could see the red in his eyes—a staple of most vampires in the world—and the harsh line of his mouth. Those pink lips just begged me to lean forward and—

I jerked my chin up to meet his penetrating, all-consuming gaze. Fire danced across my skin, and that heat seemed to build and expand in my core. All I could hear was the crackling of flames. All I could feel was the fire's immense heat burning my flesh. All I could see was red.

"I must be asleep." Jax sounded almost stunned by that proclamation. A tiny bit of surprise and worry seeped into his eyes. "I remember...a fight..." He rubbed at his forehead before dropping his hand back to his side and focusing on me. "I'm just happy I'm here with you."

He leaned forward and dragged his nose along my throat, inhaling my scent deeply.

And I let him.

I wondered if he could hear how fast my heart was racing. I knew he could definitely feel my pulse skittering each time he touched me.

“Everything’s so silent now,” he murmured against my skin. Each time he talked, his lips parted, and I could almost believe he was kissing my neck. “The voices have stopped.”

“Why are you touching me?” I tried to keep my voice hard and angry, but it came out breathless and needy.

Fuck.

And what did Jax mean about a fight?

Why did my stomach tighten with worry?

Fuck. Fuck.

Fuck!

He pulled away just enough for me to see his shiny red eyes. “Because you’re my everything. I love you more than anything in the world. The ground could start shaking, the stars could fall from the sky, the volcanoes could erupt...but my love for you would never die. It’s as infinite as the universe. Because even when everything is destroyed, every atom that remains will shake with the force of my love for you.”

I caught my breath as a tide of emotions threatened to batter down my composure. His words seemed to pry me open, and now he was here, standing before me, wanting to carve his name into my heart. Into my damn soul.

And then this Jax's face superimposed itself over the Jax from the past. Gluttony, if I remembered correctly. I didn't want to think about what I saw, yet the images bombarded me, barraged me, assaulted me until I was gasping for breath.

Aaliyah claimed that the Seven Deadly Sins never loved Gabrielle, but I had seen their eyes when she died. The grief. The despair. The anguish. The love. No one could fake those emotions, not even the most skilled actors.

And now, Jax was looking at me the same way he'd looked at me in the vision. There was so much love and tender anxiety on his face. It lassoed me in. Consumed me. Begged me to just give in and allow him to hold me, love me, be there for me.

My heartbeat sped up and then tripped hastily over itself.

*You can't think about Jax that way, I told myself. You hate him.*

And yet...

A sharp crack wheedled through my chest as I grabbed ahold of Jax's shirt and pulled him towards me. He came willingly, his red eyes never leaving my face. He didn't even blink.

"Come back to us, Z. Come back to me."

"Shut up," I murmured half-heartedly as I pulled his lips down to mine.

Fireworks exploded through my body.

One kiss from Jax threatened to destroy me. Obliterate me. Turn me to ash. He kissed me like he wanted to devour me, like he wanted me to remember something that I refused to. His touch burned me like a flame eating through an old quilt. I

was made up of nothing but missing pieces, and I had no idea how to begin putting myself back together again.

I instinctively wrapped my legs around his waist as he kissed and kissed and kissed me. And when he finally pulled away, I tried to chase his lips. His glowing eyes held me at bay.

“You need to remember us, Z. You *need* to.”

“I know who you are,” I told him, dazed and breathless.

He shook his head adamantly. “If you knew who I was, then you would want to leave here with me. You wouldn’t remain.”

Anger flared through me at his words, momentarily dampening the lust. “My sister—”

“Is a monster,” he finished with a snarl. “You know what she did to me.”

“Don’t talk about her like that,” I hissed, though I didn’t push him away as he released me and then dropped to his knees at my feet.

His hands captured my calves and forced them around his shoulders. The only thing keeping me upright was the wall at my back and his arms under my ass.

I still wore that damn bathrobe and nothing else—I didn’t want to accidentally run into Killilan in our shared room—so Jax was easily able to flip the bottom up until I was bare to him.

His hot breath wafted against my most sensitive area.

“I’m not yours,” I snapped, out of breath and panting.

I wanted him to touch me almost as much as I wanted him to leave me alone.

“You’re right.” Jax’s abnormally long lashes fluttered against his cheeks as he peered up at me.

With his mussed brown hair, vibrant red eyes, and chiseled features, he was more beautiful than any angel I had seen in the vision. There was a devilish glint in his gaze that hinted he would never belong in heaven, even if he did put all of those beings to shame.

“You’re not mine. I don’t think anyone could own you. But I’m yours, and no matter what you do or say, that will never change.”

*I’m yours.*

*I’m yours.*

*I’m yours.*

Fuck. I was weak. That was the only explanation for what I did next.

I grabbed a fistful of his brown hair and forced his lips to my center.

“Touch me, Jax. Please.”

There was no hesitation as he dropped his mouth to my overly responsive pussy and began to suck and lick like his life depended on it. Lightning struck through my body, setting my skin aflame. Electricity buzzed in the air between us, and I wanted it to consume me. Consume *us*.

One of his fingers entered my channel, and he began to crook it in a come-hither motion. A rough callus hit my G-spot in a way that made me see stars.

“Fuck, Jax.” I threw my head back and moaned.

His lips suctioned around my clit, and he pulled.

Stars exploded around my now closed eyelids—when the fuck did I close them?—but I knew I needed more.

“Bite me, Jax,” I pleaded as my orgasm shot through me, ripping me apart and then stitching me back together again. “Please.”

Jax didn’t answer in words. Instead, he planted a gentle, chaste kiss to my inner thigh. He waited then, giving me a chance to change my mind, before his teeth sharpened and elongated.

He bit down.

A second orgasm tore through me like a tornado. I screamed out loud, uncaring of who’d hear me. Hell, a twisted part of me *wanted* them to hear. It wanted the entire world to know who owned me in that moment, heart, body, and soul. It was wrong, so, so wrong, and felt like a betrayal to my sister.

Yet everything inside of me screamed in pleasure. My body reacted to Jax’s in a way that felt almost carnal and primitive. We were two wild beings clashing in the middle of the forest, biting and scratching and clawing.

Mating.

That was what this felt like.

An intense, sensual mating between two beasts.

Jax sucked at my blood, even as his fingers continued to piston in and out of me. Prisms of light danced across my vision.

“Fuck, Jax.”

He pulled away, his lips stained with my blood, his eyes hooded with arousal, his lips curled in a salacious grin that had my own mouth curving instinctively.

And then I heard a voice. “Z, are you there?”

My eyes widened as I stared at Jax in mounting horror. I had no idea who—or what—I was afraid of. Jax being discovered? Or maybe I was simply afraid of myself and how easily I’d given in to this man. I should hate him. I wanted to hate him, but my body responded to his on a visceral level.

Jax quickly—but gently—lowered my legs to the floor before standing.

I smoothed down my bathrobe, desperate to hide the evidence of what we had just been up to. I didn’t want anyone to see my arousal dripping down my legs or the bite mark on my inner thigh. When I was sure everything was covered, I glanced up.

Only to see that Jax was gone.

My heart... It broke. Shattered. It didn’t just crack. No, the remnants of the organ lay in diminutive pieces before me, and I wasn’t sure if I’d ever be able to put them back together again.

And I didn’t even know if I wanted to.

SIXTEEN





## Z

**S** materialized around the corner, his brows furrowed and his eyes brimming with suspicion.

He glanced in both directions with a scowl. “Did I hear someone? Was Killian with you?”

He said Killian’s name like it was a curse word, something acerbic and bitter that burned his tongue. I half expected him to spit on the floor in disgust.

I placed a hand to my chest, desperately trying to control my rampant heart.

What the fuck was that?

Jax had felt so real, so alive, so vibrant...

And that orgasm hadn’t been in my own head.

But where was he?

The seedlings of a memory became planted in the darkest corner of my mind, where my magic couldn’t quite reach.

Hadn’t I visited Jax when he had been taken by Aaliyah? Hadn’t I somehow found a way to get to him, using the...bond between us?

My head pounded almost as rapidly as my heart did. I could feel a headache quickly approaching, threatening to rip

my skull apart.

“I don’t have time for your crazy today,” I snapped as I attempted to step around my ex. “I’m going to take a nap.”

“Z!” Quick as a whip, S grabbed my arm, yanking me to an abrupt halt.

His fingers dug into my skin hard enough to bruise, but I didn’t allow the pain I was feeling to show on my face.

“Let go of me, S.” I kept my voice calm and level, but internally, I was screaming.

Heat built in my core, threatening to erupt like a deadly volcano, intent on obliterating everything in the general proximity. The streets would be doused in lava, and the sky would be painted gray and black with smoke. The strange magic inside of me seemed to exacerbate my anger. I was afraid of what would happen when I let go, when I allowed my powers to be unleashed.

“Why do you keep doing this to us?” S agitatedly ran his hand through his hair with his free hand. “Why do you keep pulling away from me?”

“I’m not going to tell you again,” I warned. “Let. Go. Of. Me.”

The desperation on his face morphed into anger. His grip tightened even further, no doubt leaving bruises. “You’re mine, Z. Mine. You were promised to *me*.”

“I don’t belong to anyone,” I hissed, Jax’s words from earlier rumbling in my mind.

No one could own me.

But it certainly seemed as if my heart disagreed when I thought about the seven dangerous men from my past.

“Aaliyah promised me—”

Before S could say anything else, I grabbed ahold of his wrist and twisted it. Hard. I heard the satisfying snap of his bone, but S’s desperate expression didn’t change. There was no pain in his eyes, no anguish, no fear. Even as he cradled his broken wrist to his chest, he didn’t let on that I’d hurt him.

What the fuck?

“You can’t run from me, Z.” S’s voice held a deadly note I had never heard before. As I watched, horrified and moderately transfixed, he snapped his wrist bone back into place. His cold, malicious eyes never strayed from my face. “I gave up everything for you, and you will be mine when all is said and done.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you.” I spun on my heel and walked confidently down the hall.

I needed to find Aaliyah.

Now.

---

MY SISTER WAS SITTING at the grand piano, but she wasn’t playing. Her gaze was fixed on the window leading out to the cliffside.

I knew she could sense my presence, but she didn’t speak until I was sitting on the same chair from before, directly behind her. Her shoulders stiffened nearly imperceptibly before she finally—almost reluctantly—turned to face me.

Her bright-red lips were pursed as she studied me, though her eyes twinkled with something akin to mirth. “Do you plan on getting dressed today, or are you content walking around

my home in your bathrobe? My servants are getting quite the show, no doubt.”

I snorted before I could stop myself. “I haven’t seen anyone besides you, S, Mali, and Killian.” I purposely left Jax’s name off that list. I had no idea why. I told my sister everything usually, yet I didn’t want to tell her about what had just happened between the vampire prince and myself. “Do you even have servants, sister?”

She absently grabbed at her long hair and began to braid it over her shoulder. She wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“You’d be surprised by what my servants see and hear when no one knows they’re around,” she murmured absently.

Her long, nimble fingers continued to twirl her hair around and around.

Trepidation settled in my gut like a boulder.

“Something is happening to me,” I confessed after a long moment of silence.

Even to my own ears, my voice sounded desperate and pleading.

“Is that so?” Aaliyah didn’t pull her gaze away from her braid, the strands the exact color of the flame beside her and only a shade lighter than her lips.

“I’m feeling...things. Things I know I shouldn’t feel.” I remembered Jax’s hands on me, ravaging my body, and then Killian’s tongue plundering my mouth. Heat built in my lower stomach. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

A single tear cascaded down my cheek.

My words felt like a betrayal to my sister. She had given up everything for me, including her mates. Why was I feeling

this way about seven men I was supposed to hate? I did hate them...didn't I?

Yet my body fucking *burned* at just the thought of them.

“I was afraid this would happen.” Aaliyah’s lips straightened into a grim line, and she stood gracefully, smoothing a hand down her already wrinkle-free dress. “I thought the magic in the dagger would be enough, but I underestimated your bonds with those...men.”

Her face twisted in disgust.

“I don’t love them,” I insisted, hating the anger emanating from her eyes. “I promise. I think that they’re doing something to me. Is it possible that they put a spell on me?”

Desperation writhed in my gut. Fuck, I should’ve kept my worries a secret from Aaliyah. She would only worry about me and my sanity.

How could I love the nightmares who’d betrayed me? The sons of my enemies? I didn’t love them. No, I most definitely did not.

I hated them.

Why did that feel like a lie?

A headache threatened to rip me apart. Was it possible for a brain to explode?

I grabbed at my blonde hair as I struggled to orient myself, struggled to hold on to what I knew was my reality.

I hated those men.

I loved them.

I hated them.

Loved them.

Hated them.

Loved them.

Hated—

Aaliyah appeared before me, her features downcast and eyes shadowed. She tentatively cupped my cheek as she peered deeply into my eyes.

“My dear sister. I’m so sorry I have to do this. Forgive me.” Unshed tears glistened in her eyes, reflecting in the candlelight like a prism of reds, oranges, and yellows. “I won’t allow those monsters to destroy you a second time. Not in this lifetime.”

“I don’t understand.” Unexplainable fear twisted my insides. “Aaliyah, you’re scaring me.”

“I know.” She sniffled and then stepped away, her gaze darting to something over my shoulder. Or *someone*. “I’m sorry.”

Before I could demand an explanation, something hit me over the back of my head. Pain reverberated through me, and I sucked in a sharp gasp.

Just before darkness consumed me, I was able to say one word and one word alone. A question. A plea.

“Why?”

SEVENTEEN



# JAX

I jerked awake with a gasp.

What in the...?

“Easy there,” a familiar, soothing voice reprimanded.

A second later, someone rested a hand on my shoulder, forcing me to lie back down. I blinked at Devlin in surprise, noting the dark shadows beneath both of his eyes and the disheveled state of his normally immaculate hair.

Pieces of memory flitted across my mind, but I couldn't seem to grasp any one in particular.

There had been a fight...

I instinctively brought my hands to my stomach, where I half expected to feel sticky blood coat my fingers. Instead, I was met with a clean bandage that had been painstakingly wrapped around my center.

I lifted my gaze away from my stomach and studied the room I found myself in.

An inn.

Yes, that would explain the impersonal state of the tiny room, with its single bed, dresser, and washing basin. There



were two doors on either side of the room. One I suspected led to a bathroom, while the other must've led back to the hallway.

The most startling realization was that there was no blood dripping from the walls, no monsters lurking in the shadowy corners, no voices screaming in my head, demanding for me to give in, to stop fighting. The madness that had haunted me for years seemed to have abated, at least for the time being.

I brought a hand to my mouth, half expecting my fingers to come away red. They didn't.

My dream returned to me then with startling clarity. Not even Devlin could stop me from jerking upright in bed, Z's name a silent plea on my lips. No, not a plea. A prayer—because she was my goddess, and I was nothing but a lowly servant bowing at her altar.

Yes, I could remember it now. The images were burned into my brain in a way that had my cock stirring to life.

The hallway.

Her black eyes.

Her glistening pussy.

The way she had moaned my name...

“Z,” I breathed in wonder, and Devlin's face twisted in what I almost thought was sympathy.

Or maybe it was just confusion.

He ventured a tentative step closer. “What do you remember, brother?”

It occurred to me the reason for his wariness. He thought I'd forgotten that Z had willingly followed Aaliyah through that portal. He thought I'd forgotten that Z had turned dark,

her small body riddled with black magic that twisted and warped the woman we all loved.

I began to shake my head adamantly, excitement thrumming through my veins and momentarily overshadowing my confusion.

“No, you don’t understand.” I brought a finger to my lips and rubbed it back and forth, back and forth.

I swore I could still taste her—ambrosia, the nectar of the gods. Fuck, had anyone ever tasted so delicious? I wanted to selfishly covet her and claim her as mine. I didn’t want anybody else to touch her, feed from her, love her.

“I fed from her. I can think.” I began to tap at my head erratically, desperate for him to understand.

The madness that stemmed from a lack of blood had plagued me for way too many years, after I’d refused to feed. My brothers were almost used to my semi-insane state. Then, there was the bloodlust—a sickness that occurred when you drank too *much* blood. That had happened to me when Aaliyah had held me hostage.

It seemed as if my life was a constant pendulum swaying back and forth from insanity...to insanity. I was either insane from a lack of blood consumption or insane because I had too much of it.

Only Z could mellow out the temperamental side of my beast.

Only she could silence the voices in my head.

Only she could destroy the monsters that haunted me when I was both awake and asleep.

Devlin continued to regard me cautiously. “I think you’re confused, Jax.”

Without moving his gaze from my own, he moved to perch at the very edge of the bed. He reached forward to grip my ankle and give it a reassuring squeeze. I wanted to kick at him, to remind him that I wasn’t a child who needed to be coddled. But at the same time, I knew it wasn’t his fault he didn’t understand.

“I entered Z’s mind,” I stressed.

Confusion swam in his violet eyes. “I don’t understand—”

“But I wasn’t in her mind,” I continued eagerly. “I could touch and feel her. I could drink from her. I could—”

Devlin shook his head sadly. The confusion from before had morphed into pity, and I hated that. All of my brothers knew I resented their sympathy. I didn’t need the constant reminder that my brain was broken, that I didn’t see the world the same way they did, that I was a shell of my former self. Hell, I didn’t even remember who the old Jax was. I had been like this far longer than I hadn’t been.

“It was like when I was captured by Aaliyah, remember?” I held his eyes with my own, pleading for him to hear me. Believe me. “Z visited me. Not just in my dreams, but in real life.”

Fuck, why wasn’t he understanding me? What more could I say to get him to see reason?

I once again cursed my brain for making conversation difficult.

“We know it’s possible to enter her dreams.” Devlin’s brows arched downwards. “Is that what happened to you? Did you enter her dreams?”

Excitement lit his eyes, turning the striking violet color into something I would almost describe as amethyst.

“I didn’t enter her dreams.” I huffed out an annoyed breath and crossed my arms over my chest. “She was awake. I was able to touch her, feel her, taste her...”

I closed my eyes at the memory of her arousal on my tongue. I wasn’t sure which I liked better—her cum or her blood. But the two of them together? Indescribable. I was hard at just the memory of her taste, my cock aching.

Devlin continued to stare at me in confusion, but this time, at the very least, there was no pity in his gaze.

“You...fed on her?” His gaze dipped to my lips as if he, too, thought he would see blood smearing the skin there.

“I did,” I told him. “And I feel...great.”

My brain was working overtime, as if it wanted to make up for the years it had been nothing but a discombobulated mess. But I knew my coherence was fleeting—there and gone, faster than a shooting bullet. I was determined to hold on as tightly as I could to my sanity.

At least...I thought it was sanity. It was hard to say for certain. I wondered if I had grown insane, and no amount of blood would change that. Perhaps what I perceived as “sanity” was only a lesser form of “insanity.”

But even when the walls were talking to me and the ceiling was dripping blood and the monsters were clawing their way out of the floor to attack me...Z never looked at me with anything less than love. No beguiling. No trepidation. No contention.

In my dream-slash-vision, she had stared at me with...adoration. At least, I would like to believe she had. The

darkness might have been permeating her soul, but my mate was still there, waiting for me to save her. Waiting for *us* to save her.

I was telling the truth before. No one could own Z. Not a single male, human or nightmare alike, and most certainly not Aaliyah or the kings. But she owned the seven of us, completely and irrevocably.

“She was in a...castle,” I told Devlin, squeezing my eyelids shut as I attempted to remember my surroundings.

It was surprisingly difficult. Most of my observations centered around Z.

Did she look thinner than before?

When had she last bathed?

Was she happy?

Had she been injured?

And then she'd touched me—or maybe I'd touched her—and I'd forgotten everything else but how right she felt in my arms.

Still, I had been standing in that hallway long enough to remember the view from the nearest window. We appeared to have been in a castle far above the ground. On a cliffside, with water rushing below us. It was different from the house Aaliyah had brought me to when she kidnapped me but seemed eerily similar in style.

I wondered if she had found a way to somehow...transfer her home from one location to another. Or perhaps she had numerous mansions around the kingdom, each one similar in appearance. The crazy bitch certainly had a preference for all things dark, gothic, and depraved.

But, in the distance, I recognized the tiny town that seemed almost hazy, as if a constant mist was rippling over every surface.

Devlin's source was correct.

Aaliyah was right here, in the town of Meade, directly beside the lake.

We were so, so close to our mate.

So fucking close.

Only a boat ride away.

Excitement burned through my veins at just the thought of seeing her again. Touching her. Holding her. Tasting her.

*Z, we're coming for you.*

*I promise.*

"Jax, you're injured. You need to calm down," Devlin warned in a growly voice.

I realized then that I was practically bouncing on the small bed, my exhilaration a living, breathing entity in my chest.

"She's here, Dev. She's here." I reached for his wrist and gave it a squeeze. Only when his gaze flew to my own did I release him. "She's so close. So, so close."

My words were becoming slurred, but I had no idea if it was because of my injury or the excitement of the day. Perhaps it was a product of using the mate bond to visit Z. Or maybe it was just plain old blood loss. Either way, my body swayed precariously to the side as my lashes fluttered rapidly.

"We're going to get her, brother," Dev assured me, though his voice sounded muffled.

Still, it managed to cut through the darkness with the precision of a knife.

Get her...

Get Z...

Save her...

That was the last thought I had before my exhausted body finally surrendered to the sweet, welcoming embrace of sleep.

EIGHTEEN





# LUPE

I bit down on the growl that threatened to build in my throat. Even still, it remained there, this rumbling, vibrating sensation that had me clenching my hands into fists and gritting my teeth together.

After the attack on the outskirts of Meade, we decided to find an inn to spend the night. Devlin was with Jax now, dressing his wounds and ensuring he'd be okay, but the rest of us...

The rest of us had information we needed to gather if we had any hope of saving Z.

It was surprisingly difficult to find townspeople willing to talk about the mysterious stranger who had bought a home as far away from town as physically possible. Apparently, Aaliyah had a mansion built at the very top of the cliff, where bloated, gray clouds seemed to hover, obscuring the mansion from view.

Even still, as I stood at the edge of the lake, my bare toes digging into the cool water, I swore I could see a flash of golden hair high above. My imagination liked to pretend that it was Z standing on a balcony, searching for us. Waiting for us.

Another growl reverberated through me.

“Easy, Tall, Dark, and Scary,” Bash jested from beside me. He had his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face. His ash-blond hair swayed in the breeze that seemed even colder this close to the water’s edge. “We’re going to get our girl back.”

“You don’t know that.”

Bash appeared affronted. “Are you saying that I’m not perfect? Are you saying that I don’t know everything?” He placed a hand to his chest in mock offense. “How dare you.”

“What if—” I cut myself off abruptly, not allowing myself to finish that thought.

It was too horrible to even consider in my head, let alone speak out loud. It almost felt like a betrayal to the mate bond and the woman we loved above all else.

*What if Z is too lost for us to save?*

*What if there’s no reversing what the dark magic did to her?*

Devlin had given me the hell dagger for safekeeping, and I currently had it in the bag slung over my shoulder. The weight of it felt oppressive. Suffocating, almost. My back actually began to ache as if I were lugging around a five-hundred-pound object instead of a two-pound one.

So much darkness...

I’d assumed all of that dark magic would transfer straight into Z, but that didn’t seem to be the case. The dagger seemed to hum and vibrate like electricity was coursing through it. It wanted me to touch it, to plunge it into my chest, to pierce my heart...

I shook my head rapidly to clear it of such macabre thoughts.

As soon as I could, I was going to get rid of the damn dagger. Even if that meant crawling into hell itself and offering it up on a silver platter.

“Z’s a badass,” Bash said resolutely, oblivious to the direction my thoughts had wandered. “She’s capable of kicking all of our asses...and she’s more than capable of kicking the magic’s ass. And Aaliyah’s.” His lips twitched in the makings of a smile that never fully formed. “Don’t underestimate our girl, Lupe.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I couldn’t help but smile slightly in return.

Bash was right.

If anyone had hope of surviving this shit show, it was Z. Her determination, perseverance, and resilience made her a force of nature, one capable of both mass destruction and harmony. She was a tornado that blew through towns, leaving behind demolished buildings and fallen trees in its wake. But she was also the wildfire that engulfed fields and forests, ensuring that crops could grow in the future.

And I knew we would be right behind her every step of the way. Without her, I felt...broken, yet each jagged piece of me reached for her. I had been sliced and carved apart by a longing that I didn’t think would ever abate, not even when I had her in my arms.

“Did you find anything?” Bash asked, and at first, I thought he was talking to me.

When I looked over my shoulder, I saw that his attention was fixed on Ryland and Dair, who were walking towards us,

their faces subdued.

“Probably the same shit you did,” Ryland responded as the shadows withered around his body.

“That a strange woman had a mansion made at the very top of the cliffside? And that the townspeople claimed they have seen monsters coming and going from the property?” Bash rolled his eyes in exasperation. “We may have heard that once or twice. Or a few dozen times.”

“The only way to get to the mansion is to scale the cliffside,” Ryland continued, ignoring Bash’s snark. “Or...”

He shifted his gaze to Dair.

Despite myself, I couldn’t help but remember the way Dair had killed the incubus. I didn’t blame my brother for murdering him—hell, I’d killed half a dozen bandits myself—but the way he had done it...

I’d never seen a power like that before. It was almost as if Dair pulled all of the blood out of the nightmare with nothing but a thought.

What Z said before echoed in my mind then, about the seven of us not being born but appearing out of thin air.

About the seven of us being reincarnated versions of the Seven Deadly Sins.

An uneasy feeling settled in my gut.

The mermaid prince heaved out a breath, pulling me back to the topic at hand. I forced all thoughts of strange powers and reincarnations to the back of my mind.

“Or we can take a boat through Lake Meade to reach Aaliyah’s house.” Dair scrubbed at his clean-shaven jaw, exhaustion evident on his face.

Something in his tone...

Splinters of ice pinned my joints into place.

“And why do you sound as if you’re getting anal probed by a fist?” Bash sounded annoyed. “This should be easy. Find a boat, cross the lake, and then...bam! Save our mate.”

“There’s an entire community of mermaids in this lake,” Dair explained, his features still pinched together tightly.

“And?” Bash rubbed his hands together, an evil glint manifesting in his eyes. “That’s a bad thing *because?* You’re the damn prince of all mermaids. They should be kissing your damn feet...errr...tail. Your tail and your feet? Fuck if I know mermaid politics.”

“Apparently, they’re a rebel group who has broken away from the king’s rule,” Ryland explained with a frown. “Hence why they no longer live in the Mermaid Kingdom.”

My skin prickled like a thousand tiny fingers were poking and prodding at me. A boulder dropped through the hollow remains of my chest.

“We’re going to need to ask them for safe passage to reach the cliffside,” Dair said, grimacing. He pointed towards a spot on the cliff that was hidden by gray, cloying mist. “There’s supposed to be a staircase that will lead us right to the mansion.”

“So...you just have to charm a bunch of mermaid dicks who hate your father and probably want to see you dead?” Bash snorted as if he found this entire thing amusing. I might’ve punched him in the face for his nonchalance...if I didn’t see the tight lines bracketing each of his eyes. “Great. Just great. And here I thought this was too easy.”

“I was able to schedule a meeting with them for tomorrow afternoon,” Dair told us as he took a step closer, his feet remaining a few inches away from the lake.

I felt like that water—my tension rising like a wave about to break, cresting and then falling, shattering apart against the rocky shoreline.

We were so damn close.

Yet too damn far.

“Just be yourself,” Bash told Dair with an impish smirk. “Unless you suck. Then, be anyone but yourself.” He paused, seemed to consider his words carefully, and then said, “Yeah. Don’t be yourself. Just pretend to be me.”

Dair shoved at Bash’s shoulder playfully, but I could tell he was just as anxious as I was.

We had to survive twenty-four hours in this hellish town, find a way to convince rebel mermaids to support us, kidnap Z, and then free her of the dark magic plaguing her. Add on to all of that Jax’s condition...

We were fucked.

My fingers itched to do something, anything, besides waiting here. I wanted to draw the frothing water with Z standing on the shoreline, her blonde hair luminescent and highlighted with silver. I wanted to write poems expressing my love for her.

I wanted to do all of that...but I couldn’t.

Z didn’t need an artist right then; she needed a fighter.

And to free her, I would become one.

Even if it killed me.

NINETEEN



# AXEL

I hummed underneath my breath as I traversed the dank prison underneath the capital.

The mermaid king stared up at me through his fringe of lashes, anger radiating from his eyes and tension lining every muscle in his face. He sat on the edge of his tiny cot, not moving an inch even as I stepped closer. His face was smeared with dirt and dried blood, and his clothes were rumpled.

“You’re a traitor to your kind, Axel.” His voice was a low, sibilant hiss that echoed through the stone hall.

“Ohhh. Look at me. I’m quaking in my boots,” I said in a singsong voice, sliding my machete off my shoulder so I could swing it around and around in my hands. “My anus is puckered so damn hard right now.”

His right eye began to twitch in irritation. I could tell he was used to me stumbling forward in my attempt to please him. Little did he know during that entire time, I had my own agenda. And that agenda didn’t involve kissing the asses of the esteemed kings, even when I was their own personal assassin.

Besides, fatherhood had changed me. I now had to think about Mary, my favorite machete, and Mary-Lynette, my half-human, half-mage charge I’d kidnapped-slash-adopted-slash-fostered. Ah. The struggles of being a single father.



Of course, the kings didn't know about Mary-Lynette. They couldn't. If they ever discovered that a nightmare found a way to reproduce with a human...

I shuddered just thinking about it.

I wasn't afraid of blood. Hell, I reveled in it. You could just call me Axel the Bloody. Nah. Maybe not that name. Axel the Bloody sounded like a period gone wrong. Anyway...

I liked blood.

But I didn't want to think about my pseudo-daughter being covered in it.

Maybe that was progress for me. A transition from a "murderous psycho who loved machetes" to a "murderous psycho who loved machetes and had a daughter."

"Nightmares are meant to rule this world," the king continued in a gravelly voice that sounded as if he'd swallowed one too many pebbles.

Been there. Done that. Got indigestion. Zero out of ten, did not recommend.

"Times are changing, old man." I tossed him a wink. "Better get behind it, or...get in front of it? No. That doesn't sound right." I tapped the edge of my machete against my chin in thought, accidentally nicking my skin in the process. Oops. "Get to the ass of it? But why would you want to be on time's ass? Unless time is sexy..."

The mermaid king's lip peeled away from his teeth in disgust. "Are you fucking her too? Is that why you betrayed us?"

I tried not to let his crude words affect me.

“Nah. You know I’m more into the pickle than the bun, if you know what I mean.” I winked yet again. “Unless we’re talking about an ass bun, then I suppose I would be lying if I said that I wasn’t—”

“I can offer you all the riches you desire if you get me out.” The king straightened and smoothed a hand down his messy blood-streaked curls.

“Unless it’s money I can put up my asshole, then I’m not interested.”

“And power,” the king continued, ignoring my comment.

I froze and watched a slow, calculated smile curl up his lips when he realized he had me right where he wanted me. Hook, line, and sinker.

“Is that what you want?” He cocked his head to the side. “Power? Do you wish to be king, Axel? Have a harem of handsome lovers as your own? Do you want to rule the lands?” When I didn’t immediately answer, he stood and gripped the bars of his cell. “I can give you the world if you release me. You have my word. You can be a king—a great king. A powerful one. Every nightmare and human will bow at your feet.”

I stared at him for a long moment...before bursting into raucous laughter. Honestly, this guy should have a career as a court jester. He was fucking hilarious.

His features twisted when he realized that I wasn’t actually considering his offer. With an angry huff, he collapsed back onto the bed, his cold eyes never leaving mine.

“Do you really think I want power?” I asked once I got my laughter under control. I wiped at a few pesky tears that cascaded down my cheeks.

Oh, I'd needed that. There was no greater joy in all the realms than listening to your enemies plead for their lives.

"You know what they call me out there?" I used my machete to gesture in the vague direction of the dungeon's entrance. "The Butcher. And do you want to know what butchers do?" I leaned forward and allowed him to see the true depths of my insanity—the part of my soul that was only satiated by blood and death. "They *butcher*."

I had the pleasure of seeing a sliver of fear seep into the king's normally impassive eyes before he turned away. I wished I were an artist. Then, I'd be able to draw this exact moment so I could look at it over and over and over again. Maybe I'd even masturbate to it. Dair's father wasn't the most attractive man, but I was sure I could allow my magic to run wild.

I pictured him naked, kneeling before me, his pouty lips opened in a perfect O as I fed him an inch of my cock at a time...

"Axel!" Atta exclaimed as she appeared at the bottom of the staircase leading out of the dungeons. She brushed a hand at her perfectly coiffed hair before wrinkling her nose. "This place is disgusting."

She shuddered, and I couldn't help but notice that she very purposely ignored the gazes of the kings. No, not the kings; only one king in particular—her father.

She kept her attention pinned on me. "I need your help with something."

I sighed and swung my machete over my shoulder. "I was just about to start masturbating. Is this important? You know I value my alone time."

The mermaid king gasped in surprise, and the lust king—imprisoned farther down the hall—began to chuckle. Atta merely appeared annoyed.

“Just come on.” Without waiting for me to respond, she turned on her heel and stomped back up the stairs.

“I suppose I’ll see you later,” I told the mermaid king, offering him a wink.

He simply glared at me, his eyes emanating an almost elemental fury that made my insides dance happily.

I thoroughly enjoyed teasing the sadistic asshole. I would never actually touch him—my standards weren’t that low—but I wanted him to live in a constant state of fear. I knew all about what he did to Dair, and even though I didn’t know the mermaid prince very well, I knew Z. And I knew how much she loved him.

So for now, the mermaid king was public enemy numero uno.

Atta was waiting for me at the very top of the staircase, and she didn’t waste any time locking the door behind me before grabbing my wrist. I followed after her with a waning chuckle.

“Are you kidnapping me to have your naughty way with me?” I teased. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

She didn’t laugh at my joke or even make a retort back. It was only then that I saw how tense she was. Her fear was so palpable it was like a living force.

A tide of fire swept across my skin, and suddenly, I wasn’t the same Axel from even a moment before. I was the assassin, and I wasn’t just ready for the hunt...but for the kill.

I straightened my spine, grabbed my machete off my back, and quickened my pace.

“Who do I have to murder?” I murmured dispassionately, already planning on how I could dispose of the body.

I’d had the pleasure of helping the princes bury Z’s latest victims—a bunch of rich supernatural nobles who owned more human slaves than I did weapons. Which was saying something, because I liked my weapons almost as much as sex. It was liberating to be able to free all of those humans.

But damn, a twisted part of me wished I had helped Z kill those rich, sadistic assholes.

Even thinking about it sent a disconcerting shiver down my spine.

Fuck, I needed help if I was getting turned on by the thought of murder.

A lot of help.

A barrel of help.

A boatload of help.

A castle of—

“No killing,” Atta said out of the corner of her mouth, and my good mood plummeted.

I freaking pouted.

“But why?” I whined as I very reluctantly put Mary back into her sheath.

I gave my baby girl a stroke for good measure, silently promising her that I’d take her out in the streets if she continued to be a good machete for Daddy.

“Because we need to be on our best behavior.” Atta seemed to be vibrating at a high tempo now, like a plucked violin string. She practically bounced as she moved down the hall, completely in her element.

“Best behavior?”

“The council’s here,” she explained, spearing me with an icy look that had my balls packing up their bags and moving to live inside of my stomach. “So no killing, no maiming, no torture. We can’t let them know that anything’s amiss until the princes are ready to claim their thrones.”

I wanted to hiss and claw at her like a cornered possum.

Me? Charming politicians?

Ha.

Today seemed to be the day of jokes.

“They don’t know about the kings yet,” Atta continued. Her face was as white as parchment, but she held her chin high in the air, emulating a confidence befitting that of a ruler. A queen. “We need to keep it that way until we discover who’s a friend and who’s a foe.”

“And I can’t even do a little killing?”

She scowled. “No.”

“Not even an itty-bitty little bit? A light killing?” I pushed my lips out in another pout. “Just a tiny bit? A simple stabbing?”

“No. Killing.” She jabbed a finger into my chest. “None. Do you understand me, Axel? We need these supernaturals on our side.”

“You ask too much of me sometimes.” I sighed dramatically. “But fiiine. I’ll schmooze these assholes and win them over. But you owe me a killing spree.”

Atta smiled—a cold, predatory smile that had a chill skating down my spine even as my cock actually stirred with the beginnings of arousal. I was as gay as they came, but even I could admit that Atta’s bloodthirsty side made my testicles tingle.

“I have a feeling you’re going to get your killing spree before the month is over.” Abruptly, her smile faded, replaced by steadfast determination. “Now, come. We have politicians to win over and a throne to claim.”

“Bossy woman,” I muttered as I followed along after her. “This is why I prefer men.”

Atta just snorted.

TWENTY





## Z

I woke slowly, leisurely, confusedly. My head pounded something fierce, and the stirrings of a memory tickled the edges of my consciousness like ghostly fingers. There was something I needed to remember, something important...

Shifting, I was surprised when I rolled off the bed and landed with an audible thump on the floor. The *hard* floor—not the soft carpeting in my bedroom.

When had my bed shrunk? I was almost certain that I had been sleeping on a king-sized mattress with Killian, yet this felt like a twin bed. And what happened to the plush carpeting?

I slowly peeled my crusted eyelids open...and then immediately slammed them back shut when I was bombarded by piercing white light. It burned my retinas and exacerbated my already pounding head.

Where the fuck was I?

I groaned and slowly rose to a sitting position. It took my lashes three times to open completely, but when they finally did, I went still.

I was no longer in my opulent room back in Aaliyah's mansion. I was in...a dungeon. That was the only term I could

think to use, and even that failed to encapsulate the tiny cube I was trapped in. There was a single bed flush against the wall, adorned in cozy-looking blankets. I also saw a sink and toilet, thank the gods. But there were no windows and only one door.

Locked.

Of course.

I tugged at the handle ineffectually, but of fucking course, it didn't budge.

What the hell had happened?

My thoughts immediately jumped to my so-called mates. Had they somehow kidnapped me from my sister? Was this their doing? But then the kernels of a memory began to pop into existence in the dissonant mess that was my head.

Aaliyah...

I remembered her tear-stained face as she apologized to me. And then I felt something hard hit me over the back of my head.

She wouldn't...

No.

No!

As if my thoughts alone had conjured her, the door to the tiny room opened, and my sister stepped inside. Over her shoulder, I could see a long, narrow hallway constructed entirely out of gray stone. I even thought I saw S's hungry eyes and lewd smile. Then the door was closed, and I was left alone with my sister.

My sister...who'd betrayed me.

No, I didn't believe that.

I couldn't.

Aaliyah loved me. I loved her. There would be no reason for her to do this to me.

I tried to remember what we had been discussing, tried to grab ahold of the wispy fragments of my memory, but they slipped through my fingers like a fluffy cloud—impossible to hold on to.

“Aaliyah?” I hated when my voice quivered. I didn't want her to think I feared her or even distrusted her, yet...

Aaliyah's face was forlorn as she stepped farther into the room. “I didn't want to have to do this, my dear sister. But I didn't have a choice.” A single tear cascaded down her cheek as her lips thinned, turning into a grim line. “You didn't give me a choice.”

“What are you talking about?” My heart flipped over in my chest.

Aaliyah was supposed to be the one person I could rely on unconditionally, the one person I could trust in this fucked-up world.

Why would she lock me away?

I searched her eyes somewhat desperately. Was this a joke that had gone too far? Was she mad at me?

All I saw reflecting back at me was utter agony and despair. That one look broke through the web my brain was desperately trying to spin.

This wasn't a joke.

Wasn't a prank.

Aaliyah gracefully moved to the edge of the bed and sat down. She fiddled absently with the hem of her dress as she stared everywhere but at me. At the tiled flooring, at the white sink, at the toilet, at the closed door.

“This isn’t a prison, sister,” she said at last, her voice slicing at my skin like a razor blade.

“It certainly feels like one.” I remained on the ground, though I scrambled backwards until my back was against the wall opposite her.

I needed to keep her—and the door—in view at all times. Turning my back on either of them would be like baring my throat to a predator.

“The sheets are the finest in the kingdom,” she continued, grabbing ahold of it and allowing the material to slide through her fingers. “And you have a toilet and sink—”

“This is still a prison, Aaliyah,” I snapped sharply.

She winced, and I immediately tried to soften my tone. I didn’t want to hurt her, even knowing she had chosen to lock me away. I told myself that she must have had a reason for her decision. I was just missing something, something crucial, something important.

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Those mates of yours are corrupting you.” Her harsh words banded around my chest like manacles.

I couldn’t remember a time I had seen such rage on her face, such hatred. It ripped away at my flesh like acid.

“My mates?” I tried to laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of her statement, but it sounded forced, even to my own ears. “They’re not truly my mates, Aaliyah. You know this.”

One of her perfect brows arched. “Do I?”

“I don’t care about them.” I focused on my hands, where they hung limply in my lap. Her gaze felt like hot specks of ash burning my cheeks. “How many times do I have to tell you that? Whatever I feel for them...” I shook my head somewhat desperately. “It’s just lust, nothing else.”

*Lies*, my inner voice sniped.

“I certainly didn’t get that impression when Killian was feasting on you in your bedroom...or when Jax was making you come in the hallway.”

I snapped my head up. “You were watching me?” I couldn’t help but gape at her in disbelief.

A tiny voice in my head warned me this was wrong. So, so wrong. Why would she be watching me? That wasn’t normal. It certainly wasn’t healthy.

The magic inside of me reared its head and then began to slither through my body, spreading to every crevice and bloating me with darkness.

*She must’ve had a reason...*

*She loves you...*

*She cares for you...*

*You’re her whole world...*

The voice in my head didn’t feel like my own. No, it felt distinctly dark and insidious, and I realized it was my magic speaking to me, whispering soothing reassurances.

But all it served to do was make me uneasy and confused. It was like a bomb had gone off, and shrapnel flew everywhere, slicing at my skin.

My headache intensified. It seemed to be pounding in tandem to my heartbeat.

“You know I need to keep an eye on you.” Aaliyah sounded almost offended. “You’re my sister. It’s my job to look after you.”

“That’s... That’s sick, Aaliyah.” I began to shake as the warmth from the magic faded from me like the sea drawing back from the land. “You can’t—”

“You wouldn’t say that if it weren’t for them.” Her voice was hard. Fierce. Angry.

“Aaliyah...” Tears pricked the backs of my eyes.

The pain of her betrayal cut deeper than ever before, nestling beneath my rib cage and punctuating my heart.

She stood abruptly and smoothed her hands down her dress. She always seemed to do that when she was anxious or upset, as if ironing out imaginary wrinkles somehow calmed her.

“Until you can forget about those *men*, you’ll remain here.” She stepped forward with her hand extended, as if she meant to cup my cheek.

I flinched away from her and tried not to feel despondent when her face fell. She was my sister, and I loved her, but this... It was too much, even for me.

“I’m doing this for your own protection.”

And with that, she was gone.

TWENTY-ONE



## Z

I'd never considered betrayal to have a taste before, but as I sat on the edge of the small cot, staring vacantly at the closed door, something sour and bitter settled on my tongue. Every single time I tried to swallow, the acerbic flavors would barrage me.

I didn't cry, though I desperately wanted to. My damn tears hung suspended in my eyes, a constant reminder of what Aaliyah had done to me.

How could she have done this to me, her sister?

*Why* would she do this?

Those questions rattled around in my brain, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't formulate an answer that made sense.

And yet, strangest of all, Aaliyah wasn't the one I thought about most as I sat in this dilapidated prison. My mind couldn't help but continually drift to Killian, and fear for him gripped my heart in a chokehold.

I didn't want to be afraid for the striking incubus—that would just prove Aaliyah's point—but terror grabbed ahold of me regardless.

Where was he?



Was he okay?

Did Aaliyah get rid of him in an effort to “save” me?

When I closed my eyes, Killian’s handsome face was etched on the skin of my eyelids. I could see his sultry, albeit timid smile and the soft curls of his red and golden hair as they kissed his temples. But then the image changed, and his eyes were glazed and vacant, not a drop of life in their depths. Blood was splattered across his cheeks and neck from a knife wound.

Dead.

He was dead.

And my heart fucking shattered.

The strange magic inside of me tried to reassure me that everything was okay, that we didn’t care about him, that we wanted him dead, but something deep inside of me screamed in protest.

When I wasn’t staring forlornly at the door, I was trying to find a way to escape. I used a piece of metal from the bed to chip away at the stone wall, but I knew my endeavor was fruitless. It would take me years to break through, even if I worked twenty-four hours every day of the week.

I even tried to throw my tired body against the door, but it refused to budge even an inch. I didn’t know if Aaliyah had reinforced the door with magic or just plain concrete, but all I served to do was hurt myself.

I supposed it was a waiting game—a game I was failing. Patience had never been my strong suit, after all, and just then, it felt like I would burst into a thousand pieces if I didn’t get answers. A part of me hated my sister for locking me away,

but that piece of me was small and quiet, a mosquito buzzing around my head but never landing on my skin.

She must have had a reason to do this to me.

She must have.

I repeated that thought like a mantra, a prayer, a goddamn plea in my head. Even still, those words felt oddly hollow, lacking any sustenance or truth.

Somehow, Aaliyah seemed to know the exact moment I fell asleep. I didn't know if she was watching me or if she was merely attuned to my emotions. Either way, the second my eyelashes fluttered shut, she was there. I would wake up to see that fresh food had arrived and a few basic toiletries had been left out.

I once tried to stay awake long enough to confront her, but I believed magic had been in play. My body had rebelled against my requests, and unconsciousness claimed me without my consent.

I probably smelled disgusting.

While I had food, a toilet, and a sink, my sister failed to provide me with a shower or a bath. Instead, I had to clean myself using the washcloths she provided. Fortunately, the sink was large enough for me to place my head into, so at least my hair was semi clean. I couldn't say the same about my clothes—or lack thereof. All I had was the stained bathrobe from before.

I didn't know how long I remained in that prison, but fear for Killian threatened to strangle me. Every time I tried to dismiss such a ridiculous, irrational emotion, it would poke its head back up unbidden, staring at me with mocking eyes.

I couldn't run from the truth, no matter how hard I might try to.

It was on the third day—third night?—when my dreams changed from what they were before. It wasn't a conscious decision on my part. One second, I was dreaming about sexy, shirtless men hand feeding me chocolate-covered strawberries.

The next, I was standing in the corner of a small room. I didn't recognize it, though I assumed it was a room in an inn. Everything held an impersonal feel to it, from the perfectly made bed and stark white walls to the gaudy red carpeting.

Six familiar men were situated around the room, scooping what appeared to be beef stew into their mouths.

Ryland and Dair sat on the edge of the bed, looking as different from each other as night and day. Ryland wasn't wearing his shadows, so I was able to clearly see his dark, scarred face slightly obscured by his midnight hair. His piercing blue eyes were fixed on his bowl of soup as he stirred the contents around idly.

Dair, on the other hand, was a vision of gold and sunshine. If Ryland was made up of shadows and darkness, then the mermaid prince was constructed entirely out of light. His golden hair and golden skin gave him a striking look that might've looked tacky on anyone else but made him even more beautiful. His coloring contrasted greatly with his warm blue eyes—the exact same shade as the water just outside the inn's window.

A rather *familiar* body of water...

Devlin sat at the tiny wooden table, opposite a stone-faced Bash and a subdued Jax. Lupe was leaning against the

fireplace with his arms crossed over his chest. He was the only one who wasn't eating.

As I watched, Devlin raked his fingers through his brown, curly hair. It was longer than I remembered seeing it before, coming to a stop just at his shoulders. He had curls that most women would kill for, but no one would ever describe Devlin Genie as feminine. The scruff on his face and the intensity in his violet eyes begged to differ.

“We can't allow those mermaid bastards to keep pushing back our meeting date,” he said at last, and his husky voice curled around me like smoke.

Despite myself, goose bumps pebbled on my skin, and delicious heat cascaded down my spine. I inwardly cursed my body's instinctive reaction to the genie prince.

Maybe Aaliyah was right.

Maybe I needed to be locked away for my own sanity.

Every time I was near one of these princes, I lost my damn mind, consumed by an aching need to claim them and have them claim me in return.

And I couldn't forget about the lust I felt whenever they stared in my direction.

A lot of fucking lust.

It wasn't natural.

“What do you suppose we do, oh great and holy one?” Bash's voice was rife with sarcasm.

Unlike Devlin, Bash's ash-blond hair appeared as if it had been cut recently, though the waves were still a disheveled, tousled mess.

Devlin seemed unperturbed by Bash's snark. "Great and holy one? I can't say I've been called that before. It fits me, don't you think?"

Bash merely gave the genie the middle finger in response.

"The mermaids are purposely making this difficult for us." Dair's voice was grave. He pushed his bowl of stew away with a grimace like the contents were making his stomach roil.

"Can't you just tell them that you're not like your father?" Bash exclaimed, using his spoon to gesticulate wildly.

A tiny bit of stew went flying across the room and hit Lupe squarely in the forehead. The burly shifter barely even blinked as he wiped it away with the back of his hand before it could drip onto his glasses.

"Do you really think they'll believe that?" Dair kept his voice patient and calm. "These mermaids have been treated like shit by the royal family for years now. They see me as the enemy. I doubt they'll believe me when I say that I'm nothing like my father. Put yourself in their shoes."

Silence descended between the six of them as they focused back on their food. Lupe merely shifted his huge body to stare out the window, watching the white-tipped waves batter the rocky shoreline.

Why did that lake look so familiar?

Could it be the same lake that was outside Aaliyah's castle?

My heart began beating rapidly at the thought, even as insidious fear slithered through my veins.

I didn't want to be afraid for these six men, yet that emotion persisted regardless of my own thoughts and wants.

Aaliyah would kill them if she knew they were near. Of that I had no doubt. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd already "taken care of" Killian.

Oh god.

My stomach twisted and tightened at just the prospect of anything happening to the shy incubus.

"Do you think they're okay?" Bash's voice was uncharacteristically soft. Subdued. None of his usual sarcasm or ire remained. His pink lips were pressed into a thin line as he stared intently into his stew, as if he believed he'd find the answers to the universe in the beef.

"Of course they are," Ryland snapped with more vigor than I could remember hearing from him. The shadows around the room pulsed with the intensity of his emotions. "Z would never let anything happen to Killian, and we all know that Z can take care of herself."

The snakes writhing in my stomach began to move even faster, coiling around my internal organs.

How could these men have such faith in me, even knowing I hated them?

And why did it break my heart to know that the faith was misplaced?

I *had* let something happen to Killian, and I definitely couldn't take care of myself if my current living conditions were any indication.

Not for the first time, I felt *anger* towards Aaliyah. Not even the dark magic inside of me could sweep that emotion away completely.

Devlin's eyes glowed purple. "But Z isn't—"

Ryland cut Devlin off with a literal growl. “She’s not lost to us. Not now. Not ever.”

“She’s here,” Jax piped up for the first time, straightening almost imperceptibly in his seat.

The other five turned to stare at him in confusion, but he wasn’t focused on them or his stew.

He was staring directly at me.

Slowly, five other heads turned to swivel in my direction.

“Z?” The bowl of stew slipped from Devlin’s hands and fell to the floor, shattering.

“What the fuck?” Bash exclaimed, jumping to his feet. His eyes were wide and panicky in his painfully handsome face.

“Baby?” Lupe took a tentative step closer...

And then I blinked, and the vision changed.

I was no longer in that strange room with the six men I was supposed to hate. No, I was back in my cell, lying on the floor.

Standing above me, a crazed smile on his warped face, was S.

“Z,” he whispered in a low, reverent tone.

He reached down to brush my cheek, and his fingers lingered a second too long. Revulsion skittered down my spine like an infestation of maggots.

“I’ve been waiting for the two of us to have some time alone.” His eyes gleamed with a manic energy I’d never seen before. “We need to talk, my love.”

Before I could even open my mouth to argue, he was leaning forward.

His cold, slimy lips touched mine, and I thought I was going to vomit.

Fuck.



TWENTY-TWO



## DEVLIN

“Z !” I bellowed, my hand extended.

Reaching for her.

Always reaching for her.

But the second my fingers would've made contact with her smooth, porcelain skin, she vanished.

Blink.

She was in front of me.

Blink.

She was gone.

I could do nothing but gape at the spot where she'd once stood, wondering if I had imagined it. But if I had somehow started hallucinating, then I certainly wasn't the only one.

All of my brothers were gawking at where we had last seen Z.

“What the fuck?” Bash sputtered, tugging at his hair and beginning to pace. “Seriously, what the ever-loving asshole of a fuck?”

Lupe removed his glasses, rubbed at the bridge of his nose, and then replaced them with a weary sigh I felt all the way to the hollow of my bones. “Perhaps we're dreaming. Maybe—”

“Or you guys could fucking listen to me for once in your lives,” Jax snapped, more anger in his voice than I’d ever remembered hearing before.

His red-tinted gaze locked on mine, and I couldn’t help but recall our conversation from a few days earlier. It wasn’t as if I didn’t believe him, but...

“It must be the bond,” Dair murmured, giving voice to my own thoughts. Though he was addressing the room as a whole, he didn’t tear his gaze away from where we had last seen Z. “The bond wants Z to remember us. To love us again.”

“She still loves us,” Ryland snapped, more and more shadows coalescing around him in response to his mounting agitation. His icy-blue eyes shone through the darkness like beacons. “She just doesn’t know it yet.”

She had been here, within touching distance, so close that if I would’ve inhaled deeply, I would’ve been able to smell her pomegranate scent.

I might’ve even been able to run my fingers over her smooth, silky flesh, or fist my hand in her blonde curls, or kiss her supple lips—the same lips I’d been dreaming about for years now.

What the fuck was happening to her and Killian as the six of us sat around, twiddling our damn thumbs and staring forlornly out the window?

Fear for my mate and brother pressed down on my heart and then squeezed until I feared the organ would splatter.

“I can’t just sit around here and do nothing,” I snapped at last, reaching for the coat I’d strewn over the back of the chair earlier today.

“What is your plan, Dev?” Bash arched an elegant eyebrow, the movement somehow both mocking and condescending.

It made me want to punch him in the face.

“I’m going to confront those stupid mermaid fucks and demand they listen to us.”

The mermaids in Lake Meade had been purposely pulling our chains since Dair first requested a meeting with them. We were supposed to discuss safe transport days ago, but they constantly pushed back the meeting time. When we had tried to confront them at a known hotspot they frequented—a tavern near the lake—we were refused entry.

Ryland had suggested we kill them all, but Dair had played peacemaker, reminding us what would happen if we declared war on the mermaids. No doubt, the other nightmares in the area would back their fellow townsfolk. It would be a bloodbath, one I wasn’t sure we could win.

No, the damn mermaids had us by the balls, and they knew it.

But no more.

I stalked out of the room without a backwards glance and hurried down the hall. Rage vibrated through me like a plucked string. I wasn’t prone to violent outbursts like shifters, but just then, I thought I could level the entire city to the ground. My power pulsed in tandem to my rapidly beating heart, purple wisps that dug into my wrists like manacles.

“Devlin, you need to calm down.” Surprisingly, it was Lupe who followed me.

The huge shifter was easily able to keep pace with me, despite the fact I was practically sprinting, and he was walking

in a way I would almost describe as leisurely. Fucking shifters.

“Who knows what the fuck Aaliyah is doing to Z and Killian?” I raged as purple magic slithered up my arms like sentient snakes.

I couldn’t actually use my powers the way Bash could—not without someone wishing on my lamp—but my magic burned within my gut all the same, demanding me to unleash it on the unsuspecting civilians. It was a potent, heady sensation.

“We’re going to talk to the mermaids tomorrow,” Lupe attempted to reason, though I could tell that he, too, was just barely holding on to his temper.

His voice was rougher than I remembered ever hearing it. Almost a growl.

“Until they decide to push back the meeting again?” I scoffed, wondering how we had fallen so far from grace.

We were the damn princes, for fuck’s sake, yet we were being tugged around by our dicks. No more. If I needed to, I’d remind the fuckers in this town exactly why they should fear us. We weren’t our parents...but that didn’t mean we didn’t have our own brand of darkness inside of us.

“We won’t allow them to,” Lupe said calmly—well, as calmly as a volatile shifter without his mate was able to be. “Dair has a plan.”

We finally reached the lobby of the small, unassuming inn.

Everything was constructed out of wood—wood pillars, wooden beams, polished wooden flooring. Throw rugs had been tossed sporadically across the floor, and there were a few ratty couches and chairs surrounding an unlit hEarth.

Directly opposite the check-in counter was a tavern that sold nothing but ale and stew. Only a few of the tables were currently occupied. The barkeep—a bored, brown-haired mage—was attempting to clean out a glass while avoiding the wandering hands of a drunk patron.

This entire place was a dump...just more proof of how far we'd fallen. For years, we had stayed in the finest hotels money could afford. We had servants waiting on us hand and foot.

Now, we couldn't even schedule a damn meeting with a bunch of rowdy mermaids. We were nothing but jokes to them—the disgraced sons of the malevolent, evil kings who allowed this world to fall into ruin. How the hell were we supposed to rule when nobody trusted us? When everybody assumed we were replicas of the monsters who “birthed” us?

A strange twisting sensation settled in my stomach. This was different from the all-encompassing fear I felt whenever I thought of Z and Killian. That... That emotion was pure terror and unfettered anger aimed at Aaliyah. This was something else entirely.

Because for the first time in my life, I wondered if I deserved to take my father's crown.

I had allowed the world—*my* world—to descend into chaos because I was too afraid to fight back, too afraid to do what was right. The saying “too little, too late,” echoed in my mind now.

Outside the inn, thunder boomed, and lightning spliced apart the graying sky, a zigzagging streak of yellow. Storm clouds brewed on the horizon, slowly inching forward.

I took a step towards the front door, unsure of what I was about to do but knowing I had to do *something*, when someone grabbed my arm, tugging me to a stop.

I spun around, my teeth bared, expecting to see Lupe, only to come face-to-face with the owner of the inn. Lupe was being held back by her husband.

The woman was practically ancient, and from the violet tint in her eyes, I hazarded she was a genie like myself. Wrinkles cut deep grooves into her already withered face. Her gray hair was combed back into a tight bun that somehow only accentuated her age.

Her husband, a mage, was bald, but what he didn't have on the top of his head, he made up for with a beard that touched his stomach. His fearful eyes were trained on the window of the inn.

“You don't want to go outside, boy,” the woman—who had introduced herself as Betty when we first arrived—murmured in a raspy, frail voice.

The hand that had captured my arm began to shake.

“What do you mean?” I asked, instantly concerned.

There was genuine fear in her purple eyes, and the sight of it amped up my own unease.

“A storm's coming,” her husband—Richard, I believed his name was—said.

He released Lupe and took a few steps forward until he had an unobstructed view out the window.

It was only then that I realized everybody in the inn had stopped what they were doing and were gathered around the

various windows. The barmaid was desperately checking the latches, ensuring they were still shut and locked.

What the fuck?

“A storm?” Lupe repeated. He shot me a confused look over Richard’s head.

Outside, males and females alike were running towards the nearest building, whether that be a house, shop, or restaurant. They held their shirts over their heads to protect them from a rain that had yet to fall.

My wariness ratcheted up a dozen notches, and the twisting sensation in my stomach intensified.

Betty flashed us a grim smile, one that revealed her missing teeth. Her eyes were shadowed with horrors I couldn’t even begin to comprehend, let alone acknowledge.

“You boys are new to town, aren’t you?”

“We’re here on business,” I agreed quickly, reverting to the cover story we had given everyone when we first arrived.

We hoped to keep our true identities a secret for as long as possible.

“If there’s one thing you need to take away from your time here, then it’s that you never go outside when there’s a storm.” The barmaid moved to join us and stared intently out the window.

I followed the direction of her gaze to where a man was running from building to building, attempting to be let in.

Every door he tried was locked.

What the hell?



I ventured a tentative step closer just as a deafening boom echoed from up above, and the sky cracked open. Rain began to fall in torrents, immediately dousing the streets and buildings.

The man stood in the center of the street, frozen.

“What the fuck is going on?” Lupe boomed.

Nobody answered. But then again, they didn’t need to.

The rain continued to beat down on the man, and as I watched, horrified, he began to...change. That was the only word I could think to use, but even that was an inadequate description. I never really associated the word “change” with anything painful. How could it be? Usually, changes occurred for the better.

But what happened to the man was most definitely *not* for the better.

A scream ripped through the night air, almost louder than the thunder in the distance, and the man’s back arched in a way that appeared agonizing.

“What the hell? We need to help him!” I hurried towards the front door of the inn, unable to stand seeing the way his features twisted in agony.

And that scream...

It would haunt my nightmares.

Betty stopped me yet again with a strength that belied her old age.

Her voice was grave when she spoke. “You can’t save him now. No one can.”

Vomit scorched my throat as I watched the man writhe like mad on the watery asphalt. His skin seemed to be burning away with every raindrop that touched his flesh. I could actually hear the sizzling sound they made.

But he didn't die.

Not then.

He just continued to scream and scream and scream as the rain tore away at his skin like a million serrated blades. Red blood joined the rainwater cascading to the drains lining the street.

The man's eyes turned pure white, and his teeth elongated, becoming sharp points. He thrashed wildly as an inhumane growl emanated from deep within his chest. He looked utterly...monstrous. His ears were large and pointed—wolf ears, I realized belatedly—and his fingernails had lengthened to talons that clawed at the stone beneath him.

“Don't worry,” the barmaid said, misinterpreting the horror on my face. “He won't be able to attack anyone. He'll be dead long before the change takes over completely.”

“The change?” Lupe whispered from beside me.

His cheeks were ashen, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears. I knew my brother well enough to read the anguish etched across his features.

This was his kingdom.

His people.

His responsibility.

And he was watching one of his subjects die right before his very eyes.

“Things have been different since the devil herself arrived here.” Betty tucked her shaky hand into her husband’s arm and then leaned her head on his shoulder.

“The devil?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“That...*woman*.” Betty’s lips curled away from her teeth in a snarl.

“She’s not a woman,” Richard protested immediately with a vehement shake of his head. “She’s a monster.”

“Strange things have been happening since she arrived here,” the barmaid explained, anxiously tugging at her ratty, greasy hair. “The storms are only one of those things.”

“There are monsters in the area,” Betty whispered in a trembling voice. “Monsters that do her bidding.”

“I don’t know what the fuck she’s doing up there, but whatever it is is impacting us,” Richard added. He hugged his wife closer against his chest and kissed the crown of her head. “There’s a...darkness in the air now. Something distinctly malevolent. It’s changing our weather. Our animals. Our people, both humans and nightmares alike.”

I exchanged a grim glance with Lupe.

Whatever Aaliyah was doing to access hell was obviously having adverse effects on the surrounding community. I wondered how different life here once was before the she-devil herself came to destroy it all.

“Why don’t you just leave?” Lupe asked gently.

All three of them turned to stare at him in disbelief.

“And go where?” The barkeep sniffed in disgust. “If you haven’t realized it yet, boy, we’re not swimming in riches here.”

“This is our home,” Betty agreed as she cuddled farther into her husband’s side. “We grew up here. Made families here. Built a life here.”

“We’re not going to allow one evil bitch to scare us away,” Richard added.

Lupe processed their words for a long moment. I could see that calculated gleam in his eyes that always preceded some grand epiphany he’d just developed.

After a moment of silence, he lowered his gaze back to the three nightmares. “I promise you that I’ll do whatever I can to help this town. You have my word.”

The vow hung in the air between us, startlingly pronounced, permeating the surroundings with the finality of a death chime. I knew that when Lupe made a promise, he’d have to be dead not to follow through with it.

“What can you do to help us, boy?” The barmaid narrowed her eyes at the burly shifter with unencumbered distrust.

Lupe opened his mouth, shut it, and then opened it again. I could tell he wanted to reveal the truth about who he was, but he quickly decided against it. Instead, he bowed his chin subserviently.

“I’m just a lowly servant,” he murmured. “But I promise I’ll do what I can.”

The three of them eyed him strangely but chose not to comment on his heartfelt declaration.

All five of us turned our attention back to the window where the grotesque man was crawling his way forward, strange, haunting sounds emitting from his mouth. The rain continued to pour down in a heavy torrent, though when it made contact with the man, it turned red with blood.

Only a minute later, the man fell still, collapsing to the ground in a bloody, skinless heap.

Dead.

“I think I understand why we need a boat for safe passage across Lake Meade,” Lupe murmured, his eyes wide with horror at the gruesome sight.

“The water’s contaminated,” I agreed with a sinking heart.

Was the stew we’d just eaten made with this fucked-up water? What about our horses? Were they given it in the stables? And our bath water? Our drinking water?

Fuck.

Lupe turned to face me completely, his features drawn tightly, and his eyes pained. “If just rain turned a man into a monster, then what do you think happened to all of those mermaids who currently *live* in the water?”

Swallowing proved to be impossible. It felt as if someone had shoved a sword down my throat, and the keen blade was slashing up my insides.

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

But I had a feeling we were going to find out before the week was over.

TWENTY-THREE



## Z

**S**'s lips were slimy. Sour, even.

It felt as if I were kissing a damn fish—one that had been dipped into a barrel of acid and then roasted over a fire.

Disgust curdled in my gut as S lowered his body overtop mine. The stench of decay was even stronger now, permeating the air and assaulting my senses. Bile burned low in my gut, and acid singed my throat like fingers of fire.

“I missed you so much, my love,” S whispered against my mouth.

He attempted to deepen the kisses, his tongue teasing the seam of my lips, but I twisted my head away. Of course, that didn't stop my deranged ex. He simply peppered kisses across the corner of my lips and my cheek as if I were playing some sort of fucked-up game with him.

“S, get off of me,” I warned in a low voice. Anger vibrated within me, an electrical wire that had been cut and was now whipping around, sparking and zapping at anyone who got too close. “I don't want to hurt you.”

S chuckled as if I'd just told the most hilarious joke.

“You would never hurt me, Z. You love me.”

“S...”

His hand crawled up my side—a slow, tortuous pathway that reminded me distinctly of slime emanating from a snail—and parted my bathrobe just enough so he could touch my bare flesh. The second his palm would've connected with my breast, I exploded into action.

Quick as a whip, I wrapped my legs around his waist, my ankles crossing, and shifted us so he was now at the bottom, and I was on top. My bathrobe had come undone, and S didn't waste any time admiring my curves, his eyes growing hooded with desire. He reached a hand up as if he meant to fondle one of my bare breasts.

“Z...” he murmured reverently.

I rolled my eyes so far back into my head I swore I saw brain matter.

“Don't. Fucking. Touch. Me,” I hissed, reaching for the metal bar directly over his shoulder—the same metal bar I'd used to “dig” a hole through the cement wall when I was first imprisoned.

S's face momentarily darkened, though I had no idea if it was because of my words, the sincerity in my voice, or the anger in my eyes.

“You're mine,” S raged, grabbing at my hips and gyrating his hard cock against me. “You've always been mine, and you always will be. I love you. You love me. We're supposed to be together. It was promised—”

My god. Did S just like to hear himself talk? Did he actually believe the utter bullshit he was spewing?

With a resigned sigh, I slammed the metal bar against S's head.

Hard.



He instantly fell unconscious, his eyelashes fluttering shut and his lips parting.

“Fuck you, you crazy bastard,” I murmured as I stumbled to my feet, quickly trying to straighten my damn bathrobe.

Once I was certain all of the important bits were covered, I stepped over S’s fallen body and ventured out of my prison cell.

It was apparent Aaliyah had no idea her little lackey planned to visit me. If she did, I imagined she would have left at least a few of her guards outside of my cell on the off chance that I managed to overpower S.

But the hall was empty.

My heart pounded in nervous anticipation as I stealthily tiptoed forward, trying to orient myself with my surroundings.

Where the hell even was I?

I certainly wasn’t in the basement Aaliyah had taken me to previously.

And...where did I plan to go?

That last question quite literally stopped me in my tracks. The pounding of my heartbeat intensified until it sounded like a deafening snare drum in my ears.

When I was trapped in that tiny cell, I knew I needed to escape. Yet, now that I was free, I couldn’t imagine leaving my sister. I loved her, despite her betrayal.

Then, like a meteorite skirting across the night sky in flashes of brilliant red and aspen yellow, Killian’s face appeared to me.

A damn cactus emerged in my throat, slicing at the sensitive skin there and making swallowing impossible.

I needed to find Killian, didn't I?

I needed to save him, right?

Pain exploded behind my eyelids, and I almost keeled over from the intensity of it.

*No, leave him to die,* a dark, insidious voice whispered to me.

*He doesn't care about you. He doesn't love you.*

*No one loves you but your sister.*

I recognized that voice as belonging to the magic inside of me—the magic of the dagger I'd used to stab the mermaid king.

*No!* I shook my head from side to side desperately, trying to silence the angry voice. *I need to save him.*

Determination swept over me, filling every single cell of my body until I was shaking from it.

Yes...that was what I needed to do.

Find Killian.

Save him.

Free him.

My stomach did a low, hard flip at the realization that I'd just proved Aaliyah's point. These men were my weaknesses. I was supposed to hate them, fear them, despise them, yet I craved them with a vigor that was startling. My body called out to theirs, and it was only a matter of time until my heart and soul did as well.

What the fuck was happening to me?

I quickened my pace down the long, stone hallway as my heart battled against my head. One side of me wanted to leave the incubus to die; the other side knew that I wouldn't be able to survive if anything happened to him.

Even now, his scent enveloped me, and a tiny tendril of electricity curled through my stomach. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and hold him tightly. I wanted to—

*Kill him*, my magic whispered in a silky, seductive voice. *You want to kill him.*

*No.* I shook my head vehemently as my knees trembled, threatening to give way. I used the wall for support as I inched my way down the hallway, one step at a time.

Memories assaulted me from every direction, but I didn't know which ones were real and which ones were my mind playing tricks on me.

I could see all seven of my "mates" staring at me with devotion and love. I could feel their touches, their kisses, their caresses. I could hear their whispered words as they promised to always love and adore me.

But then the visions changed, and suddenly, the love on their faces distorted into hatred. They were sneering at me, threatening me, *hurting* me.

Fear assailed me, and I threw myself against the wall, clamping my hands over my ears as if I could somehow block out the images.

*No, they're not real.*

*They're real.*

*They're not real.*

*They're real.*

God, each one felt like they were a vision set loose from a nightmare and came to rip me from the reality I once knew. I couldn't comprehend up from down, left from right, backwards from forwards.

"What's happening to me?" I whimpered as I tugged at my hair somewhat desperately.

"Z?" a tentative voice asked. And then, more alarmed, "Z?!" The patter of footsteps sounded, and then a figure moved to kneel before me. A soft hand touched my face, and I flinched away instinctively. "Z, it's me. It's Mali."

Mali?

Why did that name sound so familiar?

*Friend. She was once your friend,* a tiny voice in the back of my head whispered.

And then the dark magic was there, loud and booming, overshadowing all coherent thoughts.

*Don't you remember what she did? She got Diego killed. She betrayed you. She deserves to die.*

No.

"No, no, no." I didn't even realize I was speaking out loud until Mali wrapped a gentle arm around me and pulled me against her.

"It's okay, Z. You're okay."

"What's happening to me?" I whimpered, tilting my head up to meet her gaze.

Fear and love raced each other in her eyes as she swallowed heavily. "The dark magic isn't strong enough to

stop you from remembering.”

“Remembering what?” I whispered.

“Remembering everything.”

I didn’t realize I was trembling until her motionless body was beside mine. She continued to stroke my hair like one would a toddler in need of comforting.

“Mali...” A cry hiccupped from my throat as pain threatened to rip me apart from the inside out.

My mind was exploding—I wouldn’t be surprised if the walls became splattered with brain matter and goo.

Her face set with determination, and she shakily jumped to her feet, reaching a hand out for me. I took it, but when I began to move forward, I stumbled. I would’ve fallen completely if Mali hadn’t been there, holding me up. She wrapped one of my arms around her shoulders and began to march me forward, one painful step at a time.

My body was on fire.

“We need to get you to one of your mates,” she murmured, more to herself than to me. “We need to get you to Kill.”

“Killian?”

More and more images barraged me.

His tentative smile.

That glorious red and orange hair kissing his temples.

His jovial laugh that never failed to sweep through my body like magma.

A thread of love unfurled in my stomach, curling around the knot of lust already present there.

Wait...

Love?

No.

“No.” I shook my head adamantly as my body began to shake even more. “I don’t love him. I don’t love anyone besides Aaliyah.”

Mali ignored me and continued to trudge forward. Sweat beaded on her forehead, but still, she didn’t slow down as we turned at a fork in the hallway.

“Killian has been locked in his room since Aaliyah took you,” Mali said. “He’s going out of his mind with worry.”

It was suddenly hard to breathe around the invisible spike in my heart.

“Is he okay?” I didn’t know why I asked that. I didn’t care about the incubus.

*You care... a voice whispered. You love him. Don't you remember, Z? You love him. You love all of those men.*

*No, you don't, my magic protested immediately, spreading through my body like a malignant tumor hellbent on ravaging my body, soul, and mind. You hate him.*

I groaned and dropped my head into my free hand.

“Hang in there, Z,” Mali growled out through gritted teeth.

“I don’t feel good...” I moaned as pain continued to devastate my body.

The voice that screamed at me, reminding me how much I hated Mali and Killian, grew softer, burdened under an ever loudening, treacherous voice that contradicted the reality I once thought I knew.

*You love him.*

*You love him so much.*

Apprehension sat like a lead weight in my chest as I allowed Mali to lead me down a rather familiar hallway, stopping at the room at the very end. She reached into her apron pocket with her free hand and removed a huge bronze key. She tucked it in the stout iron padlock, and we both watched as it clattered to the ground.

Almost immediately, the door was thrown open, and Killian was in the threshold, his eyes wild with a ruthless savagery I wasn't used to seeing from my sweet incubus mate.

My...mate.

Prickles of heat ran up and down my spine as I gaped at him, momentarily at a loss for words.

Killian's desperate gaze scoured my own, as if he was searching me for injuries.

"What the hell did she d-do to you?" he asked, his stutter making an appearance in response to his combined fear and anger. "Are you okay? Z..."

Fury lent a rosy flush to his cheeks, and I couldn't help but think he was one of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen before.

The backs of my eyes prickled as I took a step closer.

Killian regarded me warily but didn't retreat.

"Z?" he asked, fear evident in his voice. "Are you okay? What happened? God, I was so worried. I thought..."

Emotions I couldn't quite name thrummed headily through my veins.

Killian was here.

Alive.

My tears created a gently blurring veil over the harsh lines of his face.

Then, in a move that surprised the both of us, I was running forward and claiming his lips with my own.



TWENTY-FOUR



## Z

**T**he kiss only lasted a second, but during it, I saw a multitude of emotions flit across Killian's face.

Shock.

Confusion.

Hope.

Fear.

Love.

Awe.

I pulled away, gasping for breath, my head throbbing, my heart aching, my palms slick with sweat.

"Z..." Killian gingerly cupped my face between his hands.

"We..." I paused to catch my breath. It felt like I'd run a marathon, yet I'd only walked down a damn hallway. "We need to get out of here."

"Do you remember?" Hope sparked to life in his expressive brown eyes.

"I... I don't know," I whispered, the confession somehow permeating the air between us like a sickly, acidic smoke. "I don't know anything anymore. I just know that I can't leave

you here to die. I *can't*. I don't think I love you, but I also don't want to see you hurt."

Even to my own ears, those words sounded like a lie.

Killian appeared crestfallen by my confession, staring at me as if I'd slammed my fist into his chest, ripped out his heart, and crushed it in the palm of my hand. For a long moment, he simply stared at me, gauging my sincerity, before he nodded.

"Okay." He nodded again, this time more vigorously. "Yeah, okay. We need to get out of here."

He gripped my hand and began to lead me towards the door of the room, but Mali stepped in front of him.

"No. We can't go this way." She trembled, and the fear in her eyes had my own terror fizzing in my blood like a poison. "Aaliyah has her creatures watching every hallway. They probably already know that you escaped."

She directed the last statement at me, and her lower lip began to shake.

"Creatures?" Killian's hand tightened in mine.

"Her monsters." Mali glanced in both directions, as if she half expected one of said creatures to materialize out of the shadows and smite her dead just for daring to talk about them. "The ones she called up from hell."

"I haven't seen anybody but us in the palace," I said, turning my attention towards the window.

It had stormed earlier, but all that remained was wet, humid air and gray storm clouds. The moon had come out behind one such cloud. It lit up the night sky brilliantly, framing the ragged edges of the cloud with light.

“Of course not.” Mali shook her head and wrapped her arms around her waist. “She doesn’t want you to see them. She doesn’t want you to even know that they’re here.”

Yet again, that pesky sting of betrayal made me ache—a splash of acid on already reddened skin.

That didn’t sound like my sister. She wouldn’t keep secrets from me. She wouldn’t hide motherfucking *monsters* around her home and then lie about them.

*Yes, she would.*

*You know she would.*

*You can’t trust her.*

*She’s not what she seems.*

The quiet voices rumbled through my head, and another migraine threatened to rip my skull into intricate pieces.

“Z, are you okay?” Killian was there instantly, and I focused on the expanse of bare chest exposed with his shirt halfway unbuttoned. Tattoos trailed down his skin like vines wreathing a pillar.

Beautiful.

He was beautiful.

Shakily, I lifted a hand and ran my finger across one of the colorful tattoos. This one appeared to be a stopwatch of some sort, or maybe a tiny golden clock. I ached to articulate the numbers through touch alone. I wondered if they would tick in tandem to his erratically pounding heart.

“Z...” He stared down at me in rapt disbelief and fascination.

His long lashes fluttered rapidly against his cheekbones. Most incubi had a cold beauty—the crystalline surface of frost—but not Killian. He was pure fire. His hair quite literally reminded me of flickering flames, and his amber-tinted eyes burned like embers.

“We don’t have time for this.” Mali hastily stepped in between us, and the mood was broken.

My head was once again throbbing like a multitude of tiny bombs had been detonated at once. The resulting explosion made my ears ring.

“We need to leave this hellhole before Aaliyah comes after us. Or worse.” Her ominous words made me shiver.

Mali moved towards the balcony and threw the doors open. Outside, the moon hung low in the sky like a pearl in a velvet box. It glittered on the cresting waves far below.

I hadn’t actually been out on the balcony before—I’d never felt the need—but I couldn’t help but greedily inhale lungfuls of sweet, fresh air. It felt like I’d been locked away for years instead of days.

Killian gaped at Mali in bafflement.

“How did you get those doors opened? I tried for hours and couldn’t get them to budge.”

Mali moved towards the railing and stared at the water far below. I wondered if she expected us to jump. All I could see were the dark, craggy rocks of the cliff face and the turbulent sea far below.

“Aaliyah spelled the castle so only she and a few others could open the windows and doors.” She turned to stare at me over her shoulder, and her eyes were unreadable. “Myself included.”

“Why you?” Mingled shock and distrust rooted me to the spot.

Whatever Mali saw on my face made her grimace. “She trusts me, believe it or not. She thinks she owns me.” A dry, humorless laugh burst free of Mali’s chest. “And she’d be right.” She swallowed and then anxiously licked her bottom lip. “I thought I was doing the right thing to protect the ones I care about. But now... Now I realize that I was just her evil pawn in this entire fucking mess.” She focused on the railing once more. “She knows no one will dare to betray her, not with the spells she has in place.”

Something in her voice had my back muscles stiffening, causing me to stand straighter.

“The spells?” I asked.

Mali ignored my question and pointed at something in the distance. “You see that staircase? That will lead you down to the lake. You’ll be able to ask the mermaids there for safe passage across it.” She rushed forward and gripped my hands tightly. “But whatever you do...*don’t touch the water.*”

“You’re not coming with us?” Killian asked, shock altering his tone.

Mali’s face paled. “I can’t leave here. Not without Aaliyah’s permission. The spell she placed on all of her servants won’t allow us to.”

She rubbed at her chest as if that was where the source of her pain congregated, as if there was magic slithering directly underneath her skin that was invisible to the naked eye.

I knew I shouldn’t care about what happened to Mali—the magic inside of me was practically begging me to push her off the balcony—and yet...

“Aaliyah will kill you once she realizes you helped us escape.” My voice took on a pleading quality I didn’t understand. I couldn’t leave Mali behind. I wouldn’t. I refused to, despite the voice in the back of my head demanding that I leave her to rot. “Come with us.”

“I can’t,” Mali stressed, her lower lip trembling. Tears glimmered in her eyes, making them appear positively luminescent in the yellow glow of the room. “But promise me something, Z.” She swallowed and gave my hands another tight squeeze. “Promise me you’ll tell Atta that I love her. And that I’m sorry.”

“You can tell her yourself—”

Mali was shaking her head even before I’d finished speaking. A single teardrop cascaded down her cheek and settled on the corner of her lips. “Promise me.”

Barbed wire coiled through my chest. “I promise.” My own tears welled in my eyes.

Mali offered me a watery smile before sniffing and backing away.

“Go. You two need to get out of here.” She anxiously glanced in both directions. “Take the staircase down and—”

“How dare you?! How dare my own sister betray me!”

Hot wax seemed to slither across my body at the high-pitched, angry voice. Mali had grown perfectly still beside me, terror warping her features, and Killian moved until he was standing in front of me protectively.

Aaliyah wasn’t the first thing I saw when I turned to stare at the balcony.

No, what captured my attention first was the strange, blue-gray creature with clawed feet, shiny scales, and a snout that displayed two rows of razor-sharp teeth. I'd never seen a creature quite like this before, and terror slammed against my rib cage with renewed vigor.

Aaliyah sat on top of the majestic creature as if it were a horse and not some mythical creature plucked straight out of a storybook. Her reddish-orange hair hung loose around her shoulders, blowing in the night breeze.

And her eyes...

I didn't think I'd ever seen such anger on my sister's face before.

It somehow made her seem even more terrifying, more unapproachable, more grotesque.

Her gaze homed in on me, and her lips curled in a snarl. "How dare you betray me! After everything I've done for you?"

Her voice rose to a screech at the end, and I swore the windows surrounding us shook with the force of her rage.

I attempted to push myself around Killian, but he remained in front of me, protecting me the only way he knew how. Love for him blossomed within me like a rose covered in thorns. The beauty hid something that was harsh and prickly—dangerous to the touch.

"You locked me away." My voice trembled despite my best wishes. "How could *you*?!"

"How could *I*?" She laughed mockingly, and the creature's slitted eyes zeroed in on me.

I swore the monster was laughing at me as well.



“I did what I did to protect you.”

“You’re messing with my mind!” I screamed. “I can’t... I can’t think straight!”

“Those men are the ones messing with you. Not me.” She gently rubbed the neck of the creature, her gaze never leaving my own. “Have I introduced you to one of my newest monsters? It’s a wyvern.” Her lips stretched into something that was cunning and cold. “Do you know what that is?”

I gripped Killian’s forearm and urged him to step backwards with me. There was something immensely unsettling about my sister’s glare. Something predatory and dangerous that had the hairs on the back of my neck turning to delicate spikes.

“It’s like a dragon, my dear sister, but it’s significantly smaller, and it has only two legs instead of four. It’s also more bloodthirsty than its brethren. Wyverns don’t just go for the hunt—they go for the kill.” Aaliyah’s smile grew even more unhinged as she urged the creature forward. “I allowed the incubus to live because I thought that was what you needed. But I’m afraid I was wrong. Having any of these so-called mates in your life only makes you confused.” She shook her head sadly. “They make you remember a lie, Gabrielle. That’s what your relationship with them was—a lie.”

A tremble cascaded down my spine. “If it’s a lie, then why does it feel more real to me than your dark magic inside of me does?” I placed a palm to my chest, unsurprised to feel the desperate pounding of my heart against my rib cage. “Whatever you did to me...” I swallowed. “It wants me to forget about what I feel for these men. But I know *that’s* the lie.”

I was confused about a lot of things, but not that. The dark magic inside of me wanted me to hate these men, but my heart didn't allow me to.

At one point, I must've loved these men more than life itself.

I didn't know if I loved them like that now, but maybe I could with time.

Maybe.

Aaliyah's eyes sparked with pure malice.

"It's apparent I need to get rid of the problem before they can influence you further." Her gaze snapped to Killian and stayed there. "Once they're out of the way, you'll remember what's important." A wistful smile played with the corners of her lips. "Family."

"Aaliyah, don't do this," I warned as I interlocked my fingers with Killian's. Warmth migrated from where they touched and spread through my body like wildfire.

How could Aaliyah believe that this connection was bad?

Nothing that felt this pure, this perfect, this ethereal could be anything but good.

Aaliyah hummed something noncommittally and guided her wyvern forward. The creature had to duck its head to fit through the doorway, but soon, it was in the room with us, breathing out puffs of air that swayed the blonde locks of hair that kissed my temples.

"Once again, I must do what is best for you, even if you don't agree with me." Aaliyah speared me with a look that locked my whole body tight with dread. "Remember, my dear sister, this is for your own good."

Before I had time to protest, the wyvern dove at Killian.

And my entire world came to a standstill when its claws dug into Killian's back and pulled out chunks of his skin.

TWENTY-FIVE



# ATTA

I sometimes wondered how Z put up with Axel.

Okay, not sometimes.

All the fucking time.

The assassin seemed to have a one-track mind.

“We could poison her cup, and the sheep here would never suspect a thing. Fucking idiots.”

“You see that window? That would be a great window to shoot him through. I could easily hide in the trees when the guards came out to find the culprit.”

“I wonder how quickly I could slash that guy’s throat before he realized anything was amiss.”

Yes, the batshit crazy psychopath felt the need to regale me with stories about how he planned to murder every single member of the esteemed council if he were given the chance.

He would sidle up beside me, sipping from his wineglass as if he hadn’t a care in the world, and whisper disturbing stories of death and destruction in my ear. His taste for blood rivaled that of even a vampire—and I would know, considering the fact I was mated to one.

Honestly, Z was a saint to put up with him for as long as she had. I always considered myself a calm and collected person, but just then, my patience was a wispy thread that could be severed at a moment's notice.

Axel and I had been sweet-talking the council members for *days* now—planning elaborate parties and partaking in boring political meetings. We told all of the representatives that the two of us were acting on behalf of the kings, and so far, the bastards bought it.

For now.

How long would this guise last?

Already, I could see suspicion brewing in the council members' eyes, though no one had said anything to us outright. I sometimes could even taste the acrid tang of distrust and wariness in the air, an unsurprisingly bitter and potent flavor that settled on my tongue like chalk.

“Can we not talk about murdering the vampire representative when he's only a few feet away?” I hissed to Axel out of the corner of my mouth as I smiled cordially at the vampire in question.

“Why do you always have to ruin my fun?” Axel actually pouted at me, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at the petulant man-child.

“You know I'm not a fan of these assholes either, but we need them on our side,” I murmured as I linked my arm with Axel's and allowed him to lead me around the room once more.

We smiled pleasantly at everyone we passed. Well, I smiled. I was pretty sure Axel just bared his teeth.

“Can’t we just kill them and get new council members?” Axel’s voice was a little louder than I would’ve liked, considering the circumstances.

Fortunately, no one was in range to hear us.

“Council members are voted in. You know this.” I used my free hand to brush at a strand of hair that had fallen free of my chignon.

There were seven council members in total, one from each kingdom. They were voted by the people to rule on all matters concerning interspecies relations and disputes. The kings were in charge of the individual territories and kingdoms, but the council presided over the species at large.

At one point, there had been over one hundred council members. Each kingdom would vote for at least twenty representatives. That changed when the kings sought to create a dictatorship instead of a democracy hundreds of years ago. They were afraid that a powerful council would hinder their own power and ability to enact laws and regulations.

Ridiculous.

What my ancestors didn’t realize, however, was that the people had learned to fear the royals instead of revere them. That was what usually happened with groups that had more power than they knew what to do with.

I wondered if I could discuss this topic with Lupe and the others. I was sure my big brother would be willing to have more representatives on the council than the seven who currently resided on it.

The seven I trusted just as much as I trusted a broken condom during sex.

And considering I'd never had sex with a male before of any species, that was saying something.

I had asked Seth, the shadow king, his opinions on the council members before coming down here, and he sheepishly admitted he'd never had much interaction with them. So it was up to me to use my wits to determine who was friend and who was foe.

The mage representative—a tall, voluptuous female with curly brown hair and emerald eyes—seemed almost too kind. I couldn't help but wonder what secrets she was hiding behind her perfectly made-up smile and lilting laugh.

Then there were the shadow and vampire council members. They appeared to be thick as thieves, despite their different species. From the few conversations I'd managed to overhear, I determined that they both had a beef with the shifter representative for some unknown reason. That didn't help me determine their allegiance in regard to the princes, but it was a start in uncovering the mystery that was the council.

"I'm bored," Axel whined after a ten-minute conversation with the incubus representative and his husband.

"You're always bored if what you're doing doesn't involve murder," I jested, only half teasing.

Okay, maybe only one-quarter teasing.

One-fifth teasing.

Axel truly did love his murder.

Honestly, it was almost unhealthy.

Axel sighed dramatically and dropped his head onto my shoulder. "You get me."



I snorted and continued my slow, leisurely walk around the perimeter of the room. It was strange to me how, only a few days ago, the ground here had been littered with dead bodies. A shiver raced down my spine at just the memory of that bloody, horrible day.

I was just grateful Z had spared me, despite our rocky past.

“Who’s that?” Axel murmured in my ear, pulling me to a stop.

“Huh?” I followed the direction of his gaze to see a rather familiar genie step gracefully into the throne room.

Her brown hair was brushed away in an intricate collection of braids that emphasized the sharp curves of her cheekbones and the splattering of freckles on her nose. For a moment, her appearance reminded me so much of my lover and mate, Mali, that my heart thrashed and rioted in my chest. Tears burned my eyes, but I blinked them away.

No, that wasn’t Mali.

That was...

Laurel?

I recognized the genie who frequented the capital almost immediately. She was an advisor to the disgraced genie king and a social climber if I ever saw one. She constantly flitted from prince to prince, trying to bag herself a wealthy husband. Fortunately, my brother and his friends saw the poison in her and never gave her the time of day, let alone touched her the way she desired them to.

Her arm was wrapped around an unfamiliar male who was surveying the room with cold eyes.

“Who is that with Laurel?” Axel whispered.

I furrowed my brows as I studied the stranger intently. “I don’t know.” I tried to get a sense of what he was. “Is he a... shifter?”

That didn’t seem right, but he was too far away for me to know for sure.

“Why does he look familiar?” Axel asked me.

Before I could respond, someone cleared their throat behind me, drawing my attention to the shifter representative. The dark-skinned, broad-shouldered man wore a scowl that somehow demoted him from approachable to terrifying. He crossed his tree-trunk arms over his chest and glared at me.

“I’m going to be speaking for everyone in this room when I say that, while it was nice to talk with you, Atta, I know you’re hiding something from us.” His eyes flashed amber as the animal inside of him struggled to come out.

A wolf, I believed he was. Maybe a coyote. Certainly a predator.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said pleasantly, adopting an expression of flawless innocence.

I’d perfected such a mask over the years.

“Where are the kings?” the mage representative interjected. “And where are the princes?”

Mutterings erupted amongst the council members and their families.

Axel leaned towards me. “Can I kill them yet?”

I was very, very tempted to say yes.

I needed to think of something, and quickly, if I had any hope of calming these turbulent waters before they could grow

into a tsunami. Because once that wave hit the shoreline, I had a feeling not a single building would survive the onslaught.

Fuck.

So I did what I always did, what I'd been trained to do since I was a toddler, and flashed a singularly beautiful smile that had all of them blinking at me repeatedly.

“Let's take this conversation to the dining room, shall we?” I clapped my hands together gleefully. “Political conversations are best suited while eating a four-course dinner. Don't you agree?”

TWENTY-SIX



# KILLIAN

**P**ain exploded through me as the creature's talons dug into my back and then shook me around like a rag doll. Dimly, I was aware of Mali crying out in surprise, Aaliyah laughing, and Z...screaming.

It was a noise full of horror and rage—so much rage, I thought I would drown in it, even knowing it wasn't aimed at me.

The wyvern released me almost as soon as he grabbed hold, and I forced myself to crawl forward, forced myself to get away from the malicious creature with beady, slitted eyes and teeth larger than my hand.

“Aaliyah, stop this!” Z bellowed, moving to stand in front of me.

Wind from the open balcony stirred her blonde hair and her blood- and dirt-stained bathrobe. Even with the pain ricocheting through me, I couldn't help but think she looked beautiful. Deadly.

Every inch the angel Aaliyah claimed her to be.

I shifted slightly so I was now on my ass, my ravaged, mutilated back flush against the wall. Slowly, I pushed myself to my feet, using the wall as leverage. Bloody streaks stained

the white surface as I lifted myself up. Agony rippled through me, but I knew I couldn't leave Z to fend off Aaliyah by herself.

It felt as if I were wading through a field of nettles—only these nettles were actually spikes the size of my arm and they were repeatedly stabbing at my skin. I worked to modulate my erratic breathing. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Only when I was standing directly beside Z, my arm brushing hers, did I exhale noisily.

Aaliyah's gaze whipped in my direction, and hatred twisted her features into something unrecognizable.

The demon had always been pretty in an icy, unapproachable way, but just then, she was hideous. Grotesque. Nauseating. Bile quite literally scraped its fingers up my throat the longer I stared into her distorted face.

“You warped my sister's mind!” she raged at me as I called on my incubus powers.

It accumulated in my gut, a heady, intoxicating presence, and I attempted to push it outwards into the room. I couldn't remember the last time I'd willingly emanated pheromones, but I knew I was out of options. I needed Aaliyah to release us, and fast.

Before I succumbed to blood loss.

Dark spots wavered across my vision, but I remained upright through sheer force of will...and Z's hand gripping my upper arm, providing me much-needed strength.

Semantics.

Aaliyah's eyes homed in on where my mate touched me, and her anger only amplified. It flew at my cheeks like hot specks of ash, burning and blistering everything it came into contact with.

I physically cringed away from her glare.

"Aaliyah." My voice slurred slightly when I said her name, and I swayed to the side. Z gripped me tighter, her features pinched with concern and fear. "Let us go."

The demoness threw her head back in raucous laughter and then, gracefully, slid off the back of the monster. The wyvern exhaled through its slitted nostrils, and the air blew at my hair. Anger practically emitted from the creature's pores in palpable waves, filling the already stifling room with wave after wave of electricity.

Aaliyah didn't seem to notice the animosity emanating from her creature. Or, if she did notice, she didn't care.

She stalked forward like a panther hunting its prey, her eyes never leaving Z's face.

"I gave you the world, sister, and this is how you repay me? By betraying me? Betraying our bond? How could you?" Genuine tears materialized in Aaliyah's eyes as she stared at her twin.

And Z...

She looked torn.

Her black eyes volleyed between me and Aaliyah repeatedly.

"You locked me away, Aaliyah. I can't trust you." Z's lower lip wobbled, and my heart broke for her.

Fuck, all I wanted to do was pull her into my arms and never let her go.

Aaliyah staggered back as if she'd been physically slapped. "Of course you can trust me. I love you."

"Why does it feel like you're lying to me? Like you've been lying to me this entire time?" Z's fingers tightened on my forearm to the point of pain, but I relished the sting.

It was a reminder that she was here with me, that she hadn't lost herself completely to the darkness.

Aaliyah whipped her gaze in my direction, and the fire in her eyes had my balls shriveling into damn raisins.

"Is that what he told you?" She spat at my feet with a look of utter disgust.

"No. Yes. I mean, no." Z placed her palm over her chest, directly where her heart sat. "It's what I feel here, sister. I care about these men. I know I do—"

"You don't," Aaliyah interrupted angrily. "Don't you remember the visions of the past? They allowed you to be beaten, raped, murdered..."

I winced, and it wasn't just because of the excruciating pain reverberating through my body from my injuries. This was a mental hurt, not a physical one.

Z had remained tight-lipped about what she saw when she was with Aaliyah. I had a feeling, however, that Aaliyah had somehow found a way to show Z the past. Our past lives, if you could even believe that. A past I knew nothing about, except for snippets whispered in passing.

And that fact only infuriated me.



How could I protect Z from a past that was cloaked in shadow and mystery?

A past that I'd only heard through stories and legends?

A past that I wasn't even sure truly existed?

I didn't know if I believed in the nonsense of past lives and reincarnations, but if what Aaliyah said were true, if our former selves had watched Z suffer the way she had, then I would never forgive myself.

How could I allow the woman I love more than life itself to endure such unspeakable horrors?

There must've been a reason. Perhaps I'd been contained or imprisoned or...maybe...dead. Yes, I must've been dead. That would be the only logical explanation for how I allowed that to happen.

Blood loss was making my brain woozy...or maybe that was just the onslaught of information. It was too much, too soon, and I feared that if the wounds on my back didn't kill me, my own befuddled past would do the job.

"I love your sister," I said at last, grateful when I didn't stutter. I wanted Aaliyah to see the truth on my face, hear it in my words. "I love her more than anything. I would give my life for her."

I stumbled forward a step, but Z was there instantly, grabbing me once more and keeping me upright. Blood—my blood—smearred her porcelain cheek as I leaned against her.

"Incubi don't know what love is," Aaliyah whispered solemnly. "No nightmares do."

"That's not true," Z said firmly. "Aaliyah, please. Let's just talk about this."

But I could see that the time for talking was over. Aaliyah's eyes had hardened, turning to chips of stone, and her lips compressed into a perfectly straight line.

“No more talking. No more excuses. No more betrayals.” She took a single step backwards, and, as if on cue, the wyvern moved forward in eerie unison.

The creature's beady eyes zeroed in on me like a carnivore searching for its next meal.

And apparently, Incubus À La Carte was on the menu.

Fuck.

“Aaliyah, no!” Z dove at Aaliyah at the same time the wyvern jumped on me.

This time, I fell on my back, the bloody gashes that marred my skin ricocheting off the floor and bringing with it another round of pain. I prepared myself for the press of talons in my stomach and sides, for the monster's gigantic mouth to bite down on my head.

But the expected pain didn't come.

Instead, the creature wrapped me in its talons and began to beat its reptilian wings. I struggled futilely, but there was nothing I could do, suspended in the air as I was.

The wyvern moved towards the balcony, and the cold night air felt like dagger blades against my skin, made even more pronounced by the repetitive thumping of the monster's wings.

“Aaliyah!” Z screamed.

She had her sister pinned on the ground, but her eyes were on me. On the creature holding me above the lake far, far, far below.

Too fucking far.

Fear gripped my airways in an impenetrable vise, and I knew with unwavering certainty that this was how I was going to die. The wyvern would release me, and I would fall into the waters far below. There was no way I could survive such a fall, not with my current injuries.

I wished I could tell Z I loved her and apologize for not being a better mate, a stronger one. Maybe one of her other guys would've been able to save her from Aaliyah and herself, but I wasn't able to.

Now, she would be stuck here, lost to the dark magic inside of her, a tool that Aaliyah could use and discard.

I just prayed her other mates would be able to save her before it was too late.

Tears burned my eyes, but they were blown away by the ferocious wind before they could fall.

I opened my mouth and croaked out, "Goodbye," but I wasn't sure if Z could hear me. I could barely hear myself.

Aaliyah laughed heartily from where she still lay on the ground, Z overtop of her.

"Drop the incubus!" Aaliyah bellowed with malicious glee.

"No!" Z cried out, jumping from Aaliyah and racing for me.

But it was too late.

The talons wrapped around me loosened, and then I was free-falling.

Falling, falling, falling.

All I could see were the wide expanse of open sky and the moon that had just begun to edge its way behind a storm cloud. Wind whipped past my face, stirring my red hair, and I squeezed my eyelids shut. I didn't want to see myself fall anymore. And I definitely didn't want to see the unforgiving water below.

But, just before my lashes closed, I swore I saw Z's face peering over the edge, terror gripping her features and her mouth parted on a scream.

Her eyes...

Her eyes were blue.

A beautiful, crystalline blue that shone with love and warmth and sorrow and grief.

Z.

My love.

My mate.

Those were the last thoughts I had when I hit the water with an audible crack, and the world around me shattered into hundreds of pieces.

TWENTY-SEVEN



## DAIR

**T**he tavern the mermaids owned was cleverly named Fish Scale.

Or maybe not so cleverly.

It was a small, unassuming building at the very edge of town, directly beside the lake. All of the shutters were closed, but I could tell the restaurant was open by the cheers and laughter that echoed from it. Horses lined the road directly in front of the establishment, their heads lowered as they grazed the brown grass on the side.

I took a deep, calculating breath as I jogged the rest of the way to the tavern.

My skin was itchy, abnormally so, and I knew it was a product of not being able to shift in water. As mermaids, we were required to spend twelve hours a day as a man and twelve hours a day as a mermaid.

But you didn't necessarily need water to be a mermaid.

After what Devlin and Lupe discovered concerning the water, it was decided that we would stay clear of all sources of it until we left the town of Meade. That meant, unfortunately, I wasn't able to shift in any bodies of water, even one as small as a bathtub.

It was immensely uncomfortable to be a fish while on dry land. It felt as if I could never get enough air in my lungs, and my skin was always itchy. No matter how many times I scratched, though, the itch refused to abate. If anything, it got worse with every drag of my fingers across my oversensitive skin.

Even now, in my human form, I still felt that incessant itch across my entire body that suggested I'd spent too much time away from water. I needed to swim, and soon, before I went insane.

Literally.

Mermaids without water could go insane just as easily as vampires without blood could.

But that was just one problem of many I needed to worry about.

Instinctively, I lowered my gaze to my hands, as if I could somehow see the magic coursing directly underneath my skin. The magic that, somehow, had drained all of the blood out of that incubus.

A shudder worked its way through me at just the memory of his vacant eyes and the blood that smeared my clothes and face.

Blood...that I'd wiped away using water the inn provided us.

I just prayed that not all of the water sources in the area were contaminated. If they were, I didn't know what the fuck we would do. I didn't feel any different, per se, but who was to say how the water would affect me? Perhaps it was having a delayed reaction. Or maybe I hadn't consumed enough to change into a monster. Or maybe—

I pushed all thoughts of monsters, water, and strange powers out of my head.

Later.

I could focus on them later.

Right now, I needed to make a deal with a group of mermaids.

I took another deep, labored breath—greedily sucking in lungfuls of air before releasing it on an exaggerated whoosh—and then pushed the door open.

A bell rang overhead, signifying my arrival, and almost every eye in the tavern turned to stare in my direction. It was surreal. One second, they had been laughing and joking amongst each other. The next, they were homed in on me with unerring accuracy.

I ventured a tentative step forward and forced myself to study the room.

Over a dozen wooden tables were set up sporadically in the center of the room, though only half of them were occupied. There were two bars, one on either side, and every single stool lining the counter had someone sitting on it. A tiny stage—though calling it a stage was perhaps too generous of a term—sat on the opposite end of the room. A man sat at the table there, watching me with a penetrating, all-knowing gaze.

Everyone in the room was naked.

Butt ass naked.

It wasn't unusual for shifters to walk around without clothing. After all, it was much easier for them to shift without clothing restricting them. Mermaids, however, weren't as comfortable with nudity, despite needing to be undressed to



shift into our mermaid forms. We were too envious of a species to be able to stare at a naked form and not become jealous.

It was in our nature.

The mermaids here, however, didn't seem to have the same qualms as the mermaids in my kingdom or even in the capital.

A naked woman sauntered up to me, her long red hair covering her breasts from view, and I instantly lifted my gaze to the ceiling. The last thing I wanted to do was disrespect Z by staring at another naked woman—even if I wouldn't get turned on.

“He's cute...” she purred, and a second later, her fingers caressed my shoulder blades.

I stealthily moved out of her way. “I have a mate,” I said simply.

Another naked woman joined the first. “I don't see anyone else here.” She giggled and trailed a finger down my chest.

Quickly, I grabbed the exploring digit and held it in my fist. Tightly.

I lowered my gaze to hers. “Don't touch me.”

She pushed her lips out in a pout. “Don't be like that.” She giggled yet again and ran her free hand across her chest. “Don't you think I'm pretty?”

“Girls, enough!” a rough voice boomed. “Leave the man alone.”

The mermaid I'd noted before—the one sitting on the raised platform—stood.

He was taller, much taller than the average mermaid, and had brown curls that tumbled to the middle of his back. His muscles seemed to have muscles, and all of them flexed as he crossed his arms over his chest. He, too, was naked, but that wasn't what made me gawk at him in disbelief.

No...that would have to be the fur that sprouted from his waist, all the way down to his cloven feet.

*Goat* feet.

What the fuck?

The man noticed the direction of my gaze, and the corners of his lips twitched in amusement. "I see that you have some questions."

"I...um..." I struggled to orient myself, to remember my purpose here. Clearing my throat, I tried again. "Are you Phineas?"

"I am." The mermaid, Phineas, nodded and then gestured for me to claim the seat opposite him.

All of the patrons of the bar were still staring at me intensely, expressions varying from hunger to hatred and everything in between.

I moved to take a step closer, but one of the girls stopped me, wrapping her hands around my bicep. She pushed up onto her tiptoes to whisper in my ear, a plethora of dirty promises that made me shiver in disgust.

Phineas narrowed his eyes on the mermaid. "Belinda, let the prince go." Then, under his breath, he added, "Gold-digging whores."

Belinda released a huff of exasperation and released me. It was only as she was walking away did I finally get my first

good look at her. A gasp lodged itself in my throat.

Her hair...

It was made entirely out of metal.

Honest-to-fuck metal that shone in the flickering candle flames.

I spun in a slow circle as I studied everyone in the room with renewed vigor.

That man... His right leg was a literal tree trunk, bark and all.

And that woman... She had teeth larger than my fist that curved into sharp, serrated points.

And that man over there... He had golden stripes in his eyes that were almost cat-like in appearance.

Every single person in the bar had some type of disfiguration.

Phineas watched my perusal of his mermaids with a sardonic, lazy grin on his face. When I just continued to stand there, at a loss for words, he gestured once again towards the seat opposite him. "Come, boy. I heard you wanted to discuss things with me."

Yes. Discuss.

Safe passage.

Z.

It was the thought of my mate that had me hurrying the rest of the way across the room. I ignored all of the stares I could feel penetrating my back as I claimed the empty seat across from him.

Silence descended as we both studied each other.

Phineas's head was tilted to the side as if he were attempting to construe a long, complicated equation. His eyes were unblinking, assessing almost, and prickles of unease ran up and down my spine like icy fingers.

I studied him just as intently.

I didn't know a lot about Phineas and his mermaids—only what I could gather from the other patrons at the inn—but I knew he hated my father. Years ago, he moved away from the Mermaid Kingdom with a small faction of mermaids. They set up a settlement in Lake Meade and have been staples in the community ever since.

So what happened between my father and this man?

And how could I convince him that I was nothing like my asshole of a father?

After a long moment of careful consideration, Phineas lifted his hand into the air and snapped his fingers. A second later, a young man hurried forward with two glasses of beer.

I wrinkled my nose as I watched Phineas down his drink without so much as a thank you to the bartender.

“You not thirsty?” Phineas jerked his chin towards my full cup.

“I'm not a fan of alcohol,” I said simply.

Not the complete truth, but also not a lie. I didn't like to drink when I was around my father or brothers. The last thing I needed was my response time to be impaired.

But more than that, I needed to keep my wits about me if I had any hope of saving Z. I also didn't trust any of the drinks Meade provided, regardless of where it initially came from.

Phineas must've seen the truth on my face, because his lips widened in a beguiling smile.

“No need to worry, lad. The beer here won't kill ya'. We have it shipped from the town over.” He winked at me, then took my own glass and drank it quickly.

The man had a strong accent, but I couldn't pinpoint where it was from. Up north in the Mermaid Kingdom, perhaps? It certainly wasn't from around here.

I wasted no time cutting to the chase. “I need safe passage across Lake Meade.”

There. No fanfare or silly pleasantries. I didn't have time to charm these assholes, not anymore. They'd been playing games with me and my brothers for far too long.

We needed to get to Z.

Now.

“Is that so?” Phineas brought the mug back to his lips, but not quick enough for me to miss his smirk of amusement.

“What do you want?” I leaned back in my chair with a confidence I didn't truly feel.

My heart was pounding like crazy in my chest, battering my rib cage, and I was afraid he could hear the desperate *thump-thump-thump* of it. My brothers were relying on me to secure a deal with the mermaids here.

Z was relying on me.

I refused to let any of them down.

Phineas chuckled wanly and once again lifted his hand in the air. This time, he didn't even need to snap his fingers before the bartender ran forward, another cup of ale in his

hands. Phineas took the drink and gingerly brought it to his lips, his eyes never leaving my own.

“Do you know why I left the Mermaid Kingdom years ago?” He didn’t wait for me to respond. Then again, I wasn’t even sure if he was asking me or merely reminiscing. He slammed his cup hard enough on the table for beer to sluice over the rim. “Because your father killed my wife.”

I remained silent.

Phineas chuckled gravely and wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. His gaze turned far away and distant, focused on something directly over my shoulder. A memory, perhaps. One I couldn’t see.

One I didn’t *want* to see.

“I used to be a member of your father’s army,” he confided. At my look of surprise, he added, “I wasn’t a general or anything fancy, but I was a good foot soldier. Loyal.” His fingers began to absently tap at the edge of the table, drumming out a staccato.

I focused on the repetitive motion of his fingers as he continued, painting a story as gruesome as my own.

“Until the king decided to visit our camp. I didn’t know why then. The higher-ups said it was to boost morale, but I know the truth.” He placed his arms on the table and leaned forward, close enough I could scent his breath on my tongue. It smelled of liquor and blood. “I think he was scouting out lovers.”

“And there was no mermaid more beautiful than my wife.” The first hint of emotion I’d seen so far broke through his immaculate mask—anger, sorrow, and wistfulness. “Matilda

wasn't only beautiful but kind. Everyone loved her...but none more than the king."

He chuckled ruefully, but there was no humor in the noise. Only pain. Only anger. Only sorrow.

"He wanted her for his own, but my Matilda? She refused. Told him to fuck himself." This time, his laughter was genuine, but it faded almost as soon as it began. Anger radiated from his pores as he clenched his hands into tight fists. He squeezed his eyelids shut, as if blocking out a horrible memory, before reopening them and focusing on me. "The king killed her for her insubordination. He killed her because she refused to fuck him. She was six months pregnant with our baby girl, Ali."

With a roar of rage, he threw his half-filled cup against the wall. Glass shattered, and brown ale rained down in rivulets.

I didn't flinch.

I refused to.

"I moved here to get away from the tyrant of a king and his bastard of a family." Phineas's eyes zeroed in on me, and the malice emitting from them nearly made me shiver in fright.

But I'd known true terror before, and Phineas didn't scare me the way he probably wanted to. I'd had my legs removed time and time again by the very man he hated. I'd watched my mate get tortured, both physically and mentally. I saw my brothers endure unspeakable horrors and nearly lost the woman I loved. I knew terror—and he didn't evoke it in me.

"And what did that get me?" He gestured towards his furry legs, which disappeared under the table. "I'm a disgusting monster now."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, and I knew it was the other mermaids agreeing with him. I could see it in their eyes—I was the bad guy in this tale, the enemy.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you—” I began.

“You’re sorry?” Phineas barked out a dry, disbelieving laugh. “You’re sorry?”

He stood abruptly and leaned over the table, peering down at me like I was a worm he wanted to squish under his boot. I refused to cower under his penetrating glare, refused to look away.

“And you have the nerve to come into my town, asking for my help, after what your family did to me?”

“After what my *father* did to you,” I corrected in a low, deadly voice. “Not me.”

Anger simmered directly underneath my skin, barely contained.

“Not you.” Phineas guffawed loudly. “Did you hear that, everyone?” He spread his arms out wide until he captured the room’s attention. “He doesn’t think any of this is his fault.”

The rage percolating inside of me continued to grow and grow. I hated when people compared me to my father, but for this stranger to do it? He didn’t know me. He didn’t know my life. He didn’t know what I’d been through.

What Phineas had gone through was horrible. There was no denying that, but I hadn’t been involved.

I just had to get him to see that...

I stood up abruptly, accidentally knocking the chair over in the process, and I swore the room held its collective breath. It was so silent that the pounding of my heart sounded like a



grandfather clock tick-tick-ticking away, counting down the seconds to total annihilation.

“You seem to be under the impression that I have any say in what my father does. That I agree with his decisions.” Rage punctuated each word I said, pervading the air between us. “But do you want to know something, Phineas?”

I leaned in even closer so he could see the truth in my face. I didn’t want there to be any confusion or disbelief.

“I hate the bastard even more than you do. He tortured me for years. *Years*. I was in a damn wheelchair because the bastard was jealous of me. Envious. He stole my legs and then tried to steal my life on more than one occasion. But you want to know the worst thing he ever did to me? The one thing that I could never, ever forgive?” I swallowed. “He tried to kill my mate—the love of my life. He toyed with her life like it was just one big game.”

I straightened and turned to face the rest of the room. Over a dozen eyes were trained on me, hanging on to every word I said.

“I’m so sorry for what happened to you. I wish I could say I knew a way to change you all back, but that would be a lie.

“What isn’t a lie, however, is the fact that I’m nothing like my father. I hate the bastard more than any of you can comprehend. I’m here for one reason and one reason alone—to save my mate. That evil bitch on the top of the cliffside? The one who contaminated your water? The one who changed you into these...mutated creatures? I want her dead just as badly as you do. I want her dead almost as badly as I want my father dead and buried.”

My breath was coming in choppy pants the longer I spoke. “I’m not going to stand here and give you a bunch of empty promises, because I don’t think that will help any of us.”

I pivoted to face Phineas completely. He had reclaimed his seat and was considering me with cold, calculating eyes. I’d never felt so much like a butterfly pinned beneath a magnifying glass as I did in that moment.

“But if you help us cross Lake Meade, I promise I’ll do what I can to end the bitch’s life. And I promise that when I return home, I will destroy my father once and for all.” I struggled to get my breathing under control, but it was hard.

I was bombarded with more emotions than I knew what to deal with, and each one was clamoring for complete and undivided attention.

Rage.

Fear.

Hope.

Phineas’s eyebrows climbed to his forehead as he regarded me, and after a long moment of silence, he nodded.

“All right.” He extended a hand for me to take. “I suppose we have a deal.” A wry smirk twisted up his lips. “I never had a prince indebted to me before.” He paused and then corrected himself. “I never had a *king* indebted to me before. But there’s a first time for everything, wouldn’t you say?”

TWENTY-EIGHT



## Z

I didn't scream.

I wasn't even sure if I was capable of such a thing anymore. All of the air that would've gone into that sound became trapped in the confines of my lungs.

Killian...was gone.

Gone.

I stared over the balcony as agony consumed my every sense. My chest tightened, and my heartbeat increased from a slow, steady trot to a full-on gallop.

Gone.

Gone.

Gone.

Pain cracked my heart into a thousand intricate pieces as a tiny noise escaped my parted lips. It wasn't a scream, though I wasn't sure you could classify it as a sob either. My lungs constricted painfully as I fell to my knees, gripping the railing of the balcony hard enough for my knuckles to bleach white.

Gone.

Gone.

Gone.

Gone.

Memories I'd thought long forgotten barraged me from every direction.

Meeting Killian and the others.

Performing as an assassin in the Damning.

Winning the Damning.

Becoming the kings' personal bitch.

All of the trials.

All of the missions.

My mates.

My. Mates.

Oh god.

Vomit clawed at my throat like talons dipped in acid. I placed a hand over my mouth to quell the rising nausea that threatened to explode out of me.

How could I have forgotten what my mates meant to me?

How could I have allowed Aaliyah to kill Killian?

There was no winning this battle. Not anymore.

With another strange, wheezing sound, I twisted my body and threw up the meager contents of my stomach.

"Fucking hell," Aaliyah murmured as she took a few steps closer, stopping only when she was directly in front of me.

She bent down and roughly grabbed my chin, forcing my face to hers. She surveyed my eyes with a soul-clenching intensity that knotted my stomach muscles.

I knew what she was looking at—my blue eyes, visible to me in the reflection of the window.

The only indication I was no longer under the control of her dark, insidious magic.

Raw fury attempted to poke its spindly fingers through the grief surrounding me. So much fury, I thought I would drown in it, that it would sweep me away just as the waves did to Killian's body.

Killian's...body.

Tears cascaded freely down my cheeks, and I didn't bother to hide them. I wanted Aaliyah to know just how little her magic worked on me now. For the first time in my life, I was seeing things clearly.

Seeing *her* clearly.

The veil had been shredded into pieces, and the mirage before me had transformed into cruel reality.

She had kidnapped me, torn me from my mates, made me forget my feelings for them.

Maybe I could've forgotten and forgiven all of that.

Maybe.

But she went too far.

Killian was dead.

Because of her.

Because of—

With a roar of rage, I launched myself at her and clawed at her cheek. I took great satisfaction when blood welled, a startling shade of crimson against her porcelain flesh.

She staggered back a step and gaped at me in disbelief. One of her hands went to her cheeks and rubbed at the blood there, as if she were shocked I would dare to actually hurt her. Tears pooled in her eyes, but they didn't move me the way they once would've when I was under her spell.

“Z...” Her voice was soft, placating...and it only served to exacerbate my rage.

Something bright and shimmering prowled through my bloodstream. I didn't know what it was exactly, but I knew it held no relation to Aaliyah's malevolent magic. This felt distinctly...warm. It extended like a limb inside of me, demanding me to use it.

“You're goddamned deranged,” I spat at her, stalking forward with a predatory ruthlessness.

On the balcony, the wyvern huffed in distaste and narrowed its pinprick black eyes on me. I could sense the warning in his penetrating glare. The threat.

But it only shot adrenaline straight into my bloodstream.

I wanted to fight the monster. I wanted to do anything but sit here in my grief, thinking of—

I dove at Aaliyah again, but this time, she was ready for me. She gracefully spun out of the way—exactly as I intended. I kicked my leg out at her shins, prepared to take her to the ground, but she disappeared before my foot could make contact.

Literally disappeared.

She materialized a second later behind me, one of her hands over my mouth while her other gripped my shoulder tightly.

“Stop fighting me, Gabrielle,” she hissed.

I’d like to believe that her voice trembled out of fear instead of anger, but I could be mistaken. I probably was. This bitch feared absolutely no one. Not even me.

Something I would make sure to rectify as soon as I was able to.

Her arm tightened around my throat with a primordial strength, and I bucked and kicked wildly. I could feel my consciousness fading as dark specks exploded in my vision.

Killian...

His name was the last thing I thought before unconsciousness, mercifully, claimed me.

---

I WOKE in the same prison as before.

This time, however, Aaliyah had left a dress for me to change into. Strapless and pink, the gown was better suited for a party than a damn prison. Still, it was better than my bathrobe, so I quickly changed into it.

My heart hammered like a war drum in my ears as I considered my reflection in the mirror above the sink.

How could I look exactly the same, yet feel a thousand years older? I half expected the agony in my heart to manifest itself on my face, but I didn’t look any different. At least, not at first glance. Same blonde, wavy hair. Same piercing blue eyes. Same slender frame.

Maybe my appearance hadn’t changed, but *I’d* changed. Maybe the Z from a few days ago wasn’t the same as the one



staring back at me.

Killian was dead.

I'd seen him fall.

“Oh god.” Great, rasping sobs exploded out of me as I fell to the ground, my legs unable to hold my weight a second longer.

I curled in on myself like old, yellowing paper and began to rock back and forth.

Was this what it felt like to die of a broken heart? Would this gaping chasm in my chest ever fill, or would it always be empty, a void that refused to go away?

I could barely see through the translucent veil of tears.

“It's not your fault,” a soft voice whispered.

I jumped about a foot in the air and whirled towards the intruder.

T was sitting on the edge of my bed, looking exactly the way he had when I'd last seen him—brown hair tousled, eyes glimmering with mirth, his lips curled in the beginnings of a mischievous smile.

“Oh...god...no.” More tears rushed down my cheeks as I stared at the man I'd once considered a brother.

The man I'd murdered.

Even now, I could remember how callously I'd snapped his neck. No second thoughts or hesitation. The acrid tang of fear had wafted off of him, but that had only increased my bloodlust. I'd wanted him to fear me, fear my power, fear the control I had over him.

I tried to force air into my spasming lungs, but it was no use. I was beginning to hyperventilate, and any second, I would pass out completely.

T watched me with an unyielding dark gaze. The heat from it drove the cold away. It took a solid minute for my toes and fingers to start prickling as they regained sensation.

“How are you here...?” I sniffled and started again. I didn’t want the answer to that question. What I wanted was to fall to my knees and beg for his forgiveness. “T, I’m so, so sorry. So damn sorry.”

My oldest friend lifted a hand in the air dismissively. “It’s not your fault. You weren’t yourself.”

“It *was* my fault.” I shook my head adamantly as the memory of his vacant eyes haunted me. “I killed you. And now Killian’s dead. And I’m trapped here. And I don’t know where my mates are—”

“Are you sure that Killian’s dead?” T cocked an arrogant eyebrow.

“I saw him fall and hit the water. I saw—”

“But your bond with him is still active, is it not?” T tapped his long fingers against his knee as he waited for me to piece together this puzzle.

“I... I don’t....”

“And since when do you ever sit back and allow fear to take hold of you?” T continued. His sharp eyes flayed me open, making speech momentarily impossible. “You’re Z, for fuck’s sake. You don’t cower and whine like a little bitch.”

“But I’m trapped—”

“And has that ever stopped you before?” T flashed me a sardonic, lazy smile. “You won the Damning as a human. You brought all seven princes to their knees before you. You defeated the fucking kings. Are you really going to allow a measly prison to keep you away from the ones you love?”

His words settled the maelstrom raging in my mind. Determination swept through me, filling every nook and cranny. It replaced my previous despair with something else, something new, something indecipherable. Something akin to hope.

Still, that didn't negate the need to make things right with him, the man I'd murdered.

“T, I'm so, so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. God, I don't even know—”

“Can you stop goddamn apologizing?” T rolled his eyes and then leaned forward, slapping his hands on his knees. “Just get out of this cell and stop Aaliyah once and for all, will ya'?” He paused then, and a strange tension saturated the air, raising the fine hairs on both of my arms. “And stop my brother too, while you're at it.”

My already bleeding, broken heart sank through the hollow remains of my chest.

“S...” I whispered as more and more memories assaulted me.

But these weren't the happy kind.

My old flame was here...but he wasn't the man I once knew and loved. Aaliyah had changed him somehow, mutating him into a sick, twisted individual more monster than man. I didn't love S, not the way I once did, but that didn't invalidate

the good memories I had of the two of us. He had once been my entire world, and I didn't want to see him hurt.

Yet...

Yet the S roaming these halls wasn't the S I once knew.

That S had died years ago, when those shifters attacked him.

I dug my nails into the palms of my hands hard enough to draw blood. The brief stab of pain grounded me to the present.

"I'll avenge you, T. You have my word," I whispered.

But when I turned to face my old friend, he was gone.

Nothing but an illusion.

A mirage.

It didn't matter to me that my mind had conjured him in an attempt to make myself feel better.

That conversation only reinforced what I already knew.

Step one—escape this prison.

Step two—find my mates, including Killian.

Step three—stop Aaliyah and S once and for all.

Maybe it wouldn't be as easy as my mind was making it seem, but I was done being jerked around by my chains. I wasn't a puppet Aaliyah could play with.

She had tried to kill my mates—maybe even succeeded—and that was one thing I could never forget or forgive.

So why did the thought of harming her make me physically ill?

Why did I pity her, yearn for her, fear her, and love her in equal measure?

And why did I constantly think about those visions she'd shown me?

I might have no longer been under her spell, but my time with her had changed me irrevocably. I just didn't know yet if that change was for the good...or the bad.

TWENTY-NINE



# BASH

**T**he boat had a giant penis carved into the side.

Dair had come through for us, thank fuck, and enlisted the help of the mermaids to cross Lake Meade. The leader of the group—a mutated mermaid named Phineas—had also agreed to provide us with a boat capable of roughing the waters.

The penis boat.

Of course, that wasn't actually the name, but it certainly was a fitting description.

Etched onto the hull was an intricate, human-sized carving of a motherfucking dong, complete with a hairy ball sac and a mushroom-tip head.

“I suppose I understand why the captain named this boat *Dick's*,” Devlin murmured, following the direction of my gaze.

“At least the mermaids are dressed this time.” Dair moved to stand on my other side, his golden arms crossed over his chest as he surveyed the crew bustling around the deck.

The crew was made up of both males and females, but all of them were mermaids.

And all of them had some sort of genetic mutation that was impossible to look away from.

My mother had always said that it was rude to stare, but come the fuck on. What else was I supposed to do when a man walked past me with green, scaly skin reminiscent of a damn lizard? Or when a woman rushed from one side of the boat to the other, topless, with eyeballs where her nipples should've been? I was morbidly fascinated.

“Come on.” Dair nodded to the five of us surrounding him. “Let me introduce you to Phineas.”

We entered a diminutive room that consisted of nothing but a huge wooden wheel and a compass. That was it. No fancy machinery or electronics. Dair told me we wouldn't be sailing in style, but I supposed I expected more than...this. Whatever *this* was.

*A penis boat*, my internal voice snarked.

A burly, broad-shouldered, shirtless man stood at the wheel, his dark hair tumbling around him in silky waves.

“Don't stare,” Lupe immediately hissed in my ear, knowing what my first reaction would be.

Because this mermaid...

Yeah, he had goat legs.

Actual, honest-to-god goat legs that were slightly crooked and covered in dark-brown fur.

“I'm not staring,” I murmured back as I, of course, stared intently.

Jax, on my other side, elbowed me in the stomach, hard, and I wheezed out a breath.

I pulled my gaze away just as the captain—Phineas, assumedly—turned around, a wide, boisterous grin on his rugged face.



“Lad! These must be your brothers!” Phineas had a thick accent, though I couldn’t pinpoint where it was from.

Then again, I wasn’t overly familiar with all of the territories in the Mermaid Kingdom. Either way, the accent was harsh and grating but somehow made him sound happier than he probably was.

It was strange as fuck to hear.

Dair quickly made the introductions, and all six of us shook the grinning captain’s hand. I half expected it to be hairy and coarse to the touch and was pleasantly surprised when it wasn’t.

Apparently, the mutation didn’t spread past his legs. Duly noted.

“Let me introduce you to my first mate.” Phineas threw his head out the huge opening directly in front of the wheel. It appeared as if a window had once been situated there, but it had long since been removed. Fresh air blew in and carried with it the stench of fish and water. “Toylo! Come here, boy!”

“Yes, Captain?” At first appearance, the man who arrived appeared normal. He had blond, sun-kissed hair, a perfectly trimmed beard, and slate-gray eyes.

It was only on closer inspection that I saw the slightly pointed ears underneath his mop of hair and the elongated canines.

“These are our esteemed guests,” Phineas said, gesturing towards the six of us.

Toylo eyed us the way I would imagine one would stare at a pile of shit on a steaming-hot day, when the smell had become so potent that you were unable to even get near the pile in fear of vomiting.

Yeah.

That was how Toylo stared at us.

The first mate definitely didn't inspire the warm fuzzies.

"Esteemed guests," Toylo repeated.

Unlike Phineas, he didn't have an accent, but that just made his dislike of us even more apparent. There was no masking the disgust in his voice.

"Thank you for your help," Dair began diplomatically, stepping forward so he was slightly in front of the group. "As we told Phineas, we'll do everything in our power to stop Aaliyah once and for all, but our priority is Z, our mate. We want—"

"Z?" The sudden paleness of Toylo's face stood out starkly in the illumination of the room. He swallowed, the muscles in his jaw bunching together. "As in...the Liberator?"

My heart tripped over nothing, skinned its knee, climbed shakily to its feet once more, and then stumbled yet again.

I exchanged worried glances with my brothers, unsure of what to say to Toylo's proclamation.

Nightmares, in general, weren't a fan of the esteemed "Liberator" and everything she represented—namely, freedom for humans. We had been trying to keep the Liberator's true identity a secret, but apparently, word had gotten around.

Barbed wire seemed to coil through my chest as I watched a plethora of emotions play out on Toylo's face.

Abruptly, he dropped his head and placed a fist over his chest.

“I will be more than happy to help rescue the Liberator,” he said reverently, and the sincerity in his tone took me by surprise.

What the fuck?

“I had no idea she was the one we were rescuing.” He quickly glanced at Phineas, swallowed, and then turned back towards the six of us. “You have my loyalty, young princes.”

Dair seemed just as confused as we were but was able to smooth out his expression quicker than the rest of us.

“We appreciate that,” he said kindly.

Toylo nodded once, still appearing at a loss for words, maybe even a little star struck, before hurrying back the way he came.

Phineas watched him go with an amused smirk.

“One thing you have to realize, sons, is that not every nightmare on this planet believes humans are cattle and slaves.” He turned towards us, and the smirk suddenly fizzled and dissolved on his face, replaced by solemn determination. “We left the Mermaid Kingdom because we saw the worst that nightmarekind had to offer. That purist, supremacist mentality your fathers hold is only backed by a few very vocal supporters. Most of us are like Toylo. We’ve either loved...or currently love...a human.” He leaned forward to clap Dair on the shoulder, though the intensity in his eyes didn’t abate, not even for a second. “The Liberator doesn’t just represent hope for the humans, but for the nightmares as well. She promises us a future where it doesn’t matter what species you are. Where you can love whomever you want. Where humans and mermaids, mermaids and shifters, shifters and mages... Where everyone is equal. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Dair swallowed. "I think so."

Phineas gave Dair's shoulder one last squeeze before releasing him. "Good. Now, why don't you guys take your seats. It's not a long ride to the cliff, but it certainly is a rocky one. The last thing we need is one of you guys falling over." He winked. "Not everyone can look as sexy in fur as I do."

THIRTY



## Z

I didn't have to wait too long for Aaliyah to visit me.

During that time, I did what T had suggested—I planned.

I ripped the bottom of my dress so it rested just above my knees. This would make it easier for me to move and fight if the need arose—which I had a feeling it would.

Aaliyah had, unfortunately, removed the bar I'd used to knock out S, but that didn't mean I was without a weapon. I shimmied the sink out of the way just enough for me to unhook a metal pipe. The weight felt solid in my hands. Sturdy.

Perfect.

Then, I waited.

Aaliyah was a vision in red as she stepped into the small room, her chin held imperiously and her dark curls braided down her back.

"I came to see if you were ready to talk," she said stiffly, her gaze homing in on me.

I sat on the bed, my hands folded neatly in my lap, my ripped skirt just barely touching the middle of my thighs.

Aaliyah's lips curled even farther at the mess I'd made of the dress she allowed me to borrow, but she didn't comment. Instead, she glided farther into the room, her cheeks pinched and her lips pushed out into a pout.

"What are you going to do to me, Aaliyah?" I asked. "Stab me again? Infect me with darkness again?"

There was no hiding the bitterness in my voice.

Aaliyah seemed to actually consider my question, her head tilting to the side. She tapped a manicured finger against her chin contemplatively.

"I did wonder if that would work," she confessed with a shrug. "But unfortunately, I don't have the dagger to experiment with, and it would take too much time to build a new one." She ventured another step into the room, her red dress swishing around her ankles like blood-stained silk as she walked. "Not the act of forging the dagger itself, per se, but of infusing it with my powers." A wistful, dreamy expression grabbed ahold of her face and twisted. "You had a piece of me inside of you, Z. Did you know that?"

I glared at her in disgust. "You're sick."

Rage momentarily flashed in her eyes before she took a deep breath. The rigid muscles in her shoulders loosened as well, as if a heavy weight had been wiped away. She smiled softly, though it didn't reach her eyes, which remained as hard and unforgiving as usual. "I'm merely a big sister looking out for her baby sister."

"So that magic inside of me..." I swallowed around the lump that had formed in my throat. "That was yours?"

"Of course it was." She studied her nails absently, though I could tell her attention hadn't wavered from me in the

slightest. It always seemed fixed on me, no matter the situation. Unerringly. “I granted the kings my power to give them their immortality. When you used the dagger to kill the kings, that power went into you. But since the magic was woven with my intentions...”

She trailed off with a flippant hand wave, as if she hadn’t mindfucked me in the most violating of ways.

The love I felt for her...

The hatred aimed at my mates...

That had all been her.

Her powers.

Her magic.

Her *intentions*.

Her goddamn will.

Anger vibrated through me—a trembling volcano just waiting to explode and burn everything in its path—but I worked to modulate my breathing before any of my rage could seep out. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Aaliyah watched me the way one would a performer in a play. Her eyes were wide and curious, and her lips were parted into a half-formed smile.

“You can try to deny it all you want, but we’re connected, Z. You’re a part of me, just like I’m a part of you. We’re sisters.” A glimmer of tears formed in her eyes like a thousand glistening diamonds.

And for a moment, I pitied Aaliyah. She loved a version of a girl who no longer existed, if she had ever existed at all.



There was no denying that Aaliyah believed she loved me, but did the demoness really understand what love was? If she did, then she never would've torn me from my mates. She never would've kidnapped Jax or tried to murder Killian or locked me away.

A leaden, miserable sensation settled in my chest at how different things could've been if Aaliyah had just...

Not been crazy?

Yes, things would've been different if she hadn't lost her mind and surrendered to the darkness inside of her.

But there was no changing the past, no matter how much we might wish to.

The only thing left to do was move forward, one painstakingly slow step at a time.

"A part of me hates you, Aaliyah, for everything you've done to me and my mates," I confessed as I inched my fingers towards the side of my thigh. "But another part of me loves you, and that's what scares me the most. I know it's not real—"

"It *is* real," Aaliyah protested immediately. "You know it's real."

I ignored her outburst. "But I can't help but remember the two of us in your vision. We once loved each other very much, didn't we?"

More tears glimmered in Aaliyah's eyes as she stepped even closer to the bed. "We did. We were each other's worlds. I loved you more than—"

*Whack!*

Aaliyah cried out in pain as the metal pipe connected with her face.

Before she could even straighten from her crouched-over position, I took aim and hit her again. This time, a little bit of that strange magic I noticed earlier infused itself in the swing, providing extra strength.

Aaliyah crumbled to the ground, unconscious, blood pooling from a wound on her head.

I wanted to take a moment and understand the strange, new magic I'd just utilized, but I knew now wasn't the time.

I had to get out of here, and fast.

"I truly am sorry," I whispered to Aaliyah's fallen form as I checked her pockets for any keys or weapons.

I found a keyring in her dress pocket and held my prize triumphantly in the air. I had no idea which doors these keys opened, but I supposed it didn't matter. Not when I was so close to motherfucking freedom.

I hurried out of the cell and slammed the door behind me. Fortunately, this door had an iron padlock. All I had to do was snap it in place to keep Aaliyah locked away. It wouldn't hold her forever, but hopefully, it would be long enough for me to make my escape.

Turning from the door, I began to run down the hall, my heart pounding in anticipation and my palms slick with sweat. I'd just turned at a fork in the hall when a low moan tugged at my attention.

I froze.

Someone moaned again.

Hesitating only briefly, I retraced my steps until I found myself in front of a door similar to the one I'd just exited out of. This one didn't have a padlock, and when I tugged on the doorknob, I was surprised to find it unlocked.

But my shock quickly morphed into horror at what I saw.

Mali hung suspended by chains in the middle of the barren room. She wore only a white shift that was covered in dirt and blood. Bruises distorted her pretty face, making her nearly unrecognizable. Both of her eyes were swollen shut, and her mouth was so puffy I was surprised she was still able to make any noise at all. Cuts and lacerations lined her slender body, the red a startling contrast to her tan flesh and white slip.

"Oh my god." I gaped in horror.

At the sound of my voice, Mali lifted her head slowly, sluggishly, groggily. Her sightless eyes twisted in my general direction.

"Z?" Her voice was slurred with pain.

I quickly regained my wits and raced forward, almost tripping over my own two feet in my haste to get to her.

"It's me. God, Mali. What did that bitch do to you?" I studied the chains securing her to the wall and then the keyring in my hand. I flipped through the numerous keys until I found one that appeared similar in size to the lock.

"Have you never had a party with a demon before?" Mali asked dryly, her head lolling against her chest.

I snorted before I could stop myself. "Why? Are you inviting me to one?"

A tentative smile attempted to twitch up the corners of my friend's cracked, bleeding lips. "Nah. I don't think you can

handle a demon party.” A cough rattled her small body, and her smile abruptly faded, replaced by solemn determination. “You should just leave me. If you’re here, then that means you were able to escape Aaliyah. You should just—”

“Don’t even finish that sentence, Mali, or else I’m going to beat you to death.”

“It’s too soon for ‘beat-to-death’ jokes,” Mali quipped. “But seriously, Z, you know I can’t leave. Not with the magic —”

“Shut up, will you? Let me concentrate.” I tried the first key and let out a muffled curse when it didn’t work.

The same thing happened with the second and third keys I tried. On the fourth key, however, the chains securing Mali’s wrists above her head snapped open. I just barely caught my vampire friend before she fell to the ground in a heap of blood and twisted limbs.

“Z...” Mali moaned as I stumbled to my feet, attempting to support her weight.

“Shut up,” I repeated as I squeezed my eyelids shut.

I didn’t know if this was going to work, but I had a theory.

The magic inside of me... It felt bright and airy. Cheerful and warm. Everything that Aaliyah’s magic was not.

If Aaliyah’s magic was a product of hell, then I wondered...

I wondered if *mine* was a product of heaven.

I had no idea if that was true or not—hell, I didn’t even know how I got these powers in the first place—but I refused to leave Mali here to rot. Despite everything she had done to

me in the past, she was still my friend, and she deserved to be saved.

I allowed my magic to tease the edges of Mali's skin, a featherlight caress that made the vampire shiver. Slowly, the power inched its way inside of her, spreading through her veins and infusing her with light. In my mind's eye, I could see dark shackles around both of her wrists, invisible to the naked eye. I focused on them.

I thought of the keys in my free hand.

Yes...I needed my magic to be a key.

A key to unlock the manacles around my friend...

I envisioned a glowing, golden key that poked and prodded at the handcuffs. At first, the key was too small. Then, it was too large.

Fuck, this was taking too long!

My heart was pounding so loudly, I could barely hear myself think. My mental voice was a weak and pathetic attempt at a pep talk.

*Come on, Z. You can do this.*

Finally, after numerous minutes of reforging that damn golden key, it was finally the perfect size to fit into the manacles around Mali's wrists. I pictured the cuffs dropping to the floor and then dispersing like a cloud of smoke.

I slowly opened my eyes to see Mali staring at me in disbelief and wonder.

“What did you just do—?”

“Honestly? I have no fucking idea.” I shook my head vehemently. “But we can focus on that later. Right now, we

need to go.”

Mali looked as if she wanted to protest, but either the urgency on my face or her own pain had her groaning out loud and nodding once. “All right. But if I throw up on you, don’t blame me.”

“Hold your puke in, bitch.”

“Make me.” She attempted to stick her tongue out at me, but with her mouth so swollen, she only proceeded to make a face like a gaping fish.

“Come on. You got this.” I continued to coach Mali forward as we traversed the long hallway.

I might not know where we were going, but Mali did. Her tired, pain-laced voice muffled instructions until we were in the front parlor of Aaliyah’s mansion.

“We’re going to...” She broke off as wet, raspy coughs shook her body.

I eyed her with concern until she got herself under control. “Mal—”

“I’m fine,” she interrupted curtly. “But we need to go. Before the she-devil wakes up and frees herself. How did you get the jump on her, by the way?”

“I don’t know,” I responded honestly, thinking about the strange power that seemed to be permeating my body.

It had arrived the second Aaliyah’s dark magic left me, but I had no idea if it was an aftereffect of whatever Aaliyah did to me or something else entirely.

“Well, I think you should—” Mali broke off with a choked scream as the door to the mansion was kicked in, careening off the wall with an audible crash.

Immediately, I moved until I was protecting my friend the best I could with her still hanging off of me.

I bared my teeth at the doorway, expecting to see Aaliyah or even one of her creatures, but it wasn't any of them that greeted me.

Hope spiked in my chest like a rose with thorns. Tears welled in my eyes, and I staggered forward a few steps, almost dropping Mali in the process.

“Guys?” I whispered.

My six mates stared at me in heady disbelief, their gazes flicking from me to Mali until finally landing back on me.

It was Bash who stepped forward first, hope, fear, and love vying for dominance on his handsome face.

“Well, baby girl, we arrived here intending to be your knights in shining armor. But apparently, you didn't need anyone to save you, did you?” His lips curled upwards, but it was a tentative smile, laced with pain and love and a hope so strong that I nearly crumbled.

“I'll always need you guys to save me,” I whispered, my throat closing with the enormity of my feelings for these men.

They were here.

They came for me.

Fuck.

Devlin stepped forward, his mouth open, his violet eyes glowing—

But a loud squawk interrupted whatever he was going to say.

We only just had time to roll out of the way before the wyvern lunged at us, smashing against the ground.



THIRTY-ONE



## Z

“**W**hat the fuck is that?” Lupe bellowed as he rushed towards me.

Without a word, he scooped an unconscious Mali up and hauled her over his shoulder. Love and appreciation for him filled me instantly. He knew I wouldn't want to be coddled or safeguarded, even though being reunited with the six of them after all of these days felt like heaven. But I could take care of myself in a battle; Mail couldn't, not in her current state.

“Let me guess,” Bash said dryly, reaching for my hand. I allowed him to take it and drag me towards the exit. Cold, bitter air blew at my blonde curls and bit at the tip of my nose. “One of Aaliyah's pets?”

“Ding. Ding. Ding. We have a winner.”

“DOWN!” Ryland yelled, and all of us immediately dropped to our bellies yet again as the wyvern flew over us.

Outside, the sky was an unassuming, depressing shade of gray. The sunlight seemed unable to penetrate the heavy cloud covering up above. Then again, I wasn't sure if I'd seen any sunlight in all the time I'd been with Aaliyah. Perhaps it just refused to shine in her presence, as if it sensed the darkness contaminating everything she touched. Or maybe it was unable

to breach the horizon. Either way, the day seemed to be perpetually shrouded in dark colors.

The seven of us stood on a cliff that dropped steeply down into the rushing, white-tipped waters far below. Behind us, Aaliyah's mammoth castle rose into the sky, disappearing in the thick gloom. It truly was a beautiful building, with extravagant turrets and gables and stained-glass windows. Balconies hugged every floor, enclosed by iron fences that rose from the stone like jagged, silver teeth.

Seeing one particular balcony brought back images of Killian.

His wide, fearful eyes...

His hand lifting slightly, as if he were reaching for me...

The wind stirring his red hair and white, button-down shirt...

A combination of terror and grief gripped my heart and squeezed. And then those two emotions mutated into anger.

Anger...aimed at the beast gliding above us now.

The wyvern batted its huge, leathery wings directly above our heads, circling us with a predatory intensity that made me shiver.

"Where's Killian?" Ryland bellowed, wind whipping his dark hair around his face.

Grief twisted my insides into a dozen knots, and I minutely shook my head. Pain contorted his features instantly, and one of my mates released a sharp gasp from behind me. I could practically taste the agony saturating the air, chalky and bitter on my tongue.

“He’s not dead,” I rushed to reassure them all. “I would know.”

And I would. I knew that without a shadow of a doubt. The bond between the two of us was muted but still there, thrumming and electrical, just begging me to follow it to the other side. But first, we had to escape this castle of horrors.

“We need to get down the stairs!” Bash had to raise his voice to be heard over the repetitive *thump-thump-thump* of the creature’s leather wings. “We have a boat waiting for us!”

“A boat?” I flicked my gaze towards Dair, who was lying on his stomach a few feet away from us, his hands lifted to protect his head from any wayward talons. “Why would we need a boat?”

Wouldn’t it have been faster for Dair to just use his mermaid speed to zip us through the water?

Bash’s face turned grim. “The water... It’s—**MOTHERFUCKER!**”

The wyvern slashed at Bash’s skin with its huge talons, and my mage prince only just managed to roll away before he became completely impaled.

I swore the wyvern released a rasping, laughing noise before it flew back into the air, circling us once more.

Why did it feel as if the creature was playing with us?

I saw true aggression on the monster’s face when it had attacked Killian, collecting my incubus prince in his claws and throwing him over the balcony. Now, it seemed to be almost mocking us. Laughing at us.

Fear and trepidation tangled together in my gut, creating an intricate web I couldn’t even hope to begin untangling.

“We need to get down the stairs,” I called to my mates, repeating Bash’s earlier proclamation.

Even as I spoke, my mind whirled, though it couldn’t seem to settle on one thought in particular. It felt as if there was something I needed to remember, something important...

“You don’t fucking say,” Devlin griped as he moved to a crouched position, just out of reach of the wyvern’s keen talons.

Purple magic misted around his arms like snakes. His eyes shone violet in the gloom as he kept his attention pinned on the creature.

Now, Devlin... Devlin looked as if he wanted to murder the creature. I could sense the raw fury radiating off of him. It was a startling contrast to the monster’s almost *jesting* behavior.

A metaphorical light bulb turned on in my brain.

“It’s not trying to kill us,” I explained, feeling the truth of that statement in the hollow of my bones. “It’s...playing with us.”

Jax shot me a look rife with disbelief. “Playing with us? And you think that’s better?”

“It’s better than being dead,” I deadpanned automatically.

“Is this...” Bash cut off as the wyvern gave another low dive, its feet mere inches from his ash-blond head. He cursed and scratched his cheek. “Is this Aaliyah? Is she...instructing the monster to play with its food?”

The wyvern roared in pure outrage at what Bash had just said and dove towards him once more.

Cursing, I scrambled to my feet, raced the short distance between the two of us, and tackled Bash back to the ground. We rolled a few feet, me ending up on top, but just before the wyvern would've made contact with my spine, the creature backed off and returned to the sky.

"I don't know what the fuck is going on," I confessed, staring into Bash's emerald-green eyes.

He was so close, all I would need to do was lean forward just an inch to kiss him...

His eyes shone with the enormity of his feelings for me, and the rest of the world fell away. The muffled curses of my mates. The wyvern flapping its wings high above. The castle directly behind me. The rocky cliffside. The water frothing against the shore in jagged, white streaks.

"Hi," he whispered breathlessly against my slightly parted lips.

"I missed you." My voice was just as quiet as his. "I'm sorry I didn't—"

"Don't apologize for things that aren't your fault," he said vehemently, and then he pressed his lips to mine.

I didn't even know if I could classify this as a kiss. It was too...brutal. Too raw. Too furious.

Just like Bash.

"Incoming!" Ryland bellowed.

The sudden burst of air on my neck was the only indication that the wyvern had returned.

The two of us rolled again, still locked around each other, and the wyvern's talons touched the ground where we were just lying. Once again, I swore the creature released a raspy

chuckle before it took off into the air again. It was a cold, brittle sound like crackling icicles.

Bash jumped off of me but remained low to the ground, focusing on the diving, swirling, dancing creature. The blue-gray scales seemed to blend in seamlessly to the sky above. Only its dark eyes glittered in the distance as if they'd been dusted with starlight.

“We need to kill it!” Bash roared as his magic cascaded down his arms and grew in his hands. His unruffled green eyes continued to study the wyvern as it soared through the sky.

A finger of ice touched my spine at his proclamation.

“No, wait!” The words were out of my mouth before I could recapture them.

All six of my mates—the loves of my existence—turned to stare at me with varying expressions of disbelief.

“She must still be under Aaliyah’s spell,” Ryland snapped bitterly, though his words were meant for the others. He unsheathed a sword from his back and held it at the ready. “Bash, grab her.”

“Bash, if you grab me, I will castrate you,” I warned as I rose fully to my feet, ignoring the shouts of protests from my mates still on the ground.

“Dammit, Z!” Lupe growled, but he was encumbered by Mali’s dead weight still on his shoulder and couldn’t reach me.

“Give me a second,” I begged as my trepidation melted into heat, traversing my veins like liquid fire.

I took another step towards the flying beast and closed my eyes, feeling the muted sunlight dappling across my skin.

I knew all of my mates were focused on me—and Bash had inched a few steps closer to my side—but none of them stopped me.

They trusted me.

Thank fuck, because if they knew how unsure I truly was of my next decision, they would spank my ass red.

The magic inside of me lifted its head, feeling my attention and relishing in it.

*Yes...you... I need to talk to you...* I kept my voice a light, airy coo, and the magic responded with an excited burst of energy that curled through my stomach.

Maybe I *was* being a damn idiot, but from the moment I'd first realized the wyvern was teasing us, I thought...

Well, was it silly to believe that I thought the creature was asking for my help?

My heart pounding, my breathing restricted, my palms sweaty, I guided my magic towards the monster flying high above.

At first, the wyvern resisted the intrusion, but I continued to whisper in a sweet, placating voice that had goose bumps popping up all over my skin. The anvil in my chest was making it hard to breathe.

Aaliyah's magic was dark and cloying, full of insidious intent that I hadn't comprehended when I was under her spell. But this magic... It vibrated with a profound kind of purity that took my breath away. I'd never experienced anything so calm and gentle before. It was the serene lap of water against a shoreline on a perfect summer day.



My magic flaked away like sawdust from my body as each individual particle poked at the wyvern. The wyvern released a low, grumbly noise but didn't protest as my magic entered it. Slowly, cautiously, tentatively. It spread through the creature's body like a forest fire, filling every nook and cranny.

The wyvern wasn't a male as Aaliyah had claimed.

No, she was a female.

*A pregnant female.*

The realization settled in my gut like a boulder.

It was almost as if I could sense the creature's thoughts. The rampant desire for blood and vengeance pounded through her with a frightening velocity.

But it wasn't my blood she craved. It was Aaliyah's.

The wyvern was furious she had been pulled away from her home. Her mate, a fellow wyvern, had been brought with her to Earth, but when Aaliyah found the male too difficult to deal with, she had him sent back to hell. The wyvern was angry and devastated, yet the invisible, magical shackles around her three legs prohibited her from doing anything about it.

She was just as much of a slave as I was.

*There, there,* I cooed, unsure if the wyvern even heard my mental voice but feeling the need to comfort her all the same.

The creature was full of so much turmoil and grief, I longed to do what I could to mend her broken pieces.

My power filled every inch of the wyvern, and just like with Mali, it focused on the manacles holding her hostage—one around each leg.

This time, it took little effort on my part to mentally forge a key and fit it into the locks. The magic inside of me was responding to her pain and anguish. It *wanted* to free the beast from captivity, from Aaliyah.

*You'll be okay*, I whispered soothingly as the cuffs fell off of her legs and blew away like dandelion fluff in the breeze. *Everything will be okay.*

Up above, the wyvern released another strange, chuffing sound.

*Thank you*, the creature seemed to say. *Thank you for freeing me.*

I peeled my eyelids open, my head pounding like crazy and my heart pummeling my rib cage. I felt dizzy and lightheaded, but there was a buoyancy to me that had my throat closing. Perhaps this airy feeling in my chest was a reflection of the wyvern's own emotions—her gratefulness for her freedom.

The wyvern had stopped directly in front of me, her head lowered. Her eyes were pure darkness—a swirling of fog over an empty graveyard in the middle of the night. Yet there was an intelligence to those eyes that I had missed previously, too overcome by my anger and grief to notice.

“Z...” Dair warned softly, coming to step beside me. Tension lined the muscles in his shoulders.

“It's okay,” I promised my mermaid prince as I regarded the beautiful creature before me. “Everything's okay.”

The wyvern nodded once—an acknowledgement and a thank you combined—before it took to the air and flew away.

I watched the creature go until she was out of sight, disappearing behind one of the largest clouds.

And I wondered, belatedly, if I would ever see her again.

THIRTY-TWO



## Z

I still couldn't believe that this was real, that they were here.

They had come for me.

They hadn't abandoned me.

Tears pricked the backs of my eyes as I sat opposite my men in the captain's quarters—a room underneath the ship with a large, king-sized bed flanked by two nightstands and a bathroom opposite it.

I had been introduced to the captain and his first mate as soon as we stepped onto the ship, and I was stunned by the deference both men had shown me. They hadn't stared at me like I was a human.

They'd stared at me like I was some sort of savior.

I sat on Dair's lap on the bed, one of my hands in Bash's while the other was held by Devlin. Lupe rubbed the arches of my feet while Jax and Ryland simply stood staring at me in wonder.

I was desperate to feel their hands and lips on me, to feel their love physically manifest itself through touch, but I knew now wasn't the time. We had too much to discuss since our separation. Our reunion would have to happen later...once

Aaliyah was taken care of, the thrones were claimed, and the world held some semblance of peace.

But fuck, my body yearned for theirs. For all of theirs. I wanted Bash to suck on my nipple while Ryland kissed and teased my other breast. I wanted Dair to claim my lips with his, plundering my mouth and goddamn soul, while Lupe kissed my neck. I wanted Jax to fuck my pussy so hard I saw stars, his thick cock filling me to the brim and eliciting cry after cry of pleasure. I wanted Killian, my sweet incubus, to claim my backside as he cursed and moaned and prayed to every deity in the universe. And, through it all, I wanted Devlin to watch, stroking himself, desperate for me. I could picture his large hand fondling his heavy cock and balls as he panted, begging me to let him come...

*Focus, Z!*

“So the magic is what caused these...mutations?” I asked, reiterating what my mates had just told me and thinking of the mermaids I’d just seen.

My brain was unable to process this onslaught of information. Or maybe it was too preoccupied with delicious and decadent thoughts of my mates and me. Naked. Sweaty. Desperate.

“It appears so.” Ryland’s lips firmed as he studied me. “Did you touch...?”

“Not really,” I responded. “Just basic washing.” I tilted my head to the side, considering. “Though I don’t think Aaliyah would have contaminated water in her house.” She wouldn’t risk me or herself like that. “What about you guys?”

“Not a lot,” Devlin responded, running the pad of his thumb across my knuckles. Electric zings reverberated through

me at the contact. “But even if the water was contaminated, we believe it was diluted enough not to harm us.”

“It seems to really only affect those who stand directly in the rain or are exposed to it for long periods, like the mermaids who live in the lake,” Dair explained as he brushed a kiss to the side of my neck.

All of my mates had been doing that—touching me in some way—since we’d reunited, as if they couldn’t stand the distance between us. I knew I couldn’t.

“Do you think there’s a way to turn them back to normal?” I tentatively asked, though I already knew the answer even before the question formed.

The heavy, pregnant silence from my mates was confirmation enough.

It was Ryland who spoke next, his voice taut and his blue eyes fierce in the darkness. I wasn’t surprised that he changed the subject, though what he brought up was the last thing I wanted to talk about at the moment. It hurt too damn much, a wound that hadn’t yet scabbed and continually bled.

“We need to discuss what you said about Killian...”

I instantly went tense in Dair’s arms as grief and pain assaulted me. “He’s not dead. I would feel it if he were, just as you guys did when I died.”

Killian was still alive; I knew that much. I just had to find him.

*We* had to find him.

I wasn’t alone anymore. Six of my mates were with me, and soon, it would be all seven.

I had to believe that.

I *had to*. Or else I'd lose my goddamn mind and surrender to the pain enveloping me in an ice-cold embrace.

"Then what happened to him?" Ryland's voice wasn't unkind, just pragmatic. He was as worried about Killian as I was. "Where is he?"

Guilt threatened to strangle me.

It was my fault he was in the castle to begin with.

It was my fault he felt the need to defend me, when I most definitely didn't deserve it.

It was my fault the wyvern pushed him off the cliff.

It was my fault that Aaliyah saw him as a threat that needed to be demolished.

My fault.

My fault.

My fault.

Maybe that was why I'd been so hesitant to broach the subject of Killian. Not only did it bring me physical pain to even think about, but I also feared how my other mates would react. Would they hate me for putting their brother in harm's way? I knew I hated myself for it. The only thing bringing me a modicum of relief was the fact that Killian was still alive. He needed me.

"We'll find him." I spoke resolutely, not allowing my voice to leave any room for argument.

Regaining my memories—and consequently my feelings—was like having a severed limb reattached. I couldn't imagine being without the seven of my mates now that they'd been returned to me. My heart pounded dauntingly at just the



thought of Aaliyah using her dark magic to warp my mind again.

I didn't want to forget the men I loved more than life itself.

I didn't want to forget what I did under Aaliyah's spell—like killing T, one of my closest and oldest friends.

I didn't want to forget my mission in this life—stopping the kings and Aaliyah, freeing the humans, and living happily ever after with the seven men I loved.

A shiver worked its way through my body, and Dair's arms tightened around me, infusing me with comfort.

“She won't get to you again,” he told me softly, correctly interpreting my tremble of fear. “We won't let her.”

He didn't really have a choice in the matter the last time she attacked, but I didn't bother voicing that out loud. It wouldn't make any difference and would only upset the men I loved.

They couldn't protect me from Aaliyah if she decided to go after me again.

No one could

No one...except for me.

That realization swirled the contents of my stomach around.

Before I could respond, the door to the room was thrown open, and Toylo, the first mate, stood there, breathing heavily. His eyes were wide and frantic as he surveyed the room.

“Your Highnesses, Liberator...” He bowed his chin respectfully before immediately jerking his head upright. Panic splayed across his face. “We're under attack.”

“What?” I jumped to my feet at the same time my mates did.

Ryland inched closer, his sword already unsheathed and held at the ready.

“Is it Aaliyah?”

“The wyvern?”

“Another monster?”

My mates began to speak over each other, desperation and fear tainting each word they spoke, but I already knew who was on our ship even before Toylo responded.

I raced out of the cabin, up the flight of stairs, and then across the deck where six crewmembers surrounded the so-called monster, their swords pointed at his neck.

Garnet-colored hair streaked with gold and auburn.

Dark eyes tinged with shades of green and citrine, depending on the way the light reflected off of them.

A tall, muscular body with broad shoulders and a tapered waist.

A flurry of colorful tattoos that covered the majority of his torso.

And...a long, reptilian tail that swished across the floor behind him and pale horns that shot through his shock of red hair.

My breath escaped me in a choppy exhale as I stared at the seventh and final love of my life. The missing piece of my soul. The man who had risked everything for me—and who I had watched fall to his doom.

“Killian?”

My mate slowly turned to stare at me.

THIRTY-THREE



# AXEL

I couldn't stop gawking at Laurel and the shifter.

Atta had given me the rundown of their story, and frankly, something wasn't adding up. I had a keen nose for bullshit, and this situation was particularly smelly.

Apparently, Devlin had made a deal with Laurel to help him find his missing lamp, which had been revealed to have been stolen by Z's friend T. According to Atta, Devlin had T's brother S's soul trapped inside of the lamp after a group of shifters attacked and nearly killed him. To save S from certain death, Devlin had made a deal with S—S's soul in exchange for Z's protection.

I didn't understand, or care, about what came next, but one of the conditions Laurel gave for finding Devlin's lamp was freeing the shifter from the dungeons.

But why was he imprisoned?

And why did he look so damn familiar?

"You're staring," Atta mumbled, jabbing her elbow into my chest.

I frowned and rubbed at the spot she'd hit.

"It's rude to attack someone unprovoked," I responded.

“It’s rude to stare,” she countered immediately, flashing me a shit-eating grin.

Atta had invited all of the council representatives and high-ranking nobles to a ball in the capital. It was an elaborate affair—the women wore frilly dresses, the men were bedecked in three-piece suits, and everyone was drunk or hoping to become drunk. Frankly, it was the perfect party to get a little murdering done.

Just a little.

I wasn’t a complete psychopath.

Besides, I had my daughter with me—and no, this time I didn’t mean Mary, my machete.

Mary-Lynette, the child I’d kidnapped-slash-adopted, giggled as she talked to one of the very few nobles Atta and I trusted. He was a mage whose human wife had been sold to a work camp many years ago. He had spent the last few years using his considerable power and wealth to win her freedom back. Atta had, apparently, discussed his allegiance and was pleased to find that he supported the princes’ bid for the throne.

Thank god, because I would hate to have to kill him, especially now that my pseudo-daughter seemed so fond of him.

Mary-Lynette was not only friendly with the mage but also his son—an adopted vampire who stared at my little girl like she hung the moon.

I didn’t ever hurt kids, but if that asshole kept giving my daughter googly eyes, I’d have to gut him.

And I’d smile while doing it.

“Axel!” Atta once again elbowed me in the stomach.

“What did I do this time?” I gave her an annoyed look and smoothed a hand down my rumpled suit.

“You’re glaring daggers at a damn ten-year-old. Stop it!”

“He’s flirting with my daughter!”

Atta gave me a look—one that instantly made me feel like a pre-teen boy who had just been found with a dead body part inside of his backpack. That had happened only *one* time, mind you, but some people never let you forget it. Geez.

“For one, how many times do I have to tell you that you can’t just claim her as your daughter? That’s not the way it works. For two, he’s talking with her, not flirting. For three, he’s a damn child. I doubt he’s thinking of her in any way that isn’t platonic.”

“I was a boy once,” I reminded her. “I know what boys think about.”

Atta pinched the bridge of her nose. “Not every boy thinks about stabbing, maiming, and murder.”

“You’re not a boy. You wouldn’t understand.”

Atta sighed again and took a sip of her drink. Abruptly, she began to choke on her wine, and I had to pat her back to get her coughing under control.

“This is a first for me,” I mused as her coughing fit finally subsided and she was able to breathe normally. “I’m usually the killing sort, not the saving sort.”

“Laurel and her shifter lover are coming towards us,” Atta murmured out of the corner of her mouth, and I immediately snapped to attention, my spine straightening and my eyes narrowing.

I had dealt with my fair share of slimy politicians since we'd started this little game, but none of them unnerved me more than that damn shifter did. I didn't know what it was about him, but every hair on the back of my neck stood on end and my mind screamed "danger" at the top of its lungs when he was near.

I palmed the hilt of my favorite dagger—Sherry—but attempted to emulate Atta's lazy confidence.

"Laurel," Atta greeted, staring at the genie as if she were a long-lost friend and not a traitor we'd discussed killing on more than one occasion.

Well, I'd discussed killing. Atta had simply stared at me like I'd lost my mind but didn't refute me. I took that as agreement.

"How are you?" Atta asked.

"Atta," Laurel purred as she stopped directly in front of us, her arm linked with the stranger's. "What a lovely party. I'm surprised none of the kings or princes wished to attend."

Atta's cordial smile never faltered. "You know how busy royalty can get." She waved a hand dismissively and then turned towards the tall man beside the stunning genie. "I don't believe you introduced me to your... friend."

Laurel's grip tightened around the man's bicep possessively.

For the first time since I'd seen him across the room a few days ago, I allowed myself to study him.

Fully study him.

He was tall, nearly as tall as me, which was saying something, with light-blond hair that was brushed back into a



low ponytail. His blue eyes sparkled with some emotion I couldn't quite comprehend. Humor, perhaps? Whatever it was made my tension grow. He was dressed in a dark suit that clung to his lean frame. It was apparent that at one point in time, he had been muscular, but his stint in the dungeons had withered away his definition.

Laurel was making her introductions—referring to the man as Peter—but I had a feeling that wasn't the truth. This man didn't look like a Peter.

Hell, he didn't even look like a shifter, yet that was the power I could sense emanating off of him.

Though it was different than anything I'd ever felt before...

I realized the shifter was studying me just as intently as I was studying him. Atta had grabbed Laurel's arm and was guiding her towards the drink table, giving me a second to gauge the stranger and get a read on him.

I didn't trust him, and from the wry smirk that tugged up his lips, I could tell he knew that.

Finally, the man chuckled, a low, raspy sound that instantly amped up my unease, and took a sip from his wineglass. "You don't have to continue staring at me like I'm the enemy, assassin. I'm not here to hurt you or your loved ones."

"Who the fuck are you?" I hissed, trying to keep my voice calm and collected despite the rage swirling inside of me.

"It doesn't matter who I am." He took another sip of his wine before setting the empty glass on the tray of a passing waiter. "It only matters who I'm here for."

"And who is that?" Sherry was going to become intimately familiar with this man's rib cage if he didn't start talking. My

love was a thirsty son of a bitch. She hungered for his blood, just as much as I did.

“I went through a lot of shit to be where I am today.” Something dark crossed the man’s face like a cloud moving in front of the sun. His features were suddenly painted in shadow. “I willingly allowed myself to be imprisoned for years, knowing that it would all be worth it in the end.”

For a moment, he allowed me to see him—the *real* him, not the illusion he gifted the world.

And it wasn’t a shifter I was staring at.

I didn’t know who or what he was, but it was terrifying. The raw power emitting from him had shivers racing through me and fear gripping my throat in an iron vise. I wasn’t a man who got scared easily, but this creature was immensely dangerous and powerful.

I flicked my gaze towards Mary-Lynette, who was still talking to the damn vampire child, before focusing back on “Peter.”

“And what is it you want?” I kept my voice low, so as not to be overheard.

Every muscle in my body was locked together, and it took considerable strength and willpower not to eliminate the threat right here and now.

But this was one battle I wasn’t sure I would win.

The creature offered me a slow, sharp-toothed smile. White wings exploded behind him, there and gone too quickly for me to know for certain I’d truly seen them. Nobody else seemed to have noticed, though their attentions might have been too far up their asses to see anything but their own reflections.

“I’m here for my daughter, young Axel.” His smile broadened, though there was a dangerous tilt to it that I didn’t like. Not for one fucking second. “I’m here for Z.”



# EPILOGUE

I was once told that if you loved somebody, let them go, and if they came back to you, then they were yours forever.

I didn't know if I believed that particular saying, but I knew it needed to be done if I ever hoped for Z to trust me.

So, I allowed my sister to believe she had the upper hand. It was extremely difficult to remain limp and docile as she raced away, locking me in the cage like I was some sort of rabid beast she desired to put down.

But for the sake of our family, I'd do it.

I'd do anything for her.

What made this entire thing even more infuriating was the fact that she had somehow found a way to free not only Mali, but also my pet wyvern as well.

My sister was growing into her powers.

That was good. She would need them in the battle to come.

Keeping her with me would only serve to ruin our relationship once and for all. She hated me—I had seen that plain as day in her blue eyes after her incubus mate was dropped off the balcony. But she would soon come to see that she needed me to survive, just as I needed her.

It was this *world* that was corrupting her.

Her mates, her humans, even the other nightmares... They ruined my sister. Destroyed her. Tarnished her.

If I had any hope of winning her back, then I had to get rid of these distractions once and for all.

I stood at the edge of the portal, staring into the dark abyss as monster after monster clawed out of the hole, drawn to my call.

S's arms were crossed over his chest as he scowled at nothing in particular. He was furious I had allowed Z to get away, but the human's hurt feelings weren't my problem. Besides, I didn't plan to keep him alive for long.

He had proved to be a useful servant—and I'd thought Z would appreciate him as a gift—but he was becoming... warped. Twisted. Deformed. Hell's power was wreaking havoc on the human, and there was only so much more he could take before his body failed completely.

Already, his hair was nothing but greasy clumps covered in bald patches. He was abnormally thin, practically swimming in his clothes, and his skin had taken on a jaundiced-yellow tint.

No wonder Z didn't want to fuck him.

He was hideous.

Still, it was better for him to absorb the excess energy from hell rather than me.

Creature after creature pulled themselves out of the pit, their sightless eyes fixed on me, my magic already shackled around them, forcing them to do my will.

Gorgons. Fairies. Dragons. Wyverns. Zombies. Skeletons. Gargoyles. Banshees.

These creatures had lived on this Earth hundreds of years before the nightmares had first arrived. They had been driven to extinction and had found sanctuary in my mother's realm.

Now, they were free.

Free to reclaim the land they were kicked out of.

Free to destroy and plunder villages.

Free to kill and eat and maim all of the humans and nightmares that now resided here.

Free. Free. Free.

I couldn't get Z to love me through brute force, but maybe I could get her to love me if she didn't have a choice in the matter. If I were the only option left, she would *have* to love me.

So I would destroy the world she had grown so fond of, and I would smile while doing so.

"I won't let you run from me anymore, my dearest sister," I whispered into the darkness, praying my words would reach her wherever she chose to hide. "You're mine, whether you want to be or not."

And this time around, I wouldn't let anyone take her from me.

Not even herself.

It was time for the world to face my wrath.



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Katie May is a reverse harem author, a KDP All-Star winner, and an *USA Today* Bestselling Author. She lives in West Michigan with her family, cat, and adorable puppy. When not writing, she can be found reading a good book, listening to Broadway musicals, or playing games. Join [Katie's Gang](#) to stay updated on all her releases! And did you know she has a TikTok? Yeah, me neither. Follow her [here](#)! But be warned...she's an awkward noodle.



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