



THE
EVERLASTING
CURSE

G. BAILEY

*I shouldn't fall for the villain.
Should I?*

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This book is written in British English, therefore some spellings might differ.

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This is a box set of The Everlasting Curse Series. It includes:

The Broken and Sinned

The Cursed and Desired

The Immortal and Damned

Exclusive Bonus Scenes

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DEDICATION

For all the stars in the sky that inspire every word I write.



There is no place for love in a world of vampires who own your soul.

On Riona Dark's twenty-second birthday, being kidnapped by strangers in the night was *not* the surprise party she was expecting. Riona is taken to the hidden world of vampires, a remote island called The Onyx, where being human means you are less than nothing. Locked up with other humans, Riona finds out that she will soon be sold at The Auction.

When two vampire princes, with dark eyes and even darker souls, come to view her and the others, Riona knows the vampires here are just as dangerous as they are gorgeous.

Once sold, Riona is told that her life belongs to the vampires who own her. They will own her soul, mind and body. *Resisting means only death.*

Riona won't be sold without a fight, and the only power in The Onyx is blood, desire...and death.

Warning: This book is a dark romance, and it contains themes not for the faint of heart.

CHAPTER
ONE



My dream turned into a nightmare the moment I saw his dark eyes.

The suncatcher above me spins in the light breeze, catching beams of light and reflecting them in a million different strands of colour all across my dorm room and waking me up far too early than should be allowed. That pretty but annoying thing was a gift from my brother, and he rarely gets me anything nice, so I had to keep it.

“It’s your goddamn twenty-second birthday, and you’re still in bed!” my roommate, aka Miss Noisy and Perky First Thing in the morning, shouts across our room as I squeeze my eyes shut. I groan and pull my covers over my head, hoping that she will bugger off, but there is no such luck as I hear her footsteps coming closer. Snatching my sheet from me, she flicks on my bedside lamp to make it that much brighter in here. I peel my eyes open and glare at her as she leans over me, hands on her hips.

“Can your birthday present to me be a lie-in? Please, Sophie?” I grumble with the best impression of puppy dog eyes I can give. Sophie Devert is one year older than I am, about four levels crazier, and overall my best friend in the world since middle school. Pushing her bright autumn red hair behind her ear, she steps back and stretches, showing off her slim and toned body. That’s what you get for being a pro swimmer. My short ass body reflects my art major *all* too well. I slide out of bed and make my way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. After a quick shower, I towel dry my waist-length, mousy blonde hair and then wrap myself in the towel

before heading back out. On my made-up bed is a present box with a big pink bow. It must be my birthday if Sophie is cleaning anything at all.

I chuckle as I sit down and open up the box, pulling out a short, light pink dress and matching light pink heels in my size. I might not be the girliest girl out there, but I love pink as much as I love dressing up for one night. Sophie is practically jumping on the spot in excitement, waiting for my response. She knows she did well; the girl knows me better than I know myself.

“I love them! Thank you so much, Soph!”

“I knew you would!” She gives me a brief hug. “Now we just have to wait for that brother of yours to call and tell you the next gift,” she replies as she picks up her bag with a cheeky grin. “See you at lunch?”

“Same place as usual?” I question as I place the dress back in the box and the heels too.

“As always,” she confirms with a wink before leaving the room. After she is gone, I get myself dressed in skinny jeans and a white top with criss-cross patterns cut into the shoulders. As I pull my boots on, my phone rings with the damn cat screeching noise my brother put on it as a joke and I haven’t been able to change. I jump, like I do every single damn time, and answer it without looking, popping it onto loudspeaker.

“Happy birthday!” my mum and dad shout down the phone at the same time. Just hearing them makes me smile, the cat ringtone forgotten. “Can we FaceTime?”

“Sure!” I answer, finishing with my boots and switching the call to FaceTime. When the camera comes on, I can only see my reflection for a second, my big doe-like blue eyes and round face that Sophie always says makes me look like a Barbie doll. I’ve always taken offence to that...but she is right. Eventually, the camera catches up, and I get a close up of the side of my mum’s nose. “Mum, you need to hold it away. I can’t see you, remember?”

“Oh right,” she grumps, not liking to be called out for her terrible tech skills. She pulls the camera back, and even though they are very close, it’s

good enough. My mother's grey hair is perfectly styled in curls around her wrinkled face, and she has a cream cardigan on with her pearl necklace she never takes off. My dad is in one of his classic sweater vests, and his greying brown hair is swept to the side. He smiles at me and pushes his glasses back up his nose.

"Where is your brother? Has he not come over with his gift yet?" Mum asks, well, demands to know.

Being the overprotective sister I am, I lie. "Of course he has. Austin just had to get to class."

Total lie.

"Well, I'm glad he is looking after you there. I do worry about you," Mum says with her usual overly worried tone. "Did our gift get to yours yet? It's not much, but we never know what to get you."

"No, but I will check my post in a bit," I reply, drifting my gaze to my dad. "How are you, dad?"

"Happy to see my little girl," he replies with soft eyes. Mum is the tough one, and my dad is as laid back as it comes. Together, they really do make the best parents. "I struggle to understand how you are twenty-two. It feels like yesterday that you were just a baby who slept in my arms, sucking her thumb."

My cheeks light up.

"We will let you go and try calling Austin again. Honestly, that boy never answers his phone," she huffs. Yeah, that's because he is a dick and likely hungover once again. I don't say that though, not wanting my parents to know the truth, and I just smile before saying my goodbyes. Deciding to find my twin brother and give him his gift is the best idea this morning, as I'm totally skipping class since it's my birthday, so I head out of my room after grabbing my hoodie and bag. I pull my hoodie on and swing my bag over my shoulder, running down the stairs to the post boxes. Finding my key in my bag, buried deep under all the very important shit I keep in there, I open up the letterbox and find three letters. I open them on my way to my brother's dorm room, not surprised to see a birthday card from my parents

with three hundred pounds inside. Awesome. I push that letter into my bag and open the second one, which is another birthday card with a red rose on the front. Inside, I quickly read the long paragraph.

*“My sweet niece, Riona,
Ri-Ri, it’s been a long time since I’ve written to you, but as always, I ask for
you to follow my advice. Do not leave your dorm tonight, it is not safe at
Aberdeen University on this particular night. They are out hunting, and they
will not be able to resist your blood.
Trust me for once, and have a good birthday.
I will come when it is safe to do so. It is time we spoke.*

*As always,
Your uncle*

ANOTHER CARD from my father’s particularly insane brother, who I’ve not seen since I was eight. I only remember overhearing a conversation my parents had with him, something about blood and sacrifices. Either way, I overheard enough to know he had lost his goddamn mind. I push the letter back in and find the third one isn’t addressed to me at all, it’s for Austin. Finally I get to the guys’ dorm and head around the back, knowing I can’t just walk in, thanks to their stupid rules. No girls allowed...even if there are, no doubt, quite a few girls in this place with their boyfriends. Two trees climb the side of the building, and I climb the left one, pushing myself onto a branch. Bracing myself, I jump to the next tree and keep climbing up until I’m near the top of the tree and the single branch that is close to the ledges of the windows. Ignoring the fear of falling, because damn that would hurt, I carefully crawl across the large branch and onto the ledge of the window. The cold winter wind whips around my body, and I’m thankful there is no

ice on the ledge as I push the window up and climb inside, knocking off a pile of books.

“Nice to see you as always, Ria.”

I pause and turn my gaze to the half-naked guy in his bed, sheets pooled around his waist, the flickering sunlight from behind me kissing the skin of his chest. Arlo O’Dargan. Aka my brother’s best friend and my long-time frenemy since first school. His deep voice is annoyingly perfect, much like the rest of him. Sun-kissed blond hair, bright topaz-green eyes, and a jawline any model would be jealous of, he could be classed as the perfect guy. Just not to me. I don’t see him like that, not even as I glance at his rock-hard abs and big shoulders. Nope.

Dammit, I got the wrong room again.

I glare at him. “I wish I could say the same, Arlo. I’m surprised you’re even in your own bed and not in some poor girl’s.”

“None of the girls’ beds I join are poor or unhappy, Ria-banana-llama,” he teases and stands up, not giving one shit that he only has boxers on. I sharply turn away and blindly stumble to his door, grabbing the handle.

“And don’t call me that!” I shout back.

“Make me stop then!” he hollers to my back as I slip out of his door and slam it hard behind me, hearing his laugh in the corridor. Taking a few steps, I find the right door and bang on it a few times before opening it up. I flick the light on as I walk in and see my brother snoring in bed. The shower is on, so he isn’t alone (unlucky girl), and I walk right up to him, stepping over messy clothes and empty beer bottles.

“Asshole, wake up!” I shout, kicking his leg that’s hanging out of the bed. He jolts up, brushing a hand through his dark blond hair and relaxing when he sees it is me. For twins, we are pretty different. For one, my brother is well over six foot, and he has brown eyes. He looks like he got all the good genes and I was cut short at some point with my height. And generally, I’m not as popular as he is, mostly because Austin could charm his way out of a lion’s den even if he was a gazelle. I’d definitely be eaten by the lion in under three seconds flat.

“Happy birthday, twin sis!” he holds his hand up for a high five.

“Happy birthday right back to you. Did you forget our plans for breakfast today?” I ask, and his sheepish grin says it all as I high-five him. “Oh, and answer your phone. Mum and dad have been calling and then nagging me because you didn’t answer.”

“Of course,” he replies with a wave of his hand like it isn’t an issue. “Wanna get breakfast now?”

I glance at the bathroom door and back to Austin, arching an eyebrow. “What about your guest?”

“I don’t even know her name, to be honest with you, sis,” he answers, and I pull a face at him as he shoves his shoes on. He writes a quick note for shower girl before hooking his arm around my shoulder and guiding me out of his stinky room. After a short walk to the cafeteria, we both sit down with our coffees and relax.

“The party is at eight. I did remember it’s my year to host,” he states, crossing his arms. One good thing about being a twin? Sharing the responsibility of hosting the party. Last year, I spent months planning a massive rave in an abandoned castle. I damn well hope Austin has come up with something good, or I’m having our next party next year in a farm with pigs. “It’s going to be the most epic party.”

I grin. “Where is it then?”

“On the beach, the left side, you know where there is that cavern?” he questions, and I nod, feeling excited. “Well, be there at eight, sis, and I’ll give you a gift then.”

“I will be there,” I reply, knowing the lazy ass hasn’t been shopping yet and plans to the second he leaves the cafe. I reach into my bag and hand him the small box and the letter that came to me. He pops open the box and pulls out the silver and black bead bracelet I made for him in class. The beads are all made from quartz, our birthstone, and the middle one has his initials carved into it.

“This is seriously fucking awesome,” he tells me, sliding it on his wrist and doing it up. “Did you make it?”

“Yup. Now go and buy me something pink and expensive,” I say, climbing to my feet. “Oh, and make sure there is wine at the party. White wine, I don’t like red.”

“You got it,” he replies, and I chuckle as I leave and head for class. Tonight is going to be epic, that’s for sure.

CHAPTER
TWO



For some weird ass reason, my uncle’s warning comes into my mind as I look at myself in the mirror. My pink dress fits my body like a glove, emphasizing all my curves, and my heels make me seem taller than I am at just five foot five. I’ve taken a ridiculous amount of time curling all my hair, only to brush the curls out to make it seem like my hair is naturally wavy. *Girl Problems 101*. As soon as someone invents a quicker way to get this effect, the better. Still, my uncle’s warning makes me halt and actually almost want to stay in. I mean, he is old and literally insane, but his warning has still creeped me the hell out. I wonder if Austin got one of those cards. I really should have asked him today.

“Are you finally going to live out all the brother’s best friend romance novels I’ve read, and hook up with Arlo?” Soph asks with a small grin, coming out of the bathroom, looking ready to kill in a short leather skirt and a yellow crop top that hides pretty much none of her. Her bright hair is up in a ponytail, and her makeup, although light, is bang on. I can never get my makeup that perfect.

I screw up my face. “You’re gross. Arlo is—”

“Ridiculously hot *and* single,” Soph interrupts. He might be all those, but that wasn’t what I was going to say. “And he only has eyes for you.”

“You’re just talking out of your arse now,” I mutter, picking up my phone. “Come and take a selfie with me before we leave.”

She chuckles and rushes to my side, and we take several photos before posting them on Instagram. While I'm on there, I find several photos of my brother at the party and the dozens of bottles of white wine he has left on the beach for me. That alone makes me grin as we grab our bags and head out. The dorm is pretty empty of other students as we head down the stairs and out the front doors. The air is cold now, and I instantly wish I had brought a coat, but then again, I will be in front of a bonfire soon, by the looks of the photos. Soph hooks her arm in mine and rests her head on my shoulder as we head down the pathway towards her car. She has rich as hell parents, and their idea of a gift was the shiny new red Land Rover, and I'm the lucky bitch who is her bestie, so I can take full advantage of the heated seats. Soph opens her bag and searches for her keys, and then keeps searching, looking more frustrated by the second.

"Crap, I forgot my phone," she mutters and pauses, closing her bag with her keys in her hand, the glittery elephant keyring I bought her shining from the street light. "Why don't you drive my car there, and I will grab an Uber."

"I can wait for you," I say, even as I glance at my own phone and see that we are ten minutes late to my own party.

"Nope. Just go," she says, passing me the keys. "I want to call my mum anyways, check and see how she is doing today."

She looks down, and I place my hand on her arm, wishing I could help. Her dad buys her cars, and her mum is one pill away from forgetting who she is half the time. Money doesn't bring happiness, that's for sure. Soph's life makes me happy for my middle-class upbringing, everything from the pound ice lollies I loved from the shops to the budget beach holidays in a tiny caravan in Wales.

"Okay, see you in a bit," I reply, leaning forward and kissing her cheek.

"Don't jump Arlo until I get there! I wanna be there when I'm proven right!" she shouts over her shoulder as she walks away. Bitch. My cheeks are still red as I glance around, seeing no one in the parking lot. I laugh as I climb into Soph's car, pushing a bag of gym clothes into the passenger seat and closing the door behind me. After doing my seat belt up and, most importantly, putting the heated seats on, I head straight towards the beach.

I'm thankful there is no traffic around at this time of day. By the time I park in the beach car park, I'm half an hour late, and I know Austin is going to be mad.

Thank god it is our birthday.

Climbing out of my car with my bag, I lock up as I hear the distant music of the party and smell a bonfire mixed in with the smell of the sea. Austin knows me well, this is the perfect party for me, considering the beach is my favourite place in the world. There is something so calming about looking at the sea, watching the waves wash in and out across the sand. Even when there is a storm, there is always the peace right after. The sea is my happy place, it always has been since I was a kid. It's the only place I feel myself and safe. That's why when I'm older, I'm buying a house as close to the sea as I possibly can get.

The rickety wooden steps eventually give out to just sand, and I slip off my heels, sinking my toes into the soft damp sand.

“Goldilocks, goldilocks, are you lost?”

I spin around to find the man who spoke, but there is no one here, just the sounds of the party and the waves of the sea.

“Dance for me, goldilocks. Spin and spin and spin until your head comes right off.”

I turn around again and search everywhere, not hearing or seeing anyone as my heart starts pounding in my chest.

Run, Ria.

Hearing my brother's voice in my head like he is right next to me, I take off down the beach path, rushing towards the party where I know I will be safe. I drop my heels and bag so I can run faster, and just as I see the party, the crowd of shadows around the bonfire in the far distance, I breathe out a sigh of relief.

Then hands wrap around my waist and a hand grabs my throat, arching my neck to the side with a jolt that takes my breath away. Something sharp suddenly bites into my neck, digging in deep, and I scream when I realise

it's teeth. I don't stop screaming, the pain indescribable, even as I go into shock and almost numb to what is happening to me. The world becomes fuzzy, and my screams fade into cries as my legs go out from under me. The man biting me, holding me, holds me up by my waist, and the world begins to spin.

"Don't kill her!" I hear another man shout. "That's enough!"

The man holding me seems to grumble into my neck, seconds before his teeth leave my neck, and he spins me around, grabbing my chin. Even as I black out, I hear his words and see my blood dripping down his chin as the last thing I can focus on.

"Yes, my masters will love you. You taste like heaven."

CHAPTER
THREE



“Wake up before you fall over!” a girl’s voice drags into my mind, and I groggily blink my eyes open, feeling a sharp pain in my neck as I breathe in the smell of saltwater, sweat and the metallic tang of blood. It’s freezing cold and damp all around me, and with only my small pink dress on and no shoes, my toes feel close to falling off. My lips are dry, but my wet, cold clothes cause me to start shaking almost immediately. My hand shoots to my neck where the pain is, only for me to realise I have iron cuffs wrapped around my wrists, with a chain going through the holes, connecting me to the floor and stopping me from lifting my hands above my waist. Fear renders me silent as I search around the room, seeing other faces in the darkness but not being able to make out much about them. The same girl who woke me up speaks again. “Don’t scream, no one comes, and if they do, it’s those men who took us, and they aren’t nice. They just bite.”

Every vivid memory of the beach comes back to haunt me. The screams, the pain in my neck, and the overwhelming sense of fear that crawled into my system like a drug.

“Where are we? What the hell is that thing that attacked me?” I question, wriggling on the wooden crate I’m sitting up on, my back plastered to the side of a curved wooden wall. The room seems to slightly rock, I notice, in the silence that follows as the girl doesn’t answer me back. I don’t hear anything outside this room, but the smell of saltwater and the rocking

movement suggests we are on a ship or boat. I wonder how long. “Please answer.”

“I was at a party on a beach, invited by some other friends even though I don’t go to many parties...,” she starts, her voice ringing with fear. That was my party, the one I never got to. Oh my god. My parents must be going mad with worry, and Austin? Was Austin taken? “The men...no, *monsters*, attacked the party and killed so many of my friends as I tried to run. One caught me and bit my neck, and I passed out. I woke up here the same as you but a few hours earlier. There was another girl in with us, but she wouldn’t stop screaming, and one of the monsters came in here... He bit her neck and dragged her out.”

They killed everyone at the party bar a few. What if they only kept women?

They might have killed Austin. The thought lingers in my mind like an unwanted visitor, repeating itself again and again until I can’t breathe with pure panic. If the girl with me notices my panic, she doesn’t say anything, just leans back and looks up at the small bits of light shining through the planks of wood on the ceiling. Austin. My twin brother. He might be gone. And Sophie? What if she got to the party when it was still being attacked? Did they take her? Or kill her too? No. I can’t think like that. If they took me, they might have taken them, and then there is a chance we will all survive wherever we are going to.

I’m going to make sure of it. Clearly, these monsters who took me live on blood, and mine seems to have delighted the guy who bit me. I bet they won’t expect their food to bite back. Wherever they take us, there must be a way out, and then I only need to find a normal person and scream for help.

I straighten in my seat, yawning a little, and my breaths come out like puffs of smoke. “They must be vampires. You know from movies and books? I mean, who else would drink blood?”

“The blood-sucking did kinda give that hint,” the girl replies with a small laugh that soon dies away into pity for our situations. “I didn’t even read paranormal books, I much prefer contemporary. Now this?”

We both stare at each other, the fear and horror of the situation hitting home. I did read paranormal and fantasy books because I prefer the escape

from reality that contemporary doesn't usually give me. But I didn't expect to be right smack in the middle of one of the many books I read. I wonder what these vamps are like. Are they the bad guys in the books? The monsters?

Does that make me a captive? My heart starts pounding as I begin to panic, and I suck in air, trying to think of anything else other than where I am.

"Tell me something before I freak out," I ask her, my hands starting to shake. These vamps could kill us, or even worse, torture us. They might only collect young women for reasons I can't even imagine. Oh my god, vampires are real. They are real, and I've been kidnapped by them, bitten by them, and I'm likely never to go home. Never see my parents again.

What if they have my brother? What if they have killed him?

She is silent for a second or two, letting me freak out before she clicks her fingers, getting my attention. "It's normal to have a panic attack or ten. Try breathing slowly and counting to ten. Then count to twenty. And so on."

I do as she asks, even when it feels like each breath hurts more than the last, but I say each of the numbers. Eventually I calm down enough to rest back, my hands still shaking, but I don't feel seconds away from passing out anymore.

"My name is Riona Dark, and my friends call me Ria. What's your name?" I eventually question. We are stuck here together, we might as well get to know each other.

"Ann Hellerud," she replies, and I wish I could see what she looks like, to have some connection to normality out here. But it's too dark, I can only make out the shape of her head when she moves and maybe dark brown hair. "And, Ria, I hope we survive whatever is coming next."

"Same," I whisper back, though my voice carries across the room. "Do you have a family? Someone who would be looking for you?"

"Two little brothers and my dad," she replies, and I can hear the affection in her voice. "I was the first one in my family to go to university, and I wanted to get a good job, show my brothers they could do it. My mum died a few years back from cancer, and she so desperately wanted me to make a

difference in the world. So I was going to be a social worker, help anyone I could. Now...”

“You will get back to university,” I firmly reply, though I have no way to make that happen, but it doesn’t harm anyone to hope. Hope might be what gets us through this. She is a strong person, I can tell from her voice alone. “Just like I will find my brother and somehow escape whatever these vampires want with us. Did you hear them say anything that might give us a clue?”

“Yes...,” she admits, but that fear is back in her voice. “They said something about auctions and food. I think they are going to sell us to other vampires.”

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath, and I close my eyes, resting my head back. “I’m not being some vamp’s long-term snack, that’s for sure.”

Ann doesn’t reply to me, not that I blame her, as the mood is sour at best now. I stare up at the top of the ceiling, through slight gaps in the panels of wood, and I can make out the moon and stars in the sky. I shiver from the cold as my eyes drift shut, and sleep soon lulls me into a false sense of safety.



“TIME TO GET THEM UP!” I hear a man bellow outside the room we are in, many days later from when we were taken. The cold has well and truly seeped into my bones, and I’m clueless how Ann and I are still alive and not dead from frostbite. Ann mentioned that the blood taste in our mouths might mean they gave us vampire blood, and perhaps it is somehow keeping us alive and healthy. I prefer not to overthink on that subject. Other than throwing bottled water and stale bread at us, this is the first time we are actually going to leave the room, by the sounds of it. A part of me is excited as much as I am terrified. The ship is still rocking slightly, but it seems less harsh now, and I wonder if we are anchored somewhere.

The door swings open, and a bulky man with green eyes, dark tanned skin, and a mixture of tattoos all up his chest and arms looks in at us with a flashlight, the light filling the room. The rapid change in light makes my

eyes water and sting to hold open, but I force myself to. His clothes are old fashioned and remind me of what a pirate in a fairy-tale book might wear, and he looks between the other girls and me. Getting a good look at my new friend, I see she does have long dark brown hair and slightly tanned skin with tattoos down her arms from her shoulders. With only cut-off denim jeans and a white tank top that is covered in her blood, she must be as freezing as me. I hear dozens of other footsteps nearby, more doors opening, and the distant sound of the ocean waves as Ann's wide brown eyes fall on me before we both look at the vamp, who lets out a long sigh.

“Ladies don't like to wear much clothing anymore, do they? Not like in my time, with the big dresses,” he states, disgust and pity in his voice. He lowers the flashlight in his hand.

What century are these vamps from?

The man doesn't say another word as he eventually walks in and goes to Ann first. Even in the darkness, which I'm now realising these vamps must be able to see in, I hear Ann's relief as the man undoes the cuffs, and they fall to the floor. I can't wait to get mine off; they are digging harshly into the skin on my wrists, and I think they are bleeding a little bit.

“Behave or you will regret it,” the man warns, his accent very unfamiliar to me the more he talks. It almost sounds Scottish, but it's not, and I'm unsure where I've heard it before. Ann and I don't reply to that threat, mostly because what can you say?

I'm hardly going to enthusiastically say yes and be a good little girl, now am I? The man undoes my cuffs next, and instantly I sigh at the relief as I rub my sore wrists, feeling the cuts and bruises those cuffs left as I stand up next to Ann. I place my hand on my neck, running my fingers over the two bite marks I find there and the dried blood stuck to me even though it's been days.

The man shoves me hard in the middle of my back, and I stumble out into the corridor, the light hurting my eyes from the fire sconces lining the walls. Eventually, I settle my eyes and look to Ann, who staggers to my side, her arm brushing against mine. I've never seen her around the university, but it's a hella big university, and I would guess she is a first-year anyway, as

she looks younger than me but not by much. I never thought to ask her age in the days we have been trapped here. In fact, we haven't spoken much about anything serious or real.

"Keep moving!" the man shouts behind me, and I trip with my bare feet across the wooden floorboards, almost slipping on some of the wet parts until I get to stairs at the end. I climb up them, hearing screams behind me that make the situation so much more petrifying. I've always been a strong person, and I don't intend to let this break me. But it's hard not to scream, to not freak the hell out. Every step feels like I'm walking to my death, and I likely am doing just that. I wrap my arms around myself, my pink dress doing nothing to curb the sheer cold wind as I step out onto the deck of a ship, my feet sticking to the deck panels, and into the crowd of people dressed in party clothes and smothered with blood. A few of them are openly weeping on the floor, others are shaking from the cold and huddled together. I can't hear much over the weeping and the sound of the sea, and the odd laugh from the vampires at the front of the group, talking together. The ship is a mixture of old and new, by the looks of it, with old floorboards and a glass top above us, stopping the pouring rain from soaking us to the bone. There are modern lights on the sides of the walls, and overall, I'm more freaked out than ever.

But as much as the ship is distracting, it's nothing compared to the island in front of me in the distance. Even at night...I know this place is nothing like anywhere on earth. Or nothing I've ever seen before. Three mountains tower into the sky in the middle of the island, disappearing into the clouds, and red snow pours down them like a fog, moving softly. Around the mountains is a vibrant city, and I can just make out the many, many lights of the buildings. The edges of the island look like thick forests, and one side seems to have beaches and the other just sheer cliffs. Several ships, like the one we are on, line the harbour of the beach, and I can see piles of people being herded like cattle into the forest line off the beach.

Ann moves close to my side, her arm hooking into mine as she stares with me at the vampire pirate things. I'm no geography student, but I know this place isn't on any human map, but then again, I hardly got kidnapped by a human. These are vampires, and it doesn't surprise me they have a secret island to live on. Not one thing about them could pass as human. They are

too perfect, too shiny, and they stand too still. Humans are flawed and imperfect, something these monsters are not.

And I honestly think we are the winners. Being flawed is what makes us human.

“Welcome to The Onyx, the island of vampires and many, many human slaves,” one of the vamps shouts out, stepping in front of us all and clapping his hands. The crying and weeping doesn’t stop, it only gets louder. I search the humans, so many of them, for my brother, Sophie, Arlo or anyone I recognise, but I just can’t see them all in this group. There must be a hundred people, easily. My brother could be here, and unless I move around, which might piss off the vamps and end with my head being torn off, I can’t see him.

Onyx. This island has a name and a whole race of supernatural beings that belong in movies and TV shows. Not real life.

“This is your home now, and you will be looked after if you behave. The Onyx has a saying, and you will do well to listen to it. There is no power in The Onyx except for blood and death.”

Ann looks at me, and I carefully hide my fear, knowing it’s pointless to make her more afraid. I have a bad feeling blood is the only reason we are here. The vampires need food, and we are just cattle they have rounded up. “You have two of the most coveted things on The Onyx. Blood and the ability to die. But make no mistake, from now on, you are a slave to your masters, and if you wish to survive, you must follow the rules. We aren’t all that bad.”

“Bullshit,” I whisper to Ann, who nods with a little tilt of her lips. But they want us to act like sheep? Then fine.

At least until they realise the sheep aren’t all the same, and there is a wolf here waiting to bite back. I’m not going down without a hell of a fight, that’s for sure, but first I want to make sure my brother isn’t on this goddamn island with me. Or Arlo or Sophie for that matter. Part of me suspects Sophie is okay, but Austin and Arlo? I’m not too sure. The vamp seems done with his shit speech and clicks his fingers. The other vamps

start grabbing the people near the front and pulling them with them to the end of the ship, and they climb down into awaiting boats, I assume.

The one vamp, who I recognise from the beach, searches the crowd until he finds me. With dark tousled hair, muck-covered skin littered with scars, and almost black eyes, he is hard to forget. I only saw him briefly, but he is memorable. I know when he finds me as he walks through the screaming group, who part quickly, and he stops close so I'm forced to smell his dirty clothes. God, he stinks. Do vamps not need to shower? He reaches out, cupping the back of my neck and pulling me to him, turning my head to the side. I smack my hands against his chest, trying to pull away, but he is too strong. He doesn't even notice my efforts.

"I will buy you and keep you, pet," he coos, leaning down and pressing his nose into my neck before lifting his head. "I can still taste your sweet blood on my tongue. You smell like the angels themselves sent you here."

I sneer at him, even when I know it will get me nowhere, but I won't let him bite me again. "Your friend said in *The Onyx* there is no power but blood and death, so that means my biggest power is my blood and my decision when to die. I would rather kill myself than be your plaything."

He laughs and it's bitter, cruel. "Who says you get to die in *The Onyx*?"

"I do," I bite out.

He leans closer, and I try to fight his grip on me once again. "No, you don't. Your freedom is gone, but keep fighting me; I do like it when my prey fights back."

I scream and try to hit him, but he picks me up like a doll and carries me to the edge of the ship before dropping me. I scream as I fall and land harshly on my side, hearing something snap in my arm. I cry out as hands pick me up and pull me down to sit as I cup my arm, trying not to cry. But tears fall down my cheeks as I look up, seeing the bastard vampire who bit me looking down from the ship. Bastard. Before I die, I'm finding out how to kill vampires and taking as many of them as I can down with me. I turn away, knowing he will keep staring, and the sick freak probably likes the attention. I glance around me, seeing a large wooden motorized boat full of people hiding in every corner of the boat but Ann is not one of them. The

engine starts up, and I look up at the vampire who bit me and dragged me here.

He is going to die before I do, even if it's the last thing I do. Everyone has a weakness, and I bet vampires aren't all that different.

Either way, I'm not going down without a fight.

CHAPTER
FOUR



It's cold. Not that annoying sort of cold, but the temperature that worries me that frostbite is a real issue, and I like my toes where they are. The vamps don't seem to give a monkey's arse about us as we walk through the red snow covering the sand, away from the docked boat. My clothes are still wet, and it is odd they don't care about keeping us alive, considering all they went through to kidnap us. Maybe they do this a lot, and it's not odd at all. I think of my uncle for a moment...he was right. He said they were out hunting, and he was dead bang right about it all. *But how could he have known that?*

The dock was empty, with nothing more than a rocky, snow-covered beach and a few trees to be seen after we got out of the boat. There are twenty-four of us in this group—I counted on the boat—and three vamps. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't the silence of the island in the dead of the night. The forest seems endless, as does the snow freezing my toes off, until we come to a house in the middle of it. The house appears normal, nothing odd about it at all, but it feels all kinds of wrong. The house itself is attached to the bottom of the mountain, and its white-framed windows and brick walls look almost out of place here. There is nothing personalised about the house, and soon the vamp opens the door, and we are ushered inside.

All of us are crammed into this tiny house, and I wonder if there are others like it? There was certainly more than one ship. I consider running away for a brief second...but then the thought comes...where would I go?

How am I going to escape this damn island?

I follow the guy in front of me into the house, which is warm, and my toes are thankful for it as I stand shivering in the hallway, nothing but several doors and a staircase to look at.

“Send one of them up!” a woman shouts down, her very British and almost Cockney, aka London-sounding, voice familiar to my ears. Please pick someone else. Please pick—I’m jolted from my thoughts as a vamp man grabs my elbow and leads me to the stairs, giving me a slight shove up the first two steps.

Pushing down my fear, I walk to the top of the stairs, which opens to one massive room littered with four wardrobes and two dressing tables. Shelves of boxes fill the corner of the room, and there are several white doors. The house creaks in the wind, and it smells like expensive perfume in here.

A woman stands in the middle of the room, and I stare at her as she looks right back. She is pretty and strange all at the same time. With her long black hair, dark tanned skin, and stylish brown leather dress, she almost seems normal, but then I see the tattoos on her cheeks. Two sigils, if I guess right, and they are completely different. One is a circle shape with birds making the circle, and in the middle is a sword with wings behind it. The other one is a dragon wrapped around a dagger with fire in a circle around it. They look burnt on, like she was branded many years ago, as they are fully healed. Why would anyone do that to themselves?

I don’t know how I know it, but this woman is a vamp. I think it’s the way they hold themselves, no crouching or movements like breathing. She is just still, and the more she stares, the more uncomfortable I get, but I still hold eye contact. Her sharp green eyes are a clear challenge.

“Oh, they will like you, girl,” she eventually states, breathing out the sentence in a husky tone. “I can smell your blood from here, and it is different. Delicious.”

She licks her lips. “I might bid for you myself, seeing as I’m not allowed to feed on the new stock.”

“Were you ever human?” I question, crossing my arms. I’m done being frightened of these monsters if they are going to kill me anyway. “Are you all born vampires with no ounce of humanity left to save you?”

She laughs and walks across the room. “Humanity is overrated, as are your emotions that come with it.”

I don’t reply, unsure what to say to that. Humanity would be overrated to someone who clearly has none. “But humans are as cruel as we are, make no mistake about that. The Onyx owns its crimes and doesn’t hide them. Can you say the same of your race? How many terrible things have you humans done and hid?”

“Why am I here?” I question instead, hating that she might be right.

“To prepare you. I will run you a bath and dress you, and then you will be taken. It is the way of things around here,” she casually comments. “My name is Merethe.”

“My mum always said it was rude to play with your food. Why don’t you just kill me and get it over and done with?” I ask her instead of giving her my name.

She tilts her head to the side. “Do you want to die? Is there no one you want to go back to?”

“My family would rather see me dead than in constant suffering,” I counter.

She leans down close, shaking her head. “Not everything in The Onyx is about suffering. Pleasure is just as much a desire as blood is. Both can be enjoyed at the same time. You will see, you are very beautiful.”

I turn away, sickness filling my mouth. That is a fate worse than death in my books. “I will be no one’s.”

She laughs like that is impossible here. “Are you a virgin?”

“What does that matter to you?” I snap. She keeps laughing and steps close to me so quickly I can’t track her movement. Her hand cups my face, and her eyes stare into mine. “Tell me the truth, are you a virgin?”

Something indescribable takes hold of me, forcing me to want to tell her the truth, but I push it back, gritting my teeth. It hurts to resist, and the more she stares at me, the more pressure I feel until it suddenly disappears. “Fuck. Off.”

Shock fills her eyes, and she lets me go, stumbling back. “How...how did you do that?”

“Do what?” I question, not understanding how freaked out she is. Rather than answer me, she starts to pace, muttering to herself, and I catch some of it.

“Must tell...princes...they will pay more.”

Princes? Don't tell me the vamps have a royal family.

“Hello?” I wave my hand, and she finally stops, plastering on a very fake smile and breathing out a long breath. Her eyes stare me down like I'm a prized pig at a Texas BBQ.

“Let's get you dressed up. You look cold,” she replies, pretending like our whole conversation didn't just happen, but she looks at me differently now than when I first came in here. It's almost like I suddenly turned into gold. “Everything will be better once you are warm and dressed in auction house clothes of a neutral colour. Can't have any arguments about you that are blamed on me.”

“Why does the colour matter?” I question, holding my ground. She walks away and into another room, and I stand still, wondering if I should follow her. Every inch of me wants to run away as fast as I can, but I know running isn't going to work well for me until I come up with a decent enough plan.

My brother always said I was the smart one of us both. And he was damn right.

Steeling my back, I keep my arms crossed as I walk to the room Merethe last went into and head inside. It's a small bathroom with a white tub, a modern one with its own shower head. Merethe is running the steamy water into the tub and pouring something that smells like lavender in.

“Get undressed,” she commands and pauses to look at me. “Not that you’re wearing much to begin with,” she tuts. “Humans.”

I scowl at her as she turns back, and I awkwardly stand there, not wanting to get undressed in front of her. Merethe sighs, turns the tap off, and comes to me.

“Nudity is not a care for vampires or d’vampires on this island,” she firmly tells me and grips my dress. In one smooth motion, she rips it off me, and I gasp at the slight pain that caused. I cover my bra-clad breasts and panties with my hands, and she rolls her eyes at me. “You can keep them on if you like.”

“Yes,” I answer and tip toe my way to the tub. I climb in, my feet stinging from the sheer difference in heat and the tiny cuts I can feel on the base of them. Sitting still, I nearly jump when Merethe leans over me, grabs the shower head, and turns it on. She washes my hair like we are old friends, pouring in shampoo and conditioner by the feel and smell, and I just sit there. I feel numb. Shocked into staying still.

“What is the difference between vampires and d’vampires?” I question, needing to understand the creatures on this island more if I have any chance of surviving this.

She sighs. “Vampires are born, like humans are, and d’vampires are humans who have been turned. D’vampires cannot turn humans, but they are just as strong as born vampires. Honestly, there is not much difference.”

“When can I go home?” I quietly ask. Merethe turns the shower off and squeezes out the water from my hair before stepping back. I look up, meeting her eyes, and I see some pity there.

“Most ask that first, and then they freak out when I answer them,” she comments, her voice lacking human emotion of any kind. “Then they threaten to kill themselves, which some do anyway, or they try to run. Running gets you nowhere, by the way. I was surprised you didn’t ask any of these questions.”

“How do you keep us under control then?” I ask.

“Compulsion, plain and simple. Compulsion is my art, I am the best at it, and that’s why I see the humans first and...soothe them,” she replies with a smirk. “And you’re the first human I’ve ever seen resist it. Are you sure you’re not a witch or something else?”

“Are witches real?” I question back, my mouth popping open. Vampires are bad enough. Witches? Nope. I still remember that film I watched as a kid where the witches turned kids into mice. I shiver. Standing out from the other humans was not the game plan. I need to go unnoticed to escape, and I have a sinking feeling that isn’t happening here. What is wrong with me? I should have just pretended to do what she asked.

“Very real and dangerous. But you can’t be one; you don’t have the markings, and you are human. I smell it,” she replies and offers me a towel before turning around as I take it off her. I wrap myself up and climb out, the cold air brushing against my skin. “Get changed into that dress and blow dry your hair over there. Don’t do anything rash, I am listening. We vampires have excellent hearing.”

With that, she walks out of the room and leaves me alone. I walk over to the small dressing table with a hair dryer, a small and old one by the looks of it, and a weird brown dress hanging up nearby on the wall. The dress is more of a sari with woven feathers all at the base of the dress, and it’s made from soft silk in three different shades of brown. It feels expensive under my fingers, and I hate that. I’m a prisoner, nothing more, and now I’m being dressed up for them to ogle. It takes me more than a few attempts to get the dress on and to work out that the design of the dress leaves my shoulders free and is tight around my waist.

Which makes sense with the whole biting of the neck thing. They wouldn’t want fabric in the way.

I quickly blow dry my hair and brush the knots out before standing up, looking at myself in the small foggy mirror.

I don’t look like me. I feel like the person in the mirror has aged a million years in only a few days. The beach, the party and my innocence seem like an old memory. My eyes catch the water in the tub, seeing it has turned pink from my dried blood.

I don't think pink is going to be my colour anymore...it seems like blood red might be the colour I need to get used to. Cooling my shaky hands by plastering them to my sides, I walk out still in bare feet to the main area. Merethe turns around and smiles.

"You remind me of my first day here," she comments, her eyes fixated on me. Something changes as she looks away and points at three boxes by the wall. "Take any shoes you like and meet me down these stairs. Be quick."

She disappears before my eyes, and I only hear the creak of a floor panel to let me know she went that way. So the vampires can move fast, and Merethe was once human. More things to figure out later. If I manage to survive.

Peeling myself from where I was standing, I walk to the boxes and pull the lid off the first. It takes me a little while to find any shoes that fit my tiny UK size four feet, but eventually I find some worn leather boots. I slide them on, grimacing at the feeling of the leather against my cut feet without socks. I stand up and fix my eyes on a shelf above the boxes and what looks like a knife resting on the edge. Quickly, I put the lid back on the box and stand on it, reaching up and skimming my fingers across the edge of the shelf until I grab the blade handle. I pull it down, smiling to myself about my little find. The knife is sharp, and it has a black leather handle—nothing special, but it might get me out of here. I tuck the knife into my dress, using the many layers of fabric to secure it to my chest.

Feeling a little less nervous, I go to the stairs and walk down to the bottom, finding the place full of people sitting on the floor and Merethe waiting for me. She instantly grabs my upper arm and starts dragging me through the house until we get to a metal gate. Merethe places her hand on it, and it glows red for a second before the gate opens, revealing row after row of cages which are full of people, their desperate eyes cutting into me. Then I hear the screams and cries, the pleas that echo around the place.

"W-what was that?" I whisper.

Merethe laughs. "Witches built this island, and vampires took it, keeping every little spell they ever did. Welcome to your new life, Riona Dark. I have a feeling you won't be leaving any time soon."

CHAPTER
FIVE



All night, there are screams. Screams of people who want to escape, screams of people in pain, and so many different types it's impossible to do anything but listen. The screams are worse than the cries and pleas for help, for death, for anything or anyone to save them. My cage is a damp brick room with holes in many places, rat droppings in every corner, and one large arched metal gate with thick iron bars. The ceiling is pure stone but littered with tiny holes, and in the middle, there is a dim lightbulb on its own, every so often flickering. Even if I could somehow reach up, I doubt the broken glass of a lightbulb would help me much as a weapon. There are four other women in here with me, and we each sit in our own space, no one saying a word.

Because what is there to say? We all know we are screwed.

I do notice all the women must be under twenty-five, and they are all wearing brown clothes like I am, but theirs don't seem to be as nice as mine. Basically, I somewhat stand out compared to them, and I don't like that. Morning light flickers in even as my eyes threaten to close, but my body is awake, too wired up to rest. Three of the other girls here are fast asleep, two blondes and a black-haired woman. The only other person awake sits still, her gaze empty as she stares at nothing.

"Hi," I say, as lame as it is. The girl doesn't move or react, it's almost like I'm talking to a ghost. I try again. "Hello?"

“Don’t bother, she has been here longer than any of us, and she doesn’t talk. They cut out her tongue and used their blood to stop her bleeding,” one of the blondes speaks up. I turn to look at her, her tanned skin and accent making me think she is from California, or near enough. There was a family that moved to my town when I was seven, and they were from California, moved for work. “What’s your name, and where you from?”

“Riona Dark, and I’m from Aberdeen, well, a village nearby it. I was taken from my university,” I loosely explain. Talking about the beach, the fact my brother and friends might be here and hurt, is too raw. I clear my throat. “What about you?”

“Lucy Denlake,” she replies cheerily, but I suspect that is just her nature coming through. “And I lived in a beach house in California. Damn, they took us from thousands of miles apart. Look, these girls don’t speak, or they are shit scared, but you seem like me. You’ve accepted your bad luck, and I think that might mean we are more likely to survive. Can you promise me something, and I will do the same for you if you want?”

“Why not?” I answer. I know I shouldn’t be making promises to strangers, but what could the harm be?

“If you escape this place, hopefully killing a few vamps on the way out, will you tell my boyfriend that I love him and have since third grade? His name is Rowan, and he will be looking for me in California. It shouldn’t be too hard to find him on Facebook or something,” she replies, breathing out a long exhale of cold air. “Do you have someone you want me to tell something to if I get out?”

I stare at her for a moment, seeing the desperation in her eyes.

“My brother is here somewhere, I’m sure of it...but my parents—” I gulp. “You could tell them I love them, and tell my uncle I wish I had listened to his letter,” I whisper, looking away at the floor. “I promise to pass on your message if I can.”

“Same,” she softly replies, and I look up, meeting her eyes. We both smile a little. “And if Rowan doesn’t believe you, tell him that tattoo on my butt is our secret. He will then.”

I chuckle a little. “What’s the tattoo of?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “You’ll never know.”

I laugh with her, and then I hear footsteps nearby, close enough to be heard over the distant screams and cries. Two pairs of them, and never before have I feared the sound of someone walking towards me as much as I do right now. I stand up, as does Lucy. The other girls all cower together in the corner, and Lucy moves to stand in front of them. I place my hand on the dagger under my dress, knowing it has to be the right time to use and not a second too soon. If one of these assholes tries to bite me, I can at least stab them and see if they bleed.

“Here is that one Merethe talked about,” an Irish-sounding man states and chuckles after he speaks. “Though Merethe might be going senile. I doubt she is as great as she made out, sir. Maybe she is losing her touch.”

There is silence for a reply for a long while. Tension fills the cell, even when they aren’t inside it. When he speaks, his voice seems to suck the light from the room, and his dark, deep and cold voice takes over it. “Open the door and leave.”

I shiver from the sheer coldness and power in that voice that unsettles me right down to my core. A man in an old suit, with a pocket watch hanging out of his pocket, steps in front of the metal cage to the door, pulling out keys from his brown trouser pockets. He has grey hair that matches his bushy grey beard, but there is no doubt he isn’t human. He quickly opens the metal cage door and steps back, though his eyes fall on me for a moment.

My heart pounds as a man walks into the room and stops. I know for certain he is the one who spoke, he is the one that I should fear.

He is six foot easily, towering over me, and he is gorgeous in a way that can only be described as inhuman.

Immortal.

And so very not human. Sharp black eyebrows rest above his dark eyes. He has thick brown, almost black hair that falls around his face and stops at his shoulders. Several strands have been braided with red crystals, and silver

rings clipped into the braids catch the sunlight. His jawline could make any god weep in its perfection, and his narrow lips seem soft almost, even with a light scruff of a beard gracing his jawline. His cheekbones are high and look strong enough to cut glass, and everything about him seems...cold. Empty. Lost.

Then his dark eyes lock onto mine, and I suck in a deep mouthful of air. Dark is a small word to describe his eyes, which are half black and half a deep red, the colour of blood. The black and red mixes together effortlessly, and it's memorizing to stare at.

"Come to me," he commands, and it's a command mixed with magic, to say the least. Whatever the magic is, it pushes into me like a storm against a shore, and it hurts. God, it hurts to stop it taking over me. I grit my teeth through the pain, refusing to cower, refusing to back down. The seconds tick on and on until he stops and walks right up to me, grabbing my chin. His nails are sharp and completely black, curved into points that dig into my skin.

"Will you scream if I sink my teeth into your pretty neck and drain all of that courage right out of you?" he almost purrs. "Will you scream my name and beg me to stop?"

"Considering I don't know your name, it's unlikely. Unless you like being called Bastard, in which case, I can definitely call you that," I growl right back at him, even as his grip borders on painful.

He could hurt me if he wanted. He could break me.

The vampire's eyes widen with what I think is amusement and shock. "I will buy you and keep you as mine. Mine to bite, mine to fuck, and mine in fucking general. Get used to the idea."

"I'd rather die," I bite back.

His eyes narrow, and he digs his nails into my skin, enough to make several cuts. He drops me quickly, and my back scratches across the wall as I fall, managing to stop myself tumbling onto my ass. Damn. Effing. Vampires. My blood coats his nails as he slowly licks each one, his eyes closed shut, but I think he likes what he tastes.

One of the girls behind Lucy makes a small noise, and the vampire swiftly turns towards them, noticing they are there for the first time. He moves quicker than I can track, and then he has Lucy in his arms, and she screams as he bites into her neck. I don't know how long I stare, paralyzed on the spot in fear as he drains her, but her screams slowly fade, and eventually her body goes limp before he lets her drop to the floor.

“Riona Dark, I will enjoy your company and your blood, I'm sure,” the vampire tells me, walking to the cage door like nothing happened and he didn't just kill someone. He is fucking insane. “My name is Prince Maddox Borealis of the Vampires, and everyone calls me the Mad Prince.”

I stay silent as he leaves, never looking back once, and the second the gate shuts, I fall to my knees and throw up everything in my system, which isn't much more than stale bread and water. After I stop heaving, I break into sobs, which I stop escaping my lips by holding my hand over my mouth. Tears fall down my cheeks endlessly as I resist the urge to scream and scream. Crawling over the stone floor, I pick up Lucy's head off the ground and brush some of the hair from her eyes, her vacant eyes that stare up at nothing above me.

My mum's words come to haunt me as I close Lucy's eyes and say a silent prayer. “When everyone dies, they look at peace. So there is no need to fear what comes after death, because I have seen it is a better place than life. You may rest and god will watch over you. You're with the angels now.”

Of course, she doesn't reply, and it doesn't make me feel better, but I hope she heard me somewhere. I close her eyes shut, giving her the peace she deserves, before resting my forehead against hers.

“I hope you're at peace, Lucy Denlake, and I will keep my promise,” I whisper to her. The three other girls never move from the wall, and one starts screaming not long after, the screams mixing with those in the distance.

Hope is an easy thing to squash, apparently. All you need is death.

CHAPTER
SIX



I don't know how long it is until the Irish man comes back to our cell with a bed on wheels and a plastic body bag resting on top of it. He unlocks the cage and comes in, pulling the bed with him as his keys clatter on his belt where he clips them. I am half tempted to try to steal the keys, but I figure the vampires would hear me a mile away, and where would I go? No, I need to make a better plan. Those ships have to leave at some time, for something more than humans.

"Shame," the Irish vampire mutters to himself as he leans down and picks up Lucy's body with more care than I expected of him. "Too young."

"Then why do you do this?" I question. The Irish man looks at me as he places Lucy down on the bed, like he just noticed I am here. "Does life mean nothing to any of you?"

"We all have our debts to pay, little one," he replies and pulls out a breakfast bar from his pocket. "The stealers always get me these when they collect humans. Want one?"

The stealers, that's what the vamps who kidnapped me are called. Good to know.

My aching stomach screams yes, even as I shake my head and grit my teeth. The Irish man sighs and comes over to me, placing the bar in front of my feet.

“The name’s Eachann,” he introduces himself even though I didn’t ask. “And I won’t hurt you. I simply look after the auction house prizes and work with the stealers.”

“So this is an auction house? We are going to be sold off?” I question. He pauses before nodding his head.

“Don’t suppose telling you is going to do much harm,” he sighs. “The rich and powerful will come and buy whoever they want. Anyone still here after four weeks is sent to the warehouses or bloodhouses on the island,” he explains, and my gaze drifts to the silent girl no one has bought. I gulp. “You’ve attracted more attention than most, little one, so you shouldn’t worry.”

“How is this place hidden from humans?” I question him. I might as well dig up as much information as I can from this vamp. Eachann straightens up and goes back to the bed.

“That’s a long story,” he starts and scratches his head. “But seeing as you are popular and likely to be sticking around, I will tell you it. See, long ago, before humans even walked this earth, there were vampires, witches and sirens. Always at war, the witches made several islands like this one, and on them, they cloaked the island with powerful magic. The magic was held in objects, and one family was given the responsibility of protecting the magic for their lives. Each island has its own magical objects, and each race lives on them.”

“Are vampires immortal then?” I question. “And what are the magical objects?”

And importantly, can I steal them and use them to bribe my way off this island?

“To a human, it would seem so, but no. Vampires can live for two thousand years before needing to sleep for a thousand and be reborn for another two. And so on,” he replies. “Therefore, immortality can be achieved quite easily. As for your other part, they are orbs of magic.”

So, not immortal, and clearly the sun doesn’t bother them. What could the weakness be?

“And witches? They are real then?” I question. “And sirens?”

“Extremely so and very powerful. There are ten witch covens and most live on their own island. As for the sirens, there is one clan, and they are secretive,” he tells me before doing the zip up on Lucy’s bag, shutting her away. “But I think that’s enough of story time for today.”

“Wait.” I make him stop as he goes to push Lucy out. “What will you do with her body?”

His eyes are soft, making him almost seem human, and it’s strange. “We bury the dead in the sea as we have much dead around. I will be gentle with her and wish her our god’s protection.”

“How can you believe in any god when you are all blood-sucking monsters who kill so easily and without guilt?” I demand.

His eyes find mine. “Not all of us feel no guilt, nor do we take life. Can you say humans are without faults?”

“Kidnapping and murder is illegal for humans. Is it here?” I question as he wheels Lucy out of the cage door.

“No, because humans are not at the top of the food chain on this island,” he warns me and shuts the door, locking it as he meets my eyes once more. “The auction is tomorrow. Good luck, little one.”

“Wait!” I call out, rushing to my feet and running to the gate as he pulls the key out.

“Why does everyone scream if you can simply use compulsion to calm them? Make them think they are okay?” I ask. The question has been bothering me.

He meets my eyes. “The only ones powerful enough to use that amount of magic on so many are the royals, and they would not waste their time on calming food. After all, you hardly sing to a chicken before you chop its head off, do you?”

I fall to my knees when he leaves, sucking in the cold air around me, like it can make any difference to how I’m feeling.

I'm going to be sold tomorrow and likely to that mad as fuck prince. I highly doubt I will live long under his care; he doesn't seem to think of us humans as more than a snack. The image of that beautiful and undead prince with blood trickling down his chin will haunt me for a long time, and I doubt that's the last person I will see him kill.

The screaming starts again in the distance, and I clap my hands over my heads, begging for it to stop, begging to get the hell off this island before it becomes impossible to leave any other way than Lucy did.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



“Another visitor for her? Well, just in time, as the bidding will start soon,” Eachann’s voice drifts to me, and I straighten up, realising I must have fallen asleep at some point. My body aches, and my ass is numb as I climb to my feet. I hear another man reply, but I can’t make out what he said, only that his voice is deep and his accent reminds me of the prince. “I see. Well, she is quite lovely.”

Both Eachann and the other man come into view at the same time, and I immediately hear my heart pick up speed. The man is the mirror image of Prince Maddox in his face, but everything else is so different. His eyes are redder, like rubies held under a light, and his black hair is much shorter, locks falling into his eyes a little bit until he wipes them away. I’m pretty sure he is the same height, if not a little taller than Prince Maddox, and he is far bulkier. His thick arms and chest fill out the grey sweater he has on, and his dusty jeans are tucked into heavy black boots. A blue cloak is tied around his shoulders, falling down onto the ground around him. The mixture of old and new fashion is a strange mix that somehow works for him.

I hold my head high as he walks into the cage, while the other girls run to the back, some of them screaming so loud that it hurts my ears once more. The endless screams and damp room are becoming normal in the hours that trickle by. Thankfully, I feel numb from the shock of everything that has happened. Numb to my very core. The man’s glowing red eyes leisurely trail over me, before he finally meets my own gaze. I keep very still as I hold eye contact, refusing to give him what he wants. Fear. The other prince

killed someone to see it in my eyes, and I don't know what this man will do, but I won't give him what he wants.

I refuse to do so.

“You don't run from me. I have to admit it is a surprise from a *human*,” the man purrs. His voice is almost as seductive as his appearance, but the word *human* sounds like an insult. Like my kind is nothing.

“That is what you are used to and what you want me to do. You want me to fear you as the monster you pretend you are, but I will not give you my fear,” I protest, clamping my shaky hands on my elbows as I cross my arms. The man—or quite possibly creature—chuckles, walking until he is right in front of me and I have to breathe in his musky sweet scent. His long tail flies up around his side from his back, and the sharp tip slides under my chin, lifting my head a little. Wait, tail? My body shakes a little as I take in the tail, which is black and spiked at the end, matching his black nails and hair.

Vampires don't have tails in the movies, that's for sure.

“Your heart pounds in your chest, and your body lightly shakes. I am not sure if it is fear or desire making you react so...but I do look forward to finding out,” his silky-sounding voice replies.

“I would rather die than let you find out anything about me,” I spit out. These creatures may have stolen me in the night, taken me to this goddamn island to sell like cattle, but I won't die giving them anything they want.

“Careful what you wish for, Riona Dark,” he murmurs, and at the same time, his tail quickly moves, cutting me just under my chin, and I flinch from the pain. I hold my hand to my chin to stop the bleed, glaring at him as he walks to the door, stopping just before it. The man licks the end of his tail, his red eyes flashing brighter as he tastes my blood and looks at me once more. “Delicious. I can't wait to buy you in the auctions. My name is Prince Reign Borealis of the Vampires, and you will be mine to buy.”

After yesterday...he might have to get in line.

“How many royals are there?” I question, making him pause at the door. Is he really going to walk away without trying to kill me? Or killing someone

here?

“Just my brother and me,” he drawls, turning around and leaning against the door frame. “I believe he has met you, Riona.”

“Your brother wants the world to believe he is mad, when he is lost, and you...” I pause, seeing how his body tenses. “You want to be seen as perfect and strong, but you do not have a violent heart like your brother. You’re like a ticking time bomb, and he is your fuse.”

“How can a human see so much in such a short amount of time?”

“It’s simple really,” I reply. “You are both easy to read. Who fucked you both up?”

“Magic and blood,” he smoothly answers. “Both are alluring and disastrous. Much like I suspect you are, Riona.”

“Why is your name Reign? Why are there two princes and not one king? Is there a king?” I question as he stares at me.

He doesn’t immediately answer, instead he steps out of the gate into the corridor of cages full of screaming and desperate people. “I was chosen to reign, and my brother was chosen to destroy.”

He walks away...but I know it isn’t the last I’ve seen of Reign, and I hope he wins, because I think there is a chance I could escape his grasp.

His brother? That’s a whole other topic. I don’t think anyone could escape the Mad Prince.

CHAPTER
EIGHT



I know the second the auction begins because of the cheers and shouts that outweigh the screams that have haunted me for hours, merging into a noise that I can't block out. Eachann opens the cage door and waves me forward and none of the other girls who cower in the corners of the cage. I should feel a little bit relieved to be leaving the cage, but what is ahead of me seems much worse.

I'm about to be sold to a vampire. Of all things I had planned for my future, being a vampire's snack was not one of them. Trying to find humour in the darkness doesn't work, not when every step I take feels like I'm walking into a nightmare.

I follow behind Eachann, who never looks back or seems to worry at all about me running away, which would make sense with how fast and strong these vampires seem to be. I make the harrowing mistake of looking into some of the cages we pass, seeing the desperate eyes of so many. Hearing their screams is one thing, seeing their faces is another. And I want to save them, to break them free...but saving myself is impossible enough right now.

We turn around a few corridors, the sound of crowds cheering getting louder until we come to a large red wooden door with silver spikes around the edges. Eachann pushes the door open and holds it for me, waving for me to walk out into the night. The sun set hours ago, leaving only the night sky full of stars and the moon as I step out onto a wooden platform. The stage is a square shape with hundreds, if not a thousand, vampires crowded

tightly in the space around it on a plain field. We are in a rocky, circular area with large gates letting more vampires in and out. So many of them, so many faces to look at. They cheer and call out names I mostly don't recognise, but I'm sure I hear the princes' names every so often. Red drops of snow fall across the sky, mixing with bits of white until they fall into the crowd. It smells like blood out here, that metallic tang I never thought I'd be getting used to smelling. My feet feel weighted down with each step across the wooden platform until a hand rests on my shoulder, and I nearly jump out of my skin. I didn't even hear anyone step close to me.

"The humans are delicious this time, don't you think, everyone?" Merethe shouts, and the vampires, as bloodthirsty and insane as they are, cheer back with delight. I feel so many of their eyes on me, like their gaze is ripping me apart. I pull my shoulder from her hand, and she smiles at me, her eyes crinkling in annoyance. "Do sit down, and don't be an ungrateful bitch. I helped you stand out so you won't become some whore. You will be sold last, and I want them to stare at you for a long time, so do smile."

"Why does it matter? Won't they just bite and kill me? Why would I thank you for that?" I counter.

"Watching you will make them desperate," she replies, mostly ignoring my questions, and pushes my shoulder down until I fall to my knees. She turns away from me. "This one is not only beautiful, but a virgin! Virgin blood is so tasty after all."

My cheeks burn red as Merethe walks away, and Eachann brings another girl out from the door. This girl must be about the same age as me with dark brown hair cut into a bob, a white tatty dress and worn-out black shoes. Her eyes meet mine, and I gulp from the sheer terror in them. Then I witness how a human is sold on this island.

Merethe grabs the girl, and with a knife in her other hand, she makes a small cut across the girl's wrist. The crowd goes silent as the girl's blood drips onto the wooden platform.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"One hundred dollars!" a man shouts out. Another shouts to outbid him, and it goes on for a while until they get to five hundred dollars and Merethe

announces the winner. Five hundred for a human life. The vampires here really do think we are nothing more than food. Assholes.

The vampire man, a fat man with a big belly and a giant, bald, round head jumps onto the stage and grabs the girl. She screams and fights him as he hands Merethe the money from his pocket. “Don’t kill this one right away, won’t you? Or you’ll always be back here paying me. Make sure you mark her when you’re home.”

“Of course,” the man replies with a grin that makes me feel sick. He nods once before he moves in that vampire way, and they both disappear. The next person is a guy, and the next another girl. The auction goes on and on, and each of them screams as they are bought. The endless horror never stops, and I try to switch off, to pretend I am anywhere other than right here.

Anywhere.

“Ria?” a familiar voice whispers, and I shoot my head up, staring as the next guy is dragged onto the stage. Arlo.

“No!” I harshly whisper, seeing the many bites covering his bare chest and the dried blood marking his skin. His cool green eyes find mine as he fights Eachann’s hold on him. I rush to my feet and try to run to him, but two vampires appear at my sides and grab my arms. Merethe pauses, looking between us.

“It seems our virgin blood has a friend she wants to save, how sweet,” she calls out, but I ignore her and the cheering crowd, looking at Arlo.

“I will get you out of here, Ria! I promise you that!” he shouts at me, struggling to escape with every moment. My heart pounds in my chest as I cry out and struggle to get to him.

“Please let him go! Please!” I scream at Merethe. “Please!”

She coldly looks down at me as I’m forced to my knees once more, held in place this time. “Love has no place in The Onyx.”

“NO!” I yell as she grabs Arlo’s hair, arching his head up, and rather than cutting his wrist, she bites into his neck. Arlo grunts, but he doesn’t show

how much pain he is in other than how his hands tighten into fists. I struggle and scream until my arms feel numb from how tight the vampires hold me, but I don't give in. *I won't.*

"Delicious, and a stunning example of a human," Merethe claims, licking her lips free of Arlo's blood. Arlo slumps down in Eachann's grip, and I can only stare at his back, tears falling down my cheeks. "Bids start at a thousand dollars for this one."

To my horror, the bids never seem to stop, more and more of them shouting out. I ignore them all, focusing on Arlo. "Arlo! Wake up!"

He doesn't move, and I start to sob a little, realising that I can't help him and we are both most likely going to die here.

Austin and my parents will never know what happened to us, that is if Austin isn't here.

The crowd goes silent, and I know a bid has been accepted, even before a man jumps onto the stage. The man has brown hair cut short, a big beard that is braided at the sides, and he has a flannel shirt on over jeans. He seems so normal... though he just bought a friend of mine.

"Another one for your daughter?" Merethe asks, and he inclines his head. "Another toy for her to break? Do tell her that addiction to human men is going to get her in trouble." I scream at them, gritting my teeth as the man nods and briefly looks my way.

"Perhaps I will stay and try my luck for my own treat?"

Knowing he means me, I sneer at him, and he only laughs.

"Mark him and do stay. She is coming up next as she so clearly can't behave."

"Fuck the lot of you!" I shout, and I start screaming again as the man picks up Arlo by his arm and drags him across the stage, leaving a line of blood. "Arlo! Arlo!"

The vampire holding me makes a mistake and lets my arm go, thinking the other man can easily hold me. I reach into my dress and pull out the knife,

and before I can overthink it, I slam the knife into the vampire who is holding my stomach, and pull it back out with a lot of effort. He roars and lets go, and I run to Arlo as fast as I can. Merethe catches me just as I get near, and I kick out, hitting her knee, and I spin around, my knife burying itself in her shoulder before I pull it out. Hot blood splatters across my cheek as the vampire who caught me grabs my arm holding the knife, and he snaps my arm like a twig.

I gasp before I scream, the pain immediate and so strong that I can do nothing but collapse to my knees next to Arlo, holding my no doubt broken arm. Everything goes foggy from the pain as I collapse on my side, seeing Arlo lying right opposite me.

His eyes open and widen, just before his “owner” drags him away from me.

“How did she get that knife?” the vampire demands as I watch Arlo being taken away, having no strength to get back up. To chase after them. I just watch him go.

“She is a little thief, that’s how,” Merethe snaps and picks me up by my hair, dragging me to the front of the stage. She shoves me down, jostling my arm, and I cry out. Before I can recover from that, she turns my head to the side, and with the knife I stabbed her with, she makes a long cut down my neck as I scream. My blood feels hot as it drips down my neck and down my chest, the sharp pain making everything blurry.

“As you can see, she is a wild one, and her blood is that of gods themselves, I am sure,” she shouts out, and the crowd cheers. “Who wants a bite?”

“One hundred thousand dollars!” a man shouts out.

“Four hundred thousand!” another one replies. As I feel close to passing out, they keep bidding, and I stare across the crowd, wondering if anyone decent is going to stop this. If there is even a god in this world anymore and if anything is fair.

“Ten million,” a man’s voice shouts out, and the crowd goes silent. I recognise the voice even before I look down to see Reign standing beneath me, right at the front of the crowd. They all stare, whispering to themselves.

“My, my,” Merethe replies, her voice full of joy. I would be if I just made that kind of money. Not by selling humans though. “You’ve never played in our auctions before, and now you come with such a high bid!”

“I will double my brother’s offer,” the man I didn’t want to hear talk states as he steps out of the crowd. Maddox, the Mad Prince, stops a good distance away from his brother. Looking like a dark angel in the crowd, he wears all black like he is attending a funeral. But the smile on his lips says something else entirely. He meets my eyes, and he smiles wider, like seeing me in pain and covered in blood is pleasing to him. The crowd drops into further silence, almost a fearful silence. The distance between the brothers is clear in many ways, more than just where they stand.

“I will triple his bid,” Reign counters, his eyes flickering with annoyance at his brother.

Maddox smirks at his brother.

“Money is no object,” Maddox replies with a wave of his hand. “Have what you wish, Merethe, but Riona Dark is leaving with me.”

“Like fuck she is,” Reign coolly replies, and they turn to each other. It’s very clear these brothers do not like each other, and everything feels tense and awkward.

And ever so perilous.

“Perhaps it should be the girl’s decision?” Merethe suggests, winding them both up so she can get more money. “Seeing as money is no issue.”

“The girl doesn’t know us, and it would be impossible for her to judge which monster she wishes to live with the least,” Maddox replies with a devilish grin. “Although, Riona, I’m the fun one.”

I gulp.

We most *certainly* have different ideas of fun.

“I have a counter offer,” Merethe hums, pulling on my hair a little tighter when my head starts to drop and I didn’t notice it. My blood is soaking my dress now, and I’m smart enough to know dying from blood loss could be

an issue soon. “She should spend alternating weeks with one of you at a time, and in six months, she can make a choice. It would be a fun competition and make this fair.”

“I do like a competition,” Maddox smoothly replies, sounding like he has won before he has started.

Reign looks me dead in the eye. “I agree to these terms, and my brother can go first. Once she sees the horrors of his home, I have no doubt my house will be a relief.”

With that, Reign disappears using his vampire speed.

“Brilliant!” Merethe says while Maddox looks pleased as he looks up at me. “She will be marked by both, and one can be removed if needed.”

“Understood,” Maddox replies and jumps onto the stage. Just before I pass out, I see and feel Maddox catch me.

In the arms of a monster, I am owned, but I will escape.

CHAPTER
NINE



Slowly I come around; harsh light beams flickering across my eyes every so often does just that. I dreamt I was taken by vampires and sold at an auction...wait. As I open my eyes, I know it wasn't a dream at all. I shut them straight away, wishing I could go back to sleep and pretend everything didn't happen. My arm throbs, not nearly as bad as before, and my neck is sore as I look up at a glass ceiling above me, the sun high in the cloudless sky with the red mountain in the distance, covered in red snow. I think that is where we are heading by the looks of it. We are in something that is moving as I slightly rock every now and then, but not in the way a boat would. Gradually I become aware of the sounds of horseshoes against stone and wheels creaking every so often in a strange rhythm. Wherever I am smells of blood and something almost sweet, and for a moment, I want to pretend I don't have to acknowledge where I am.

Then *he* talks.

"I was concerned for your well-being," Maddox states in his deep and seductive voice, almost like the very thought of being concerned about someone is insane to him. "It would be a shame if you died and the chance to beat my brother at something was lost."

Ah, he cares about the competition, not my life.

There's my sadistic vampire owner.

I sit up, grumbling at the movement of my sore arm, to see we are in a carriage of some kind with black leather walls and an outline of a door on

the left side. Above me is a glass roof that floods the small space with bright light, and opposite me is Maddox, sitting with his legs stretched apart, his arms up, and the back of his head resting in his hands. His eyes swirl with power, the mix of red and black reminding me constantly that I'm trapped with a monster and not a man.

A "man" could never be used to describe what he is, the word is too weak. Everything about Maddox, the Mad Prince, is power.

I rub my arm, noticing that it's hardly swollen anymore, and it was just broken. When I touch my neck, the cut is nothing more than a scab. "How am I...okay?"

Maddox yawns. "Vampire blood heals humans, and I fed you some. If you drink enough of it and have your heart turned cold, you will become a d'vampire. I like that idea."

He healed me? I drank blood. Sickness fills my throat at both of those ideas. "Don't do that again."

Maddox turns his head to the side, and quicker than humanly possible, he is leaning over me on my seat, his face buried in my hair. I freeze. "I will do as I please. You belong to me now. Your blood, your body, your soul and, most importantly, your death. I command you."

Turning my head to meet his gaze as he leans back, I watch him carefully. "I belong to no one, and you may forcibly take my blood and body, but you will never, ever have my consent, my willingness to be yours."

"Is that a bet, Riona?" he softly asks, his eyes sparkling with a challenge. Not many people call me by my full name, mostly because they call me Ria. But when Maddox says my name, it's like he owns it. "I think it is."

"It's a promise, *Prince* Maddox."

He laughs and leans back, and I finally feel like I can breathe now he isn't so close. I still don't relax, because like it or not, I'm on an island of vampires who clearly have no respect for human life. Or morals, while I'm thinking about it.

"Where are we heading?" I question after a brief pause of silence.

“To my castle at the top of the mountains. The royal castle of The Onyx,” he answers me, still sounding bored, and it gets on my nerves. “It is mine, and my brother did live there until he decided to move out.”

He yawns again.

“Am I boring you?”

“Mildly.” He waves a hand at me. “I’m waiting until you get to the bit where you beg for your lover boy to be found and brought to you. Or will you beg for someone else? Women can be so fickle with their love.”

“His name is Arlo, and I know better than to ask you for anything, Mad Prince,” I counter, crossing my arms to stop him seeing how much he is affecting me, even as I shake with anger. All I want to do is attack him, hit him hard and see if he bleeds. If the devil can bleed at all. “I will ask Reign to help me.”

“My brother is a fool for blondes,” Maddox responds. “I’m sure he will help you, or he will kill the competition. It’s hard to tell. I may be mad, but he is nothing if not fickle.”

Turning my head away from him, I bite on my lip to stop myself saying anything that will get me killed. The carriage turns silent, and I’m thankful for it, a moment to collect my thoughts and plan my next action. Realistically, I know that Maddox’s castle, being at the top of a mountain of blood-red snow, isn’t the best place to try to escape. He must have other humans working for him, or at least there for food, so I could try to find out as much as I can about how to actually hurt a vampire. From there, I think the best plan is to reason with Reign, he seems the more logical one of the two princes.

I have a feeling Maddox is just going to use me as a pawn in whatever game he is playing with his brother, and I want nothing to do with him. He is *the* devil. I’m sure of it. The carriage eventually comes to a stop, and Maddox opens the door, jumping out. I stand up, feeling a little wobbly (likely from blood loss), and walk to the edge of the carriage. Before I can climb out, Maddox is in front of me and grabs my waist, picking me up and lowering me onto the red snow-covered stone path. His hands stay on my waist for a second, both of us extremely close, and I stay very still, unsure

what he is thinking. His hands feel like they burn into my skin, and he is so warm to touch, much more than a human is.

We stare at each other for a long time, and I wonder if he knows I'm planning to find a way to kill him for good and escape.

I wonder what he sees with those demon eyes of his.

He lets me go, looking at me like I just burned him as his eyes scorch with what I think is annoyance. He spins around, his black cloak brushing against the snow.

“Make sure she rests today and joins the staff tomorrow. Nothing extreme!” Maddox barks out, walking away down the path to the giant building in front of me. Holy shit, this is a castle and a half. Looking like something straight out of a Disney movie, nine strong and solid square towers pierce the clouds in the sky. They are connected by reinforced, heavy walls made of gold stone and brown-framed windows. Around the castle is a wall pressed into the mountain, and between that and the castle are thick gardens and a maze on the one side. A massive gate is right in the centre of the castle, and it is circle-shaped with birds flying around the edges, hundreds of them until I can just make out wings. In the middle is a sword with wings behind it, and I know I've seen this before. It's one of the marks on Merethe's cheeks.

It must be a royal crest of some sort.

“Are you ready to go inside, madam?”

I turn and meet the gaze of the guy who spoke...a human just like me. I don't know why I was expecting a vampire, but I was.

“When is anyone ready to walk into the home of the devil himself?”

The guy doesn't answer me, instead choosing to stumble ahead, and I have no choice but to follow.

For now.

CHAPTER
TEN



The human I'm left with stops the second we get through the door into what is the biggest entrance hall I've ever seen. Talk about over the top. Literal gold pillars line the walls, and in the middle of them are paintings of, well, vamps of course. Vampires biting people or fucking people. There are a whole lot of painted cocks in this room. I turn my gaze away and look up at the plain white ceiling with a massive glass chandelier in the centre. Rather than white crystals, this one has dozens of red crystals that are shaped like drops of blood, reflected in the shiny hardwood floors. There isn't a bit of dust to be seen, so someone cleans this place up well.

Footsteps draw my attention as a man rushes down one of the two gold staircases, brushing a hand through his dusty red hair. He is a giant, well, at least in terms of his size. The human, which I'm assuming he is, has wavy but almost spiked-up red hair, and his hazel eyes almost seem to be the same colour as his hair from this distance, but as his huge steps eat up the space between us, I realise they are definitely more hazel. Like pools of honey. A light stubble of ginger hair graces his firm jawline.

He is model material. Maybe Irish or Scottish model material as he has that certain look about him. His long and thick thighs are held in old, worn jeans, and he wears a simple dark blue shirt over his wide chest. With Skechers trainers and an old watch on his wrist, he looks like a normal human.

In a place of monsters, lest I forget.

The guy stops in front of us, his eyes swiftly moving over me before turning to my companion. “What did he say about this one, Paul?”

“Only that she rests today and light housekeeping tomorrow,” Paul, apparently, replies. “I-I must tend the horses before they get cold.”

“Go,” the guy tells him, almost softly. Paul all but runs his skinny arse out of the room, the door shutting behind him.

“I’m Cross McGowan, twenty-four years old, and I can tell you’re scared —”

I cut him off. “I’m not scared any more than you are. I’m not going to pass out or be a silly girl about this place, that’s not who I am. Now, Cross, I want to know everything about vampires.”

Cross raises his eyebrows. “It might be good if I know your name, lass.”

“Riona Dark, and I’m twenty-two,” I say and offer him my hand. “I was studying at Aberdeen University, and I might not have a Scottish accent, thanks to my very British parents, but I think we come from similar places.”

“My family are nearer Inverness,” he replies, taking my hand. His feels warm, comforting almost after such a long few days. “And I did not mean to offend you. But usually, everyone is scared.”

“Fearing them is feeding them,” I answer, moving my hand from his. “And I don’t intend to help them feed.”

Cross watches me closely for a long second, and I can’t guess at what he sees. “Follow me then, Riona Dark. Come and see the house of horrors.”

I cross my arms as he walks off, purposely keeping his pace slow for me as we get to the stairs and walk to the top. The space up here tiers off in four directions, dozens of rooms in each one, and at the end of two of them, I can see further stairs. “Right, to our left is the way to the kitchens and washing. You need something cleaned or cooked, you go down there.”

“What is the point of a kitchen for a vampire?”

“They eat the same as we do and drink wine, with no hangover. I wish I could do that fecking shit with whiskey,” he comments, making me smile,

and points at the next corridor. “This one is for guests, and I wouldn’t recommend heading down it. The middle corridor is full of useless rooms; we don’t use them much, and the final one is our living quarters. The humans the prince owns, that is. There aren’t many of us.”

“How many?” I question.

“Ten in total, ever changing. Five of us are constant and rarely leave, so you should know them. You’ve met two of us, and the girls, I will introduce you to when I can,” he cryptically replies. “There is one vampire he lets live here as well. I’m sure you will meet him.”

“Where does the prince sleep then?” I ask, wanting to be as far away from that room as possible.

“Downstairs, there is a ballroom, many living quarters, and he uses them all. Don’t venture in there unless you are invited, lass,” he carefully warns me. “Out of sight, out of mind works well with the Mad Prince.”

“I have a feeling that won’t work for me and him,” I tightly reply. But I am sure as hell going to try hiding. This castle is huge, and I bet he wouldn’t find me right away.

Cross doesn’t reply to me, instead nodding his head to the side and walking away. I follow after him down the corridor to the far right, and when we get near the end, Cross pulls out a load of keys from a keychain and takes one off. He slides it in the door, and it clicks as it unlocks.

“The bed isn’t made up, and the shared bathroom is next door to this room, but I can do that—”

“I can make a bed,” I reply, and he hands me the key. “Thank you for the brief tour.”

Cross steps back, and he lifts his arm, rubbing the back of his neck. His hazel eyes stay on me. “Do you have a family to get back to, Riona?”

“Parents and a brother...if he isn’t on this island, that is,” I reply, a tightness building in my throat. I very well know a vampire might have my brother now and may have killed him for supper. Arlo could be dead too...and the

thought of either of them gone is devastating. Cross must see the pain in my eyes as he steps closer and places his large hand on my shoulder.

“I don’t know if I believe in any god anymore, not since I was taken and brought here, but there is magic. That’s real, and if it is, then possibly there is good magic to counter the bad here. There is hope...,” he drifts off and clears his throat. “Hope is a good thing to hold onto. It’s what we all do to survive this.”

“I don’t want to simply survive this,” I say, stepping away, and his hand drops. “I want to beat them. I will ask you everything I want to know tomorrow about vampires as I did notice you avoided my question.”

“You can’t kill them easily,” he warns. “Unless you happen to have enough strength to cut their heads off or have a certain weapon that is very rare. Trust me, even if you did manage to kill one, dozens would kill you in unimaginable ways right back. Vampires are loyal to each other, and they worship the royal line.”

“I won’t give up,” I counter, holding my head high.

Cross chuckles and steps away, looking over his shoulder. “No, I don’t think you will.”

I watch him walk away before going into my new room and shutting the door, locking it for good measure even though I’m aware a vampire could break the door in seconds to get in here. Sunlight beams through the window in the small room, which has a double bed, a dark wood cabinet with a glass lamp on top of it, and a wooden wardrobe with silver handles. The window has no curtains, and nothing about this room is personal, which I almost like. I can pretend no one lived in it before and died, because I know someone must have. I slide my boots off, noticing how my arm is fully healed. Even my feet have no more cuts on them. Vampire blood heals quickly, and I’m slightly thankful for it, even while being disgusted that the Mad Prince’s blood is in my system. I lie down on the bed, and even though I don’t feel safe, and never will on this island, my exhausted body gives into sleep quickly.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



“She’s pretty enough, but I still don’t get the uproar over her.” Waking, I blink at the female voice and sit up, staring at two women standing at the foot of my bed. They stare down at me, and one of them tilts her head to the side, her long black hair falling like a wave around her darkly tanned skin.

“There must be something in her blood, something that makes her tasty,” the woman replies with a wistful sigh. “At least he will be distracted with her for a little while.”

The other woman, who is younger and I would figure near enough my age, blinks once. She has freckles all over her pale skin, and blonde hair so light it looks like snow. Both of these women are absolutely beautiful, and there is no doubt they are human. Their dresses? Well, they are old and strange, much like the one I am wearing. Cross and that other prince seem to be the only ones in the twenty-first century. “Maybe he will kill her and we don’t have to explain everything once again. It gets boring after a while.”

“Who the hell are you two?” I demand, having enough of their debate over me.

The blonde laughs, and it’s a sweet sound. Sweet but filled with a vindictive bitterness I don’t like. “I’m Marcella,” she introduces herself and lifts her hand, looking at her nails. “Cross sent us in here to wake you up and hand you some clothes. He will meet you in the kitchen, don’t be late.”

With that, they turn around and walk to the door, not looking back once.

“How am I meant to be on time when there is no clock?” I shout, but the only reply I get is the door slamming shut. I climb out of bed and pause, lifting my arm and feeling how it doesn’t even ache anymore. After touching my neck and finding nothing but smooth skin, I try not to freak out. I mean, I’ve read about vampires in books, but they aren’t nearly as dark and deadly as they are in real life. And I can’t just shut the book on my life.

A mixture of my parents’, my brother’s, Arlo’s and Sophie’s faces come into my mind, and I wonder what they are each thinking right at this moment. Are my parents and Sophie looking for me and possibly my brother? They must be thinking the worst, I know I would be right about now.

Then there is Arlo, who has no one but his adoptive mother to look out for him, and she worked abroad so much Arlo was always alone. I doubt she would notice him missing for a long time, I didn’t ever think they were close. But my parents would notice. They have always loved Arlo like their second son, which makes their pain so much worse. A small part of me is in Denial Town, pretending there is zero chance Austin is on this island, and the rest of me, the part that isn’t stupid, knows he has to be here somewhere. One thing my parents taught us was to survive even when everything feels lost. I never thought much of their advice until now. Until everything is more lost than I ever thought imaginable.

Back to my plan. The only thing keeping me going. I climb out of bed and walk to the window, looking at the sun high in the sky and realising I must have slept all the way through the day and night and into the next day. No wonder I feel a million times better. Or at least my body does. My mind is another subject altogether.

There aren’t going to be enough therapists on earth to deal with me when I get back. When. Not if. I blow out a breath and walk to the door, pick up my boots and the pile of clothes at the end of my bed, and step out into the corridor. It’s empty, and the castle is silent, at least from what I can hear. Knowing the devil could be around any corner, I quickly open the door Cross said was the bathroom and head inside, thankful for the glass lamp lit on the counter and a tiny circle window for light in the dim room.

There is a modern enough bathtub, grey counters with mirrors above it and one toilet. The counters have three sinks, and piles of stuff line the wall, everything from deodorant sprays to perfumes to piles of hairbands. Hoping the girls don't care, I pull my hair up into a messy bun, and then I just stare. There is still dried blood on my neck, the dark colour a vivid splash against my pale skin. Blood drops speckle against my cheek and nose, and my dress is crusty, the blood dried to make it rough and horrible now.

But that's not what I stare at. It's my eyes and the sheer difference in them from the last time I looked in a mirror the night of my birthday. That night, that pink dress, seems a lifetime ago. With shaky hands, I wash in the sink before drying off with a towel I find on the counter. I hang the towel over the bath when I'm done and quickly get changed into my new dress, a duplicate of the first sari I had, but this one is red in colour, a deep thick red that reminds me of blood, and it fits the same way the other did but tighter around my chest and heavier below the waist. I tug my boots on, wishing I had socks, and straighten up.

I can do this.

The monster in this castle isn't going to break me. *I'm going to break him.*

Walking out the bathroom, I remember my steps to the main part of the upstairs and down the corridor Cross said the kitchen was in. As I get closer, I start to smell food and hear pots and pans clashing around, and male voices. The last door seems to be the one with the most noise behind it, and I knock before stepping through into a big kitchen. Cross is half sitting on a stool right in front of a massive, modern steel kitchen with at least three cookers that I spot right away. A large man, clearly a vampire, moves around the room in a chef's white coat with many, many stains littered upon it. He pauses in whatever he was doing, turning to me and meeting me with his big blue, almost kind-looking eyes. He has a bushy white moustache that curls at the edges and gives me a French vibe right away, even before he speaks with a thick French accent that makes him hard to understand.

“Ah, *oui*, she is beautiful indeed,” the man comments.

“That’s the second time I’ve heard that on this island, and I have to say, it’s rather sexist for my beauty to be the only thing you find to comment on,” I reply, placing my hands on my hips. “I have a brain if you aren’t aware.”

The vampire barks out a laugh, a laugh that goes on and on, and my cheeks burn red a little. Cross chuckles and pats the empty stool next to him.

“I do apologize. I am more impressed by your quick tongue than your beauty,” the man tells me as I slide into the seat. “I am Hector Passereau, at your service, madame.”

“I’m Riona Dark,” I reply with a small smile. “And you aren’t as scary as most of the vamps I’ve met so far.”

“Not everything is black and white, Miss Dark,” Hector states with his warm eyes watching me closely. “Now, what is your favourite food for breakfast? Or perhaps brunch, as it is quite late in the morning.”

“I like to sleep in every now and then,” I say, feeling the need to clarify. “And I will eat anything. I’m not fussy.”

“Anything it is, madame,” Hector proclaims, and he does a dramatic wave before heading to the fridges at the back of the room. Feeling Cross’s eyes on me, I turn to him just in time to see him look away. He picks up a cup of something warm, and I smell the coffee. Before I can say anything, I feel a change in the room. Cross goes tense, his eyes moving behind me, and I look back, finding the prince right behind me.

“You need to be marked.”

“Well, good morning to you too,” I say, clearing my throat and stepping off the stool, all the while keeping my eyes on the Mad Prince. “And honestly? Fuck off.”

He stills. I just told a bloodsucking monster to fuck off.

I’m so dead.

To my surprise, Maddox’s lips turn up into an intense smile, and it’s scary. No, not just scary, downright petrifying. He takes two steps, and before I

can move away, his hands move to my upper arms, holding me in place. He feels as strong as a rock as I try to move away.

“Get the mark ready, Cross,” Maddox instructs. He devotes his time to confining me, staring me down, and I don’t dare look at whatever the hell Cross is doing. “I spent a lot of time thinking about where to mark you.”

He moves quickly, titling my head to the side and leaving my neck exposed in his grip. He leans down, my heart pounding in my chest as I swallow the scream I want to let out, and he presses a soft kiss on my neck. His kiss feels like a promise, like a claim. “And I decided this would be the perfect place. Then every time I bite into your soft skin, I will see my mark.”

He lowers his voice, and my heart beats like it is trying to do its own dance. “And so will my brother or anyone who dares to touch you.”

“Mark me all you want, but you can’t own my soul. No one ever will, and I mean that,” I reply, even as my hands shake.

“I will have your body and blood willingly soon. I will wait,” he counters, breathing the words against my neck, his hot breath making me shiver. Cocky monster.

“My body isn’t my soul. Take what you want, but you won’t break me,” I all but growl back. His hand tightens in my hair, and his grin never leaves his lips as he straightens up.

“This is going to hurt.”

That’s all the warning the monster gives me before something burning hot slams into my neck from behind me. I can’t hold back the cry that leaves my lips, and even though whatever it was that burnt me is gone quickly, the pain never leaves. My legs feel wobbly as Maddox lets me go and dark spots fill my vision. I stumble back, seeing Cross walking away with a hot poker with a burning hot circular end. Maddox lifts his hand and bites into his wrist before stretching his blood-soaked wrist out to me.

“Drink to heal.”

“I want the pain,” I state, straightening my back, feeling drops of my blood dripping down my neck. “I don’t want your blood.”

For the first time, the prince's smile drops, and fury fills his expression. He walks past me, stopping purposely when he gets to my side. "You will regret this, Ria."

I hold my head high as he walks out, and I suck in a deep breath, feeling nothing but the pain from my neck as Cross comes over. He hands me a tea towel with ice in it, and I reluctantly take it from him.

"Is this your way of saying sorry?" I ask, flinching as I place the towel onto the burn. I grit my teeth, refusing to let out a sound.

Cross meets my eyes. "He is the wolf, and I am the slave. Don't forget who leads the misery, Riona. It will never be me."

Oddly, I believe he isn't just the slave he pretends to be.

"Pancakes and waffles. Perfect healing food," Hector calls out, like nothing happened at all, his attitude still jolly. This castle is full of lies, brooding hot monsters, and trapped souls. And I'm not sure which is worse.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



“Ah, you’re awake,” Marcella, or I think that’s what her name is, comments as she freely walks into my room. *Hello, boundaries?* I turn away from the mirror and my stare down with the mark on my neck, wishing it would vanish and take me with it. The mark is a dagger with wings behind it, and birds making the circle around. I try to remember Sophie’s advice, the one where she told me to see everything in a different light because it might not be that bad. I don’t know how being marked by a lunatic vampire can be seen in a different light.

I doubt even Soph could make a good thing out of this entire mess.

But she would be proud of me for not being scared. I’m sure many people who were stolen must freak out, they must have mental breakdowns over all of this. But I refuse to. Glancing at Marcella, she stares at me and taps her foot on the ground. I guess there is no privacy in this castle, not now that I’m owned by *him*. Marcella is in a pink sari today that suits her complexion, and her arms are crossed tightly against her big chest. “The prince wishes to see you. Alone. Go down the stairs and through the doors under them.”

“Thanks,” I dryly reply, standing up and taking a deep breath.

Another day, another nightmare, I’m sure.

Marcella walks out the door, leaving it open, and I follow not long after, heading down the corridor. So far I’ve learnt nothing about this place, choosing to stay in my room with only Hector’s pancakes for company all

yesterday and last night. I was surprised no one came and forced me out, or the prince didn't come and literally eat me when it hit midnight.

No Prince Charming came to save me, that's for sure. It's time I stop believing in fairy tales and learn how to save myself. The spiralling castle is rather beautiful, and although it's full of monsters, I still want to learn everything about it. I want to learn about the supernatural race of vampires. That nerdy side of me that loved *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Disney movies is geeking out about this place.

Heading down the giant staircase, I spend my time looking at the paintings one by one. For a while, they are all of men I don't know, each of them with a crown on their heads and wearing old-style clothing. The final painting at the end of the corridor is of a man who looks like Reign and Maddox. The man has long hair that falls to his chest in wisps, and he has a silver crown on his head with three glowing circle orbs held in the silver metal. He is handsome, clearly a vamp, and I wonder if this is Maddox and Reign's father. The rest of the paintings show a history that I could never read in the books at my high school, full of ancient battles and wondrous creatures that fill the skies. I wonder how old this island is and where exactly the vampires came from, when all this history happened. The only answers are going to come from the man who apparently owns me. *The prince*. The monster inside the castle I'm now locked in.

My footsteps are loud, and they echo throughout the castle with every step. There is a faint smell of cooking and some kind of cleaner like bleach, and I shiver from the knowledge that they are most likely cleaning up human blood. Crossing my arms, I walk towards the double doors that I have not gone through before. The doors are solid wood, and they are heavy as I push them open. Eventually, I make a big enough gap for me to slide through and come into what must be a sitting room, the door slamming shut behind me and echoing through the room.

Floor-to-ceiling dark wood bookcases line the one wall, stuffed with various coloured books. There is a large fireplace in the middle of them with a huge mantel made of pure black stone. That royal crest which is on my neck is also in the middle of the mantel. My eyes eat up the room, taking in all of the intricate features and sconces on the wall. The floor is made of tiles, deep blue and black tiles that spread all around the room in

rows of circles, and some of the circles are cracked, almost like the broken parts were done on purpose when the floor was made.

Four dark brown leather sofas and many matching chairs are in the centre of the room, and the other side is simply three narrow windows that look at nothing more than the side of the mountain. I walk through the room to a slightly open door where warm light from a fire glows through the gap. Despite looking welcome and warm, I still tense when I slip through the gap and come to a halt.

There, in a chair that could easily be a throne, is the Mad Prince. A woman is on his lap, her head bent at an odd angle, the prince's teeth buried in her neck. I can't see his face, his dark hair is like a blanket covering him, the tips of his hair brushing against the woman's pale chest. Stuck in a trance, I freeze as I watch her chest heave as she breathes in and out. Slowly she starts to go still, and there is nothing I can do as Maddox kills her.

"Good morning!" Maddox proclaims, letting the black-haired woman fall from his lap onto the wooden floor, the thud of her body making me jump. Sickness fills my chest, and I clamp a hand over my mouth to stop the rising sick. Maddox stalks towards me the whole time, and I get the instinctive feeling to run. To run and never stop, even if I fall off this goddamn mountain.

"Why did you kill her?" I demand, dropping my hand from my mouth and holding it in a tight fist at my side. "You bastard! Why?!"

Maddox, the silent monster, simply wipes blood from the corner of his lips and tilts his head to the side. Almost looking confused.

"Was she a friend of yours?" he asks. I cautiously watch him, unsure of his next move.

"No, I did not know her, but that is hardly the point."

"But, alas, it is," he counters and steps closer. I hold his gaze, refusing to acknowledge how he smells or how close he is to me again. "She could have murdered dozens of children, and you would never have known. Why care for a stranger?"

“Did she kill anyone?” I ask, and before I’ve thought about it, I poke a finger into his chest. “How many children have you killed? How many are dead because of you?”

He roughly catches my hand, clamping it inside his much bigger hand. “Children are innocent, and I do not take the innocent lives. Every *adult* human is tainted just as much as the vampires are. Are you really so good, Riona Dark?”

I try pulling my hand away from him, but it seems impossible. His grip is so tight, but he doesn’t actually hurt me. He moves closer, breathing in a long breath. My voice is shaky at best as I reply. “Did you demand me here to test my morals?”

Whatever I said makes him let me go, and I stumble back. I keep walking back until my back hits the door, and I try to reach for the handle. I’m so done playing whatever game this lunatic wants to play. Maddox simply watches me, a cold appearance drifting over his features once again.

“My friends are all curious about you. Tonight, there will be a dinner and dance,” he claims, turning his back on me and walking back to his throne.

“I’m not going.”

As he steps over the woman’s dead body like she is nothing more than a stool, and sits at a lazy angle on the chair, his eyes find mine. I shiver with the malice I see there. “Your attendance isn’t optional. Now go, unless you wish to amuse me.”

“Fuck you,” I snap and swiftly leave the room, hearing his laugh follow me all the way back to my room.

And even there, in my room where I feel a slight bit safe, is another reminder of my monster in the form of a silk red dress.

The very colour of blood.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



“I ’m sure he picked this dress to annoy me,” I mutter to myself, even as my hands ache as I try and fail to do up the lace on the back of my gown for a third time at a weird angle. I spin sideways in the mirror, trying to get a good look at the lace bindings and working out that there is no way in hell I am going to be able to do this myself. I find my own eyes in the mirror, the pale blue colour a big contrast against the red of the dress. My blonde hair is wavier than usual, and being in a dress reminds me of my prom night at high school when I last wore something this fancy. It seems so long ago, but the happy memories still flash across my mind. My brother, Arlo, Sophie and I shared a limo that my parents bought for us, and we snuck whiskey into it in the pockets of my dress. I don’t remember much after a few shots of whiskey, but I know it was a brilliant night.

The hangover the next morning was *not* so brilliant.

Deciding I need help or I’m going to be walking into this dinner with no clothes on, I hold the dress in place firmly at the front as I pop my head out of my door. In the distance, I see Cross heading down the corridor.

“Cross!” I shout for him. He pauses and looks back, frowning when he sees me before jogging over, his red hair flapping around in the wind.

“Everything alright, lass?” he asks.

“Can you please do up my dress for me? This isn’t me hitting on you or anything like that. I just need help.”

Cross twirls his finger around with a frown, and I turn. I somewhat expected him to be confused by all the lace and general difficulty of the dress, but he soon has the dress all done up, and I step back.

“It suits you. Red, I mean.”

“How did you know how to do dresses up like that?” I question, going over to the bed and sitting down, pulling on my boots, ignoring the high heels Maddox had someone leave with the dress. There are too many steps in this castle for heels, that’s for sure, and even though I really like the red heels, it feels like wearing them and the dress would be letting Maddox win.

Cross leans back against the wall as he speaks. “Maddox has had many women and many dresses for them to wear.”

Disgust fills my stomach. “How can you stand it?”

“I want to live,” he coolly replies. “And if you want to as well, be careful.”

I don’t reply to him, not wanting to promise him anything. I pull open the door to my bedroom and step out, hearing voices behind me. I turn to see Marcella and the same woman with long black hair, who I haven’t met yet, walking towards us, whispering. I turn to Cross as he steps out behind me. “Thanks for the help.”

“Anytime,” he replies with a small smile that helps calm my nerves a little. I want to ask him what tonight will be like, if dinners with the Prince’s friends are dangerous and if I should be scared. But the reality is: I already know the answer. If the prince’s friends are anything like him, then tonight is going to be a nightmare.

“Are there any ways to resist compulsion?” I ask Cross, carefully avoiding telling him that it doesn’t work on me.

Cross frowns. “If there is, the vampires have not been keen to share that information. Although...”

He pauses and looks around, seeing the women getting closer, so he lowers his voice. “The witches can fight the compulsion to an extent, but not without extreme pain. I’ve witnessed it before. Sirens can sing and lull the compulsion out, turning it around on the vampire who tried it.”

So maybe I have witch blood? How the hell do I find that out? And if I do, surely the vampires can taste the difference in my blood? I definitely don't sing.

Seems like my question has just brought up more questions without actual answers.

"Seems like she is fucking the help as well as the princes. What a whore," the woman I don't know whispers loudly as she walks past me and then deliberately shoves her shoulder into mine. I stumble and spin around. "No wonder they paid so much. No wonder half of The Onyx wants her."

"What the hell did you just call me?" I shout, having enough of...well, everything. I don't need bitchy bullies to add to my list of problems. I wouldn't put up with them in school, and I won't put up with them now. Knowing I'm angrier at being stuck here than I am with this girl, it still doesn't stop me from shaking from head to toe. It doesn't stop me from wanting to slam her into the wall and take out my frustration.

"Riona, leave—" Cross tries to stop me, but I step around him.

"Daphne was just—" Marcella tries to explain, looking worried, and she steps back as Daphne walks right up to me, her brown eyes burning with hate.

"You heard. You're just another one of his whores, but this is even worse because he has to share you with his brother!" She spits out a laugh. "Don't you realise the whole island is laughing at you? Judging you? Hoping one of the princes kills you before you cause chaos?" She shoves her hand into my shoulder. "He will be back in my bed. Back inside me and not you soon enough. You won't last."

She pokes me hard in the chest, and I just snap. *That's it.* I scream as I jump on her, punching her hard across her cheek and falling on top of her in the same move. Nothing but rage and anger control me, smothering any rational thoughts that might try to calm me. She hits and whacks me back as we both roll across the floor, her sharp nails scratching my arms, and I pull at her hair until clumps are in my hand. Cross picks me up like a doll, pulling me away even as I push and wiggle to get away from him, but his arms clamp down on me with incredible power.

Daphne climbs to her feet and opens her mouth to spew more hate when something sharp slides through her throat like butter. I scream, my legs feeling weak as Daphne's eyes go wide, and she coughs on blood, so much blood, until it is pouring down her chin. Everything feels so unreal, so slow as she falls to the floor, and I see her killer right behind her.

Prince Maddox. He smiles at me, like nothing is wrong, and pulls the tip of his dagger from her neck. In a damn fitted tux, he looks more human than I've ever seen him, even as he wipes the blood on Daphne's dress and slides it back into his jacket.

He is cold and dead inside. He is broken.

A pretty picture with a rotted frame, and painted with sinful blood.

The silence becomes damning while I watch Maddox as his eyes run down my body, and I feel every bit of his gaze.

“Are humans all as violent as you are? If so, where do you come from?” Maddox finally speaks, and Cross lets me go. “I think we should claim more humans from your home, as you are quite amusing.” Quickly I look back at Cross, but his eyes are on Maddox, a blank expression on his face; however, the slight tightening of his lips gives him away. He doesn't like that Maddox killed Daphne. I don't like it, and I pretty much hated the woman from the second we met.

Still...it doesn't mean she needed to die.

I narrow my eyes at Maddox, whose lips tilt up in amusement. His stupidly perfect lips. “There is that violent side of you I like. It's burning in your eyes like fire.”

“Give me something sharp that can kill you and find out for yourself how violent I can be. And no, they aren't all like me.”

His laugh fills the corridor, even while Daphne's body lies on the floor between us. I doubt Maddox even knows her name. She is no one to him, like so many he has killed.

“Come, my violent little human. Our guests are waiting.”

“Your guests,” I correct him, walking around Daphne and trying not to look at her. “And I’m not hungry after what you just did.”

I try not to react as Maddox places his hand on the middle of my back, the lace doing nothing to protect my bare skin from his hot touch. “Shame, as I’m ravenous.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



Prince Maddox's hand stays firmly on the middle of my back as we walk through the castle, heading back past the living room with the bookcases I was in earlier and through another door to the side. This leads to a long corridor that must stretch the entire back of the castle. One wall is pure stone from the mountain with gold old-fashioned fire sconces placed evenly down the wall. On the other side is a wall of mirrors with dark wood doors in the middle of them every so often. I try not to look at myself in the reflection, but my eyes are drawn to the mirror, and what I see is very strange. Maddox and I seem normal, like two people off to prom or something similar. He doesn't look like a monster, he just seems like a guy. A handsome guy that would attract every girl's attention, but a guy nonetheless. Maddox, feeling my eyes on him, turns and I quickly look away.

"We do look very fitting together."

His comment only makes me shiver. Mostly because he is right. But what does that make me? Little Red Riding Hood standing next to the very wolf who would eat her?

And enjoy it.

"Who is here tonight?" I question, needing to fill the silence. Needing sound before my nerves get the very best of me and I run.

He doesn't reply for a second, and I almost think he is going to annoy me. "My friends. Four of them, to be exact. I will let them introduce themselves.

Tell me about you.”

“No,” I curtly reply.

He looks down at me, never pausing in our walk. I meet his gaze. God, why are vampires so alluring? Why is it fair a monster gets to be as attractive as he is? “Tell me something. It was not a request.”

I smirk. “Fine. I fucking hate vampires. Are you happy now?”

His deep laugh surprises me all the way down to the doors at the end of the corridor, and my cheeks burn brightly the whole time. “I have not laughed this much since I sacrificed all those male humans for my birthday for the bonfire. They did scream for mercy. Like that is a word I know so well.”

“Sacrificed?” I mumble in shock, but he pushes the wooden doors open and heads in, pulling me along at his side into a massive dining room. A long table takes up most of the space. It’s one large slice of white wood from what must have been a huge tree. The walls are dark red, with carved symmetric patterns on the layered ceiling. A huge fabric banner hangs on the one wall, displaying Maddox’s mark, as I’m now calling it. Two fireplaces are on either side of the room, roaring fires lit in them, and the doors we came through are the only entrance and exit I can find. There isn’t even a single window.

But there are other people. No, they aren’t people exactly. Vampires. The word still sounds foreign in my mind, and a part of me still thinks I’m going to wake up soon, and this all will be over.

Two men sit on one side of the table with a space in the middle of them. Both of them are stunning in a way I am figuring out only vampires are. Both blond, with similar features and matching brown eyes. They look like Vikings with their build and height, much more similar to the size of Maddox and his brother.

On the other side of the table are two women, again with a space between where they are sitting. One of them, I can only see the back of her red head, while the other slides out of her seat like a fox, but a black-haired one. Her long black hair touches the floor as she walks over, a silky black dress clinging to her body. When I meet her bright blue eyes, a strange feeling

washes over me. Like I know her from somewhere. If she feels the same, she hides it well as she walks to Maddox and kisses both his cheeks.

“My dear prince, it has been too long,” she states, a thick French accent coming through. She turns to me and cups my face. Her hands are freezing cold, unlike how hot Maddox’s touch is. What is with that? “Ah, you are very beautiful as claimed. Yet I sense nothing special about you at all.”

Thanks a lot, stranger. She lets me go and sighs, turning to Maddox. “Have you tasted her blood yet?”

“A small amount tells me she is magical and something new to the island. I presumed the sirens would recognise her as one of her clan,” he replies somewhat truthfully. So he doesn’t bite his siren friends. *Interesting.*

“Sirens are real?” I blurt out, looking at the woman with new interest. They both turn to me.

“So very new to the magical world,” the woman rolls her eyes. “I am Natalia, and I am a siren if you must know.”

“How very lucky she is to meet not only a vampire and a siren in her first week here, but a witch as well,” one of the guys states, his voice easily carrying across the room. “Do bring her to the table to sit next to me. I wish to see her closely, my friends.”

For whatever reason I can’t make out to myself, I look up at Maddox. He smirks briefly before nodding once.

Like I need his permission.

Maybe witches aren’t as evil as vampires. Maybe. They are still friends with Maddox though, and I doubt they are highly moral.

Feeling like a goldfish in a bowl, I nervously walk past Natalia towards the table. The witch who spoke stands up and pulls a chair out for me. I sit down, looking at the gold plates and empty crystal wine glasses on the table. Everything looks perfect. Enough to make me nervous.

“My name is Alviero, but my dearest friends call me Vero,” the witch introduces himself. “My brother who sits next to you isn’t one to speak, but

his name is Vindonio. I always do all the talking.”

“Out of your arse most of the time,” Maddox adds in, sitting down in the seat opposite me, next to the woman who is looking down, hiding her face with her long red hair. When she looks up, I try not to jolt. Black markings, like symbols but made of swirls and lines, are drawn onto her forehead, cheeks and down her neck. They are hard to look at, the way they are raised makes me think they were burnt on. The woman stares me down, her expression unreadable, but her brown eyes reflect the redness of her hair.

Vero clears his throat. “Ah, this is Sabina. The head witch of our coven.”

“Do witches live on the island?” I question, looking away from Sabina, but of course, she is the one who has to answer me.

“Our ancestors made all five of the hidden islands on earth. One for the witches, one for the sirens and one for the vampires,” she coldly tells me. “Humans such as yourself have taken the two other islands and everything near them as they spread around the globe, destroying as they went.”

Her distaste for humans is clear.

“Oh, Sabina. If they didn’t breed, we wouldn’t have our magic today. Human organs are vital in our spells after all,” Vero claims. Sick fills my throat once again, and I have to think of happy things, force myself not to react to that.

“Perhaps Riona might wish to discuss something less...revolting,” Natalia cuts in. “Unless you wish to see her vomit all over this table.”

“Ah, I forget her human ways,” Vero exclaims. I stare down at the gold plate in front of me as they carry on their conversation, and I try to cut myself off from being here, pretend that I’m anywhere else.

Pretend that I’m at home, and my brother is there making his jokes. My parents cooking and laughing with each other, and I sit there watching it all.

I nearly jump out of my skin when the doors open in the room and eight people, in two lines of four, walk into the room with plates. They place the plates in front of us all and then move to stand behind each of the chairs. The two remaining people go and stand by the door.

“To new friends,” Maddox lifts his empty glass. “And to finding out more about our guest, Riona.”

Maddox clicks his fingers, and the servant behind him lifts a knife and cuts a line down his arm, filling Maddox’s glass. I look away only to see Natalia’s eyes glowing white, and a small whisper leaves her lips. The sound is nothing more than a brush against my skin, pushing at me like the feeling of a paintbrush grazing me.

But the other servants in the room don’t seem to feel the same effect. They all walk away and start dancing around the room to no music, each of their movements exactly the same. The servant who cut his arm dances too, his blood dripping across the floor, and the other people whirl around in it, until the floor is covered in bloody footprints.

Natalia watches me very closely before smiling softly. “Ah, I see.”

“I assumed she would resist your magic as well as ours,” Maddox replies.

“Look, it’s very nice. You must eat,” Vero whispers to me, his voice too close to my ear, and I move away across my seat as he lifts the silver covering on my plate to reveal some posh cuts of meat and veg that no doubt has a fancy name. I much prefer cheese on toast or pizza over this crap.

I play with my food, having no interest in eating as they all proceed to eat like nothing is wrong.

“So is that *issue* still coming up?” Natalia asks Maddox, and I notice all of them look to Maddox for his answer. Using a code word means it’s something she doesn’t want me to know. The others seem to understand though.

He chews his food before drinking the blood (that I’m mentally pretending is wine) and folding his hands. “Yes, two more have arrived this month. My brother has found another as well. Same condition.”

“Are they still alive?” Natalia asks. “Perhaps I can take one and run tests.”

“I have one, and we have found nothing. The magic, if it is that, is unlike anything we have seen,” Vero cuts in. “But if you think sirens can find

something witches cannot, please take ours. It is a bother to contain.”

“I do not want the—” Maddox looks at me and pauses. “It must not be killed, any of them, or you will face my wrath.”

“You do have a heart after all,” Vero jokily chuckles in a teasing manner, and Maddox simply says nothing, his eyes on me.

“Do you have a hobby, little human who does not speak?” Natalia asks me after a brief moment of silence. Business talk over then.

“I like to paint and play the violin,” I answer. I can’t see any point of saying nothing, not when it’s clear my silence isn’t making them trust speaking around me. “I hate dancing, love white wine and calling my mum for long chats. I hate cooking but love baking cakes. My ideal day out is sitting at a beach, feeling the waves brush against my toes while I read a book. What else do you want to know?”

“Oh, I do love music and the sea of course. It’s a siren thing,” Natalia explains with a big smile. Any other circumstance, I think we might get along. “I will bring instruments for us to play together when I am next here, and maybe Maddox could show you the sea. The magic in the waters around the island is enchanting.”

She seems so lost in her own mind with every word that I almost feel myself wanting to smile at her.

I turn to Maddox. “What does the prince of all evil like to do?”

He smirks. “Fuck women, paint women and in general murder pretty things. Anything else you want to know?”

Nope.

“Have you shown her your paintings, Maddox?” Vero asks, cutting into my staring match with my plate as I feel all their eyes on me.

I raise my eyebrows as I look at Maddox. “Can you actually paint anything other than naked women?”

“Yes. Painting is not a talent simply for humans,” Maddox counters with a cruel smile. “And after this, I will show you my work.”

I really, really don't want to be alone with him. And he damn well knows it. I've just managed to dig myself into a corner.

"Do you have family, Riona?" Natalia asks me as she drinks some water.

"Do you?" I reply, crossing my arms and leaving my food as I'm not eating it. The people continue to dance around us to no music, but by this point the floor is covered in blood, the metal smell of it filling my nose, making me want to be sick.

"I have no family, it is the way of the sirens," she almost softly explains. "When we are young, our parents give us to another clan, and they give a child up of their own in return. Therefore all clans are at peace. It is our way. No one family, everyone is family instead."

I frown at her, feeling sorry for her a little bit.

I'm sure sirens aren't all nice, and they must do terrible things, but that is a cruel thing to do with their children.

"At least they don't carve your face like they do our females," Vero chuckles. Sabina lifts her hand, and it glows red for a second, and then a burst of hot air hits me, Vero and his brother. Screaming, I fly across the room and slam into something hard and warm, taking my breath away and hurting my back a little. Blinking a few times, I feel his hands around me, holding me close to his chest even as I realise it's him. *Maddox*.

He caught me.

Maddox lifts his eyes above my head. "Careful...friend. Riona is *mine*."

"Ouch," Vero grumbles nearby. I look over to see him and his brother standing still, like nothing happened.

I turn my head back to see Sabina stand up off the chair and hiss, like a frigging cat, but it's downright scary. "I was proving a point to Riona. We women witches may not be beautiful on our outside, but we are far superior to our male counterparts. I must be leaving."

"Leave and take with you my warning. Anyone touches Riona, and they will face me," Maddox replies, his cold voice making the room feel

freezing. Sabina bows her head, as does Natalia even though she seems quite shocked.

“I should be heading out also. But I will go and see Reign before I leave,” Natalia claims, standing up. The way she says Reign’s name is with a slight bit of affection. She looks directly at me. “May the sea bless your way, Riona.”

A whirlpool of water appears around her, spinning so fast, and then she is gone. Sabina just steps back and disappears like she was never here. Becoming rapidly aware Maddox is still holding me, and how I don’t like how I didn’t notice, I try to get out of his arms. He chuckles and eventually lets me go. Screaming, I stumble back when I see body parts all over the wall behind Maddox, blood pouring across the ground like a wave. Dots of it are scattered everywhere, and it’s a miracle we aren’t covered in it. Vero is standing in front of the bodies, and he winks at me before disappearing.

Then I notice the people aren’t dancing anymore, they aren’t anywhere to be seen because they are all dead. They are smothering that wall, the witches nowhere to be seen after they caused this destruction. This time, I can’t hold it in, I turn and puke all over the floor, not caring when hands hold my hair back. Even when I know exactly who it is.

When I’ve stopped, Maddox lets my hair go and walks to the table. He pours a glass of water from a jug near the edge and brings the glass to me.

“Here,” he offers, and I reluctantly take it, drinking enough water to get rid of the taste of sick. Maddox takes the glass from me and throws it across the room where it smashes into pieces before walking to the door. “Follow me.”

Wanting to get out of this room, I do just that, heading out into the corridor and across it, the only door in the mountainside of the wall right at the end. Maddox holds the heavy wood door open for me, and I slip in after him, into a small room with a spiral staircase bathed in a bright light coming from the top, enough to light the steps down here. He walks up, and I follow after him, walking up and up, even as I start to feel a little breathless.

How many bloody stairs?

My cardio needs work, that's for sure.

The stairs eventually come to an end, and I step into an attic type room with a triangle window pouring in light from the sun setting in the distance over the city. Having never seen the city like this, I walk past all the covered-up easels and white canvases lining the wall to the window, taking in the view. The city is so much more than it looks, especially lit up at night like this.

"How is this hidden from the world?" I whisper.

Maddox steps behind me, moving silently, but I feel the heat of his body to warn me of his presence. "Because we kill all those who escape with our secret."

"Would you kill me if I left?" I breathlessly question, my voice huskier than I meant it to be.

I gulp as his hand slowly drifts down my bare arm, making me shiver. "No. Not because you can resist my compulsion, but because I find you interesting. Nothing has been interesting to me in a very long time, Riona."

"What do you want from me?"

"What any man wants from a beautiful woman," he breathes into my ear as his other hand snakes around my waist, pulling my body against his. "My name breathlessly uttered from your lips as I'm buried inside of you. Your sweet moans that I can claim as my own. The sound of you completely giving yourself to me."

I can only stay still, even as his words do things to me that they shouldn't. He is a monster. *Plain and simple.*

"I think you want me because it would hurt your brother. I'm a game," I reply. "You could have any woman, choose someone else."

He hums. "No, I saw you first, and you refused to give me your fear. You were strong in the face of everything. That alone decided your fate. My brother is nothing more than a nuisance."

His answers make sense to a crazy person, I guess. "Why are there two princes and not one king?"

“My father was the last king,” he murmurs into my ear, like the devil whispering all his secrets. “And when he died, he hid one of the three things needed to take the throne.”

“And the other two?” I question quietly, as if not to break the strange trance we are under.

“Two princes. Two orbs of indescribable magic that hold this very island together,” he replies and swiftly lets me go. *Orbs?* Like the magical ones I was told hold the island’s magic. If I can just get one of them, I might be able to bribe my way out. In a split second, he moves in front of me, so quick I didn’t see him. Maddox places his finger under my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his. “You hate me so dearly, don’t you?”

“I don’t know you enough to hate you, but if you keep killing, then you will make me,” I admit, feeling my heart pounding in my chest. His eyes drop to my lips for a second before drifting back to meet my gaze once more.

“I want you to hate me. Everyone else does,” he replies.

I search his eyes. “Hate is a strong word.”

“It’s perfect for us.”

“You’re messed up, I get it, but doesn’t a small part of you want to be a better person?” I ask. “Didn’t your mother teach you to be? Your father?”

“My father was a monster, and my mother was an angel in every sense of the word. I am like my father,” he tells me. “My father preferred to beat me senseless for being kind, I soon learnt that to be mad is how to truly stay in power.”

“Making people fear you isn’t true power,” I reply, “because, at the end of the day, it’s only the ones who love you who save you in the end.”

“Power saves me,” he replies. “And who says I want to be saved?”

“I think you do.”

He leans down, and I suck in a breath. Run, Riona. Goddammit, run before he kisses you.

The common-sense part of my brain finally kicks in (screw you, lady parts), and I turn and run to the stairs. His laugh follows me, haunts me as I run as fast as I can in this dress.

“Run all you like. Before you go to my brother, you will be mine, and you will know it.”

I’d rather burn in hell, thank you very much. Even if my body doesn’t totally agree.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN



“You seem so sad, are my pancakes not nice enough to make you smile?” Hector asks, rubbing his hands dry with a tea towel that has little dog patterns on it. He is too normal for this place, too nice for a place filled with monsters. Even though he is a vampire. After a night of tossing and turning, and a certain vampire being in my dreams a little too much, I finally gave up and came in here. Hector, who never seems to leave this kitchen, was all too happy to make me breakfast.

“They are delicious,” I reply with a sad smile. Hector seems to know not to ask anymore; he must understand the horrors of this place. “How did you end up here, Hector? Were you born a vamp or bitten?”

“My story is long and sad, and you are too young and beautiful to hear it right now. But understand I choose to stay here, to serve the young prince as I did his father, the king, once upon a time,” he tells me, placing the tea towel on his shoulder and leaning down. “Fathers do teach their sons everything they know, even if it is not who they really are.”

“Are you trying to suggest I should give the murdering bastard of a prince a chance to be my friend?”

He sighs. “Hope is easy to kill, much like humans. Perhaps you should not stomp on it so hard, oui?”

“Morning,” Cross interrupts, walking into the room. “Just the girl I wanted to see.”

“Me?” I question, turning on my stool. Cross has overalls on today, making him look like a weird ginger cowboy from a guy calendar like the fireman ones my mum always buys every year “for a good cause.”

He nods his head to the door. “You need a job, and it’s about time the walk around greenhouse was looked after by someone.”

“I’m not good at gardening,” I admit.

“Everyone starts somewhere. I was never good at most of the things I do here to begin with,” he tells me as I climb off my seat and walk to him. “We adapt.”

“Is that what you have done to stay here?” I question, rushing to walk at his side as he leaves the room. The corridor is empty as we head down it, but I hear people talking and moving around behind the many doors. “Adapt to the prince and his murderous ways?”

“Are you ever going to stop asking so many questions?” he asks, looking down at me for a second.

“Nope, so you might as well tell me the answers now,” I smoothly suggest. He laughs low as we get to the stairs and go down them.

“Yes, I have adapted to my new environment with the prince,” he replies with a grim look ahead. “When the king died only twenty years ago, both the princes near enough destroyed the island looking for the lost orb to make themselves king. When neither could find it, it became clear that they would be stuck. So they divided the island after a big falling out. One half belongs to Prince Maddox and the other Prince Reign. They don’t work together, they barely talk for years usually. Everyone finds the situation with you very strange.”

He pauses as we head through a door on the right by the staircase and into a cold corridor. Light flickers in from the small windows and outlines a door at the end of the corridor. “The stealers got me when I was fifteen and brought me here, where I fought and ran away on the beach. I ran straight into a very drunk Prince Maddox, and he decided to keep me for whatever reason.”

“And then he never tried to kill you?” I question. “Does he feed on you?”

“No, I came here, and it was empty. Just me and the prince. Slowly he has let me take on a cook that worked for his father, Hector. Then a bellboy, and finally some other people to clean. Unfortunately, the only ones he doesn’t kill are Hector and me,” he tells me, both of us stopping in front of the door. He pulls out a set of keys, their metal clanging noise filling the silence. “I never knew Maddox’s father, but I have heard he was a cruel and unforgiving man, and that Maddox was the son he never wanted. Maddox is angry and bitter about the cards he has been given, but it doesn’t mean he is altogether evil. A part of me wants to hope he will change, and no, he doesn’t bite me. Plenty of human women come here willingly, begging to be bitten by the prince. He never needs to look for food.”

“And the other parts of you?” I question as he slides a key into the lock and turns it, dust sliding off the door. No one has gone in here in a long time.

Cross looks down at me. “The other parts of me want to escape, like all of us want to who have known the world outside of this island, but this is the right place for me now.”

I hope he sees the understanding in my eyes, even if I don’t know how to word it exactly. Cross opens the door, pushing it hard as it scrapes across the floor, and some ivy, I think, snaps from it being open. The room is hard to see, even though it’s bright from the wall of glass stretching all the way to the ceiling in a curved effect. It’s a massive dome shaped walk-through greenhouse with a high glass ceiling, and every other window is stained red glass, plastering the room with a mixture of light colours from yellows to oranges. The inside isn’t as nice though, not anymore. Overgrown plants and ivy litter the floor and crawl up every bit of brick and glass it can find, smothering what looks like statues and a waterfall in the middle.

“Hector said this place used to be the queen’s private garden,” Cross explains to me. “And it has fallen into disrepair over the years. What do you think?”

“You want me out of the way down here, don’t you?” I question, slightly stepping away from him.

“You make the prince madder than he already is,” he replies, tightly crossing his arms. “And many of the others are jealous of his connection to

you. This place is safe, and you are better off in here, as not many know it exists. Maddox doesn't like to come here."

I watch him carefully. There is something he isn't saying, but how exactly do I figure it out?

I clear my throat. "I will need tools to cut all this to start with, and gardening gloves. Later on, I will need soil and fresh plants."

He smiles and steps back before walking to the door. He pushes it shut, revealing another door at its side, and he tugs it open. "Hector said everything you need is in here, and he cleaned it all for you. I will bring you lunch if you wish. There is also a toilet just down the corridor."

Cross opens the other door slightly and slides out, leaving me in the ruined and ancient greenhouse alone.

I wrap my arms around myself as I walk to the cupboard, finding there are shelves of equipment in here, all covered in cobwebs except for a bunch of tools on the floor. Those must be the ones Hector cleaned. Gardening gloves on, I grab the cutters and get to work.

My dad said tired minds can't worry or stress. So time to wear me the hell out.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



“I heard this has been your hiding place.”

Prince Maddox’s voice makes me jump and nearly drop the cutters in my hand. I spin around, dropping the ivy I had just pulled off, to find Maddox near the fountain. He runs his finger across the red stone fountain at the top, where the water is meant to pour down, but I have no idea how to turn it on. For ten days, I have successfully dodged the prince and his every attempt to flatter me. I threw the hundreds of red roses he left in my room out of the window. I didn’t eat the several iced lemon cakes he had made for me, but it was creepy that he knew it was my favourite.

Overall, I’m not being romanced by the evil prince.

“It’s looking better, I think,” I carefully reply. Everything I say around Maddox has to be careful, I don’t trust him not to flip a switch. He stares at the fountain for a moment longer, and I wonder if he is remembering something. This was his mother’s garden once, and she might have brought him here, but I don’t know when she died. Or how old he was. I get the sneaking suspicion he was young.

“I had forgotten about the greenhouse gardens until Cross told me you were down here,” he admits, holding his hands behind his back as he walks over to me. “And here you are, with another sharp item. Are you feeling violent today, Ria?”

“Not now I know I can’t kill you with this alone unless I get the strength to cut your head off,” I mutter, lifting the sharp cutters up in the air.

He flashes me one of his deceptively evil smiles. “It would hurt me though. Are we past that?”

I point the cutters at him, touching the middle of his chest with the sharp tips. “Are you past killing humans like they are toys?”

“Never,” he breathes out and clamps a hand over the cutters. Like my grip is nothing but a nuisance, he throws them away from me, and I stumble back into the glass. He keeps moving, slower than he needs to, until he is cornering me into the glass with nowhere for me to go. “I have dinner ready for us in my room.”

“I’m not going to your room, Maddox,” I warn him, narrowing my eyes.

He laughs and places his hands around my waist, harshly pulling me against him. I jolt and try to pull away, but he easily picks me up and throws me over his shoulder. Screaming in frustration, I smack my arms against his back and kick out my legs, but he doesn’t react, not even bothering to use his other arm to clamp my legs down. He carries me through the castle, past the sitting areas and into that corridor behind them, and through the first door on the right. Disoriented, he drops me onto a soft and bouncy bed, and I glare up at him.

“Welcome to my room,” he sarcastically states, walking back to the door and slamming it shut. “Don’t scream in here, you will give my bird a heart attack.”

“Your bird?” I question like a fool, and he nods his head behind him. Next to the door is a huge aviary with a massive eagle inside of it. The eagle is pure white, not a drop of colour to its feathers, and it must be the size of a small child. The eagle watches me as it perches on a long branch that is spread across the aviary that is the size of a room on its own. I pull my eyes from the eagle to the rest of Maddox’s room, and not surprisingly, it’s as grand as you could get. The king-sized, or bigger, bed I’m on has black sheets spread across a mattress that sits on a flat wooden platform. White cushions and pillows line the giant black stone headboard that stretches to the ceiling. In one corner of the room is a door to a bathroom no doubt and a big closet, which has a frosted glass door. One chest of drawers sits under

the only window in the room at the back, and it is empty of anything personal.

“So, you paint like a pro, and you have an eagle for a friend-slash-pet. Anything else I should know about you?”

Maddox walks over to me, and I try not to run when he chooses to sit next to me on the bed, his body brushing against mine. My heart beats ridiculously quick, giving away my reaction to him no doubt.

“I want to know about you, Riona Dark,” he murmurs seductively, picking up a strand of my hair. I hold my breath on instinct and force myself to breathe when it becomes clear he isn’t going to drop my hair or move away. “I’ve researched you extensively and found nothing more than a regular human upbringing, and yet, you are so very unique.”

“Have you met other humans who can’t be compelled?” I question.

He meets my eyes. “No. That’s why you are perfect for me. Even if I weren’t extremely attracted to you, I would not let you go. I need a queen at my side who cannot be controlled by magic and can be my true equal.”

“You like the idea of an equal who hates you for who you are?” I ask, almost softly, damn my soft heart.

“It apparently worked well for my parents,” he replies and sharply looks away, dropping my hair. “I will make no apologies for who I am and neither will I change.”

“Then you will never have anything real or true, Prince Maddox,” I angrily reply, narrowing my eyes at him.

He glares right back at me and cups the back of my neck, his touch burning my skin like he is on fire. “I will have you, and that is all I want. Screw the rest.”

Then he kisses me. Every inch of my mind begs myself to fight back, to push him away, to remember that he is a monster, but my body doesn’t react the same way. I kiss him back on instinct, letting his soft lips devour mine with a passion I’ve never experienced, sucking me deep into a world of

torment I wasn't aware existed. His tongue slides into my mouth just as someone knocks on the door.

And I realise what the hell I am doing. I all but fall off the bed, crawling my way backwards as I climb to my feet.

If Maddox looked at me with desire before...it's nothing like he stares at me now.

My heart pounds as Maddox walks to the door and pulls it open with a scary ass look on his face.

"You are dead unless this is important," Maddox all but growls at the poor bellboy.

"Cross s-sent me to tell you another issue has come up, and it's more than one this time. He needs you to urgently come to help as several are bitten and dead," he sputters out. "They burned from the inside out from one bite, like the others."

What the hell can do that?

"Fuck."

Maddox looks back at me, turning his frown into a smile, but I can tell he is still annoyed by the interruption and whatever is going on. I'm thankful for the interruption before I did anything else downright stupid. "Seems like our last night is going to be cut short. I won't see you tomorrow, but be sure I am waiting for your return."

Maddox leaves the room without another word, the door hanging open, and the eagle makes an almost coo-like noise. I walk up to the aviary and run my finger over the gold plate on the door, with the name Amity.

Another word for friendship.

I guess I was bang right, the eagle is the only friend to the Mad Prince.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



Blasting music fills the castle behind me as I sit on the steps, my arms crossed tightly against my chest to protect me from the cold. Whatever happened last night between Maddox and me is clearly forgotten, which I'm totally thankful for, as I woke up to some kind of party. The castle is full of drunk women and men, loud music, and blood everywhere. I all but tripped in the blood as I escaped and came to sit here, waiting for Maddox's brother to come.

"Here," Cross says as he lays something on my shoulders. I pull the soft red material around me and push my arms through the cloak and clip up the five silver buttons. "Maddox bought you it."

"Surprised he remembers who I am with his party going on to celebrate that I'm leaving," I mutter. I don't know why I'm pissed off, but I can't deny that I am.

"Is that what you think?" Cross questions with a furrowed brow. "And not because he is wallowing that you have to leave?"

Pulling myself to my feet, I think about Cross's words as we wait in the snow-ridden ground, watching the city at the base of the mountain. It's nothing more than lights and shapes, but I can make out a certain structure to the city. It's five squares, thick walls separating the squares, and a river runs down the left side with one bridge going to big houses on the other side of it. As much as I want to escape, I also want to see this city.

“What is the city like? I mean compared to say London, Edinburgh, Paris or New York?” I question, rambling off the cities I have been in.

Cross clears his throat, looking at the city. “It reminds me of history books when they talked of Edinburgh in the 1600s. It’s rough in the city, and many are born there with no understanding of what is outside this island. The Onyx breeds mayhem and pain.”

“Why do you say that?” I question, just as I hear the sound of a car in the distance. A large car if I’m hearing right. How the hell do they have cars here?

Cross sighs. “Without rules or real life to live for, what else are they to do? They know the vamps could kill them, their children, their families and ruin their lives on a whim. They work for nothing more than scraps of food or a chance to be a vamp, which means they would have to leave their families alone. Why would they strive to be better?”

Everything is so wrong on this island.

And I have no answers for him.

“Who makes the rules and laws? Who enforces them?” I ask instead.

Cross shrugs. “Apparently there was more order when the king and queen were alive. When the queen died, the king went into a depression and took the island down with him. The princes haven’t changed much since the king died.” He lowers his voice. “They have their own problems as you well know.”

Frowning, I look away as a big black Jeep comes up the stone path driveway fast, skidding across the snow until it comes to a quick stop sideways in front of the steps. The passenger side door swings open.

“Get in.”

I raise my eyebrows at Cross, who mouths *good luck*. I take my time getting down the steps and to the door.

Prince Reign sits in the driver’s seat, the passenger seat empty, and looking as uninviting as he can be. Even though he looks so similar to Maddox, it’s

so clear they are very different. Maddox looks one switch away from turning into a total psychopath, and Reign? He seems uninterested in the world around him, just here for the sake of it. He stares back at me, his jaw locked tightly in anger, and his eyes drift to the passenger seat and back up again. Getting the hint, I climb into the car and pull the door shut. Before I've managed to pull my seat belt on, he takes off at full speed, and I nearly slide off the seat. I shakily snap my seat belt on and look up just in time to see Reign swing the Jeep around a corner, narrowly missing the edge.

"Watch it, some of us are human and wouldn't survive a face-down dive off a mountain in a car!" I angrily snap.

Reign's eyes leave the road for a second to meet mine, nothing but contempt shining in them before he looks back, and he actually slows down. "I do apologise. I am used to escaping my brother's home as quickly as I possibly can. I did not mean to frighten you."

"Thank you for slowing down," I say, my hands still gripping the side of the seats like my life depends on it. The ride down the mountain is silent and freezing, and I itch to turn the heating on in the car, but I stay silent, unsure about my new captor.

When I start shaking, I forcibly pull my hands off the seat and wrap them in my dress, trying to keep them from getting too cold. Reign looks across and mutters a string of curses under his breath before pressing the switch for the heating to turn on.

"I don't have humans in my house, and I am not used to understanding their needs," he starts off, and I watch him carefully, seeing how uncomfortable he is. "You must tell me if you are cold or hungry, whatever it is you need, and I will accommodate you."

"Why?" I question. "Why did you bid for me if you don't like humans or have slaves?"

He doesn't answer me for a long time. At least half an hour ticks by, and we are near the end of the mountain when he finally does. "I heard of your unique gift, and it makes you powerful. My brother doesn't need any more power at his beck and call. A possible d'vampire with a gift to resist compulsion would be disastrous in his hands."

A power grab. I get it now.

“So you need me to choose you in under six months’ time?” I question.

He looks over at me. “In my house, you will not be hurt or forced into anything. You will be free and protected by my name. We both know my brother cannot promise you that.”

But he can damn well kiss like a god.

Even though he is a monster.

I breathe out a long breath. “I will choose you if you help me find out if a few people are on this island, and if they are, save them and buy them for your house. One of them is definitely on this island, his name is Arlo O’Dargan, and he was sold right before me. The other is my brother, but I don’t know if he is here.”

“I don’t want more humans in my house. You are bad enough,” he tsks, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

“Then I will choose Maddox,” I tell him plainly. “If he turns me, I will have enough power to buy them myself.”

I bluff all of it. Total bullshit. I’m not letting Maddox or Reign turn me into a d’vampire and some kind of weapon. I like my ass human. Thank you very much.

Reign suddenly stops the Jeep in the middle of the road, not that there is another car anywhere to be seen. I keep my eyes on Reign as he stares right back at me, his creepy eyes glaring right into mine. “You are quite something, aren’t you, Riona Dark?”

“I’ve been told that before. My professors and parents called me determined,” I reply. “My brother just said I was a smartass and that my mind mixed with what comes out my mouth would get me in trouble one day.”

“You just tried to blackmail a vampire prince,” Reign coolly replies. “Your brother was right.”

I lift a shoulder. “He was, yes. Only I’m braver and more reckless now, thanks to being stolen and shown things I never thought I’d ever see.”

“Death is something you will get used to,” he replies and sighs once more.

“I will agree to your terms,” he states. “But you and your friends will not disturb my life.”

“Agreed,” I say, offering him my hand to shake. He lifts my hand and presses a single kiss to the top of my knuckles, and while it’s sweet, his touch doesn’t do anything for me like it does his mad brother.

He lets my hand drop. “I know where your friend is, and we can head into the city now to buy him, if you wish it. As for your brother, my research suggests he is not on the island.”

I nod, feeling tears of relief pricking my eyes.

Arlo. “Yes, please.”

“Hold on then,” he instructs and drives off faster than he did at the top of the mountain. Only this time, I don’t complain.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN



At least an hour drifts by as Reign takes the car down country roads, past many houses and through a forest before we break into view of the city. We approach the city on the left side, if my sense of direction isn't wrong, and down here this place does look like a different time era altogether, but mixed with bits of the modern world. The women all dress in saris or Victorian style dresses, and the men are in suits. I don't spot anyone who looks like how Reign dresses; he clearly likes the modern clothes. The tiny houses make way for bigger ones with thatched roofs and brown brick walls with glass windows. There are newer street lights, suggesting the island has some sort of power going through it. A few children, which I have no idea if they are human or vampire, run past the car, staring in. I smile at them, lifting my hand and wiggling my fingers, their giggles rising above the noise of the engine for a second. A second enough to make me smile.

“Are you the only one with a car on the island?” I question.

Reign turns down a street, and people move out of the way, not that Reign even attempts to slow down. “Mostly. I prefer the outside world's choice of transport and clothing. What about you?”

“I can't say I'm a fan of the dresses,” I admit, picking at the sari I have on. “I envy your jeans and shirt.”

“I will find you suitable clothing to keep,” he replies just before slamming the brakes on the car, and I jolt forward, the seat belt hurting my neck. Not

making any apologies, he flips up the handbrake and opens his door, climbing out and disappearing with vamp speed. Swiftly, I undo my seat belt and climb out my door, my boots smacking against the stone. Several people stop to stare, a mixture of vampires and humans, I think. I try to ignore them and head around the car, seeing that Reign hasn't waited for me, but a door is kicked open. Taking a wild guess the prince has gone that way, I gingerly walk into the house and into a front sitting room. Reign stands in the middle, easily commanding the space, and there is a very pretty vampire woman on her knees in front of him, bleeding from her nose. Did Reign punch her?

The woman has long, almost white-coloured hair and bright grey eyes that watch over me.

“Of course, your majesty. It would be a great honour,” she is saying to Reign. Reign turns his head back, meeting my gaze and pointing to the door at the back of the room. I don't give the vampire woman a second glance, running to the back door and pulling it open. The smell hits me right away, the metallic tang of blood and just an awful stench of god knows what. I hold my nose as I walk into the dimly lit room, and I stare in shock at the sight of Arlo chained up at the back of the room. His wrists and ankles are chained to the brick wall, and dozens, if not hundreds, of bite marks litter his bare chest and legs. In fact, every part of him looks bitten, and he looks so pale.

A sob leaves my lips as I run over to him, picking up his fallen head and checking for a pulse on his neck. When I feel it, I breathe out a shaky sigh.

“I'm going to look after you,” I whisper and kiss the top of his damp hair. I look over my shoulder and raise my voice. “Reign, I need your help!”

Reign is in front of me in seconds, his vampire speed making it impossible for me to have tracked his movement. He looks me over before turning to Arlo, frowning for a moment. He lifts his arm and bites harshly into his wrist, blood pouring out all over his mouth and dripping onto the floor in front of us.

“Will your blood heal him?” I question. I've gathered as much, but I don't know for certain.

“I’m surprised my brother has not forced you to drink from him to heal you,” Reign replies. “He usually likes to break his toys and put them back together, unaware of the internal damage wreaked.”

“He offered me blood when he marked me, which I refused, and he fed me when I passed out on the auction stage, but otherwise, no,” I explain.

Reign doesn’t seem happy with my answer, but he gives no comment, only lifting Arlo’s head and forcing him to drink the blood, even unconscious. After a few seconds, he lets Arlo drop once more, and I look at his wrist, seeing he has already healed. Damn, they heal quickly. Reign grabs the chains around Arlo’s ankles, snapping them off like paper and doing the same to the ones on his wrists before picking Arlo up over his shoulder. Following Reign out of the horrible room and back into the posh living room, the vampire woman stands up and bows her head.

“I hope he makes a brilliant new addition to your home, Prince Reign,” she states, licking her bottom lip. “I enjoyed my time with him.”

I grit my teeth, clamping my hands into fists and begging myself not to try to punch a vampire. Arlo needs rest and to get the hell out of here; otherwise, I would most likely lose it. My anger and temper have never been something I’ve gotten used to.

“You speak a word about this to my brother, I will kill you when you least expect it. Do you understand?” Reign coldly states to the woman. She looks between Reign and me before falling to her knees.

“I serve only you, Prince Reign. This is your territory, and I chose to come here, to serve you. May the true king of The Onyx live,” she says, her voice thick with emotion. They really do love their royals here.

“Be true to your word,” Reign replies and walks out. I glance back at the woman, who hasn’t lifted her head. I know she did terrible things to my friend. A boy I grew up with. Someone I love as family.

“Learn to be better than the monster you were created to be,” I tell her. “Because in the end, someone will judge you, and that judgment is one many wish to pass.”

I turn away and leave, gulping down the sickness I feel in my throat, mixed with a tiny bit of hope because I have Arlo now and a deal with a relatively safe Prince. The street is now filled with vampires and humans, and all of them are on their knees bowing. So many of them fill the street like a silent wave as Reign dumps Arlo across the back seat of the car. I climb in the back with him, pulling his seat belt on as best I can before doing my own. As Reign gets the Jeep going, I lift Arlo's head onto my lap and brush some strands of his blood-soaked hair away.

He looks in turmoil, even as out of it as he is. If we ever do escape this island, I know what happens here will forever haunt us either way.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN



Arlo sleeps the entire journey out of the city and into the thick forest on the opposite side of the city, away from the mountains and Maddox's castle. The forest is full of trees so high that I can't see the tops, and the ground is littered with fallen branches, leaves and bushes. There is no clear path, but Reign seems to know his way through the trees, never once stopping the car, but it's clear why he has a Jeep. It might have been lightly snowing on the mountain, but there isn't snow here, it's just freezing cold outside, making the windows foggy. Arlo stirs a little bit, and I softly brush my fingers across his forehead, which seems to make him settle down. The car ride is bumpy for a few minutes, and I hold onto Arlo tightly to make sure he doesn't fall off just before we come out onto a smooth road. I peek out the window, wiping some of the condensation away, to see a cliff with a modern house built onto the edge of it. The house looks like something from LA, with tall glass windows, white brick pillars, and black outlined doors. Perfectly cut bushes line the road to the space in front of the door where Reign comes to a stop.

"I will carry him in and show you where you will live," Reign announces like he has overthought the idea. "Other than a housekeeper who comes twice a week, there will be no one else here, and I don't want my privacy interrupted. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," I quickly reply. I don't want to be around him any more than he does me. I smile tightly at Reign as he scowls and pushes his car door open before walking around the Jeep. Opening the door, he looks in at us and unclicks Arlo's seat belt before picking him up over his shoulder. Arlo

groans but doesn't move as Reign kicks the door shut. I quickly escape the car and jog to keep up with Reign, who speed walks to his front door and kicks it open.

He really loves kicking stuff.

I don't get much of a chance to see the inside of the room before we are heading up the glass staircase in the middle of it and around a corner. Kicking another door open, Reign heads inside a bedroom that is covered in white sheets. He unceremoniously drops Arlo on the bed and walks back to me.

"He will need rest, and I will go to get your food for a few days. What do you like?"

Raising my eyebrows, I didn't expect that. "I like a lot of Mediterranean food and pasta. I know Arlo likes anything with meat in it."

I also love pancakes, but they remind me of Hector...and the Mad Prince.

"Understood. I will cook for us tonight," he replies, moving around me. I watch the prince go, a little confused by his nature, and walk to the door, shutting it behind him. There is no lock, but even a shut door can make me feel that little bit safer.

"Ri-Ri?" Arlo groggily calls for me. Spinning around, I run to his side and sit on the bed, seeing him look around the room in confusion before his gaze rests on mine. I pick up his hand and hold it tightly.

"It's going to be okay. You're safe now," I gently tell him. He doesn't reply, his eyes falling shut and his breathing steadying out almost instantly. Running my eyes over his chest, I see most of the bite marks are already healing, turning into closed wounds before my eyes, and he's turning less pale, more of the golden complexion he usually has. Gently letting his hand drop, I search the cupboards in the room and find bedsheets and pillows. It takes me a while to get Arlo comfy in the middle of the bed and then place a sheet on him and a pillow under his head. When I'm done, I pull off the coverings on two wardrobes and a chest of drawers. All of the furniture is new and from IKEA, if I'm not mistaken.

I wonder why Prince Reign makes the effort to have all this new stuff when his half of the island and his people live in the dark ages pretty much. Another set of questions I need to ask the elusive prince over dinner.

Grabbing my own pillow, I place it next to Arlo and lie on the bed, curling up into a ball at his side.

One of my friends saved, for now, and I have to hope Arlo has good answers about Austin when he wakes up.



“Ri-Ri?” Arlo’s groggy voice wakes me up, and I open my eyes to see him sitting up on the bed, staring down at me. “Am I dead? Are we dead?”

“No,” I say around a yawn, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. “I promise you we aren’t dead. It’s a long story.”

“Tell me everything,” he firmly states, his eyes narrowed. The playful Arlo I’ve always known is not here right now. I didn’t know he had a serious side until now. I gulp before blurting out everything from when I was taken by the stealers to rescuing him. “And then Prince Reign healed you and left us here. I don’t know if he is back, but he said he was cooking dinner.”

Arlo doesn’t say a word, just staring at me. “Why would you make that deal for me? You should have asked him to get you away from this island.”

I frown. “Because we’ve known each other since we were kids and you’re Austin’s best friend. I was never leaving this island without you.”

He seems to accept this and rubs his face. “I got to the party early with Austin to sort shit out and start the bonfire. Everything was fine until Austin noticed you were half an hour late, so he left me to go and find you. The last time I saw him was then, and I don’t think he came back.”

My heart pounds in my chest. “So he and Sophie might have met up and realised where I was. Given it’s half an hour back, they might have missed the attack.”

“Possibly. I never saw him on the ship or in the cells. But I never saw you until the auction,” he replies, and he reaches over, picking up my hand. We stare at each other, all our jokes and defensiveness we usually mess about with seems to wash away. “Thank you for saving me. I owe you big time, Ri-Ri.”

“Save my life if you can,” I reply, pulling my hand from his. “How are you feeling?”

He clears his throat before climbing off the bed, looking over his body. “Like nothing happened on the outside. The inside is a little different.”

“What happened with her? The vampire who bought you?” I ask, climbing off the bed myself and picking up the green cloak I found on the bed and handing it to Arlo. “Here, you should put this on. It’s cold in here.”

Arlo takes it and wraps it over his shoulders, then he pauses. He walks up to me, and I almost flinch as he touches the mark on my neck.

“I have one as well, not on my neck though,” he tells me and pulls up his trouser leg to reveal a mark just like mine on his calf, but it’s Prince Reign’s symbol. A dragon wrapped around a dagger within a circle of fire.

“Our marks to who we belong to. But Reign hasn’t marked me,” I reply. “But I suspect he will do.”

“Be careful about making any more deals with him. Vampires are evil, through and through,” he warns me.

Footsteps make us both go still, and the door flings open. “I should be insulted, but you’re both lucky I understand your hate for my kind. I am not a fan of yours.”

“Reign, I presume?” Arlo asks, crossing his arms tightly and stepping in front of me to protect me. But we both know nothing Arlo can do will stop Reign if he wanted to hurt me. I just think he doesn’t.

“*Prince* Reign in public, but behind closed doors and in my home, Reign is fine,” he replies, his eyes drifting from Arlo as I step around him. I notice the bags in his hands, and he places them on the floor. “These are for you both. Dinner is ready in half an hour.”

“Thank you, Reign,” I call out, even though Arlo gives me a sharp look. I’m thanking one of my kidnappers. I’m sure I look crazy. Reign doesn’t give away that he heard me as he leaves the room, shutting the door behind him.

“They aren’t human, Riona,” Arlo tells me.

“You never call me my full name unless I’m in trouble. I know you’re angry and hurt by them, I get it. I don’t want to be here any more than you do, and if they gave me half a chance, I would be on the first ship home, but we have to be smart,” I explain to him. “Smart enough to survive until we find a way to escape.”

He looks away. “Part of me just wants to kill them all.”

I place my hand on his upper arm, and he looks down at me, at my hand on his arm particularly. “I want the same. I’ve seen things... They have hurt me. I get it.”

“Good.” He covers my hand with his. “Because they are going to pay for everything.”

Arlo lets my hand go and walks to the bathroom, going inside and shutting the door, the lock clicking seconds later. *What the hell did that vampire bitch do to Arlo?*

Knowing that staring at the bathroom door, even as I hear the shower go on, isn’t going to help, I head to the bags. Two pairs of jeans, one for me and one for Arlo in the perfect size, are in one of the bags. In the other are a few plain T-shirts and underwear. Again all the right size. Well, I hope Arlo’s is, but if Reign got my size eight right, I’m sure he got Arlo’s. I pull out an outfit and place Arlo’s clothes on the bed for him before slipping into the walk-in wardrobe. I shut the door and get changed out of that dress, which I wish I could burn, and back into clothes that I actually like. The skinny jeans fit me like a glove, and the T-shirt is a little baggy, which works for me. I slide my boots back on and find a hairbrush to comb out my hair. When I go back into the bedroom, Arlo is dressed in the blue T-shirt and grey washed denim jeans, looking so normal and familiar that it hurts. He doesn’t stop staring my way, his green eyes running over my body.

“Even in hell, you make it beautiful.”

I stay there like a total idiot, unsure what to say or what I’m suddenly feeling when I look at him. It’s different. Something about us is different now from what it’s ever been. Maybe because Austin isn’t here, maybe because we have been through the trauma, we both understand. Whatever it is, something has changed.

Arlo realises he isn’t going to get a reply and nods his head to the door. “Let’s go. Hopefully, the vamp prince can cook.”

“He lives alone. No humans here but us, so likely he can,” I reply, thankful that the subject has been changed. I glance down at Arlo’s bare feet after he follows me out of the room. “And maybe we should ask for shoes for you.”

“One step at a time. We both already owe him,” Arlo mutters. “And I know vampires enough to know they won’t ever forget a debt.”

“Did you ever imagine there was a world like this? Vampires? Witches? Sirens?” I ask as we slowly find our way to the top of the staircase.

“No, and I wish the fuckers had stayed in the books and films where they belong,” he growls out before walking down the stairs. Every step is filled with anger, it’s bursting out of him, and I don’t know how to fix whatever is going on in his head. But I have a sneaking suspicion the sooner he is away from vampires, the better.

CHAPTER
TWENTY



“This way,” Reign commands, waiting for us at the bottom of the staircase. The prince of the vampires looks nothing but moody at best, lethal at worst, as he turns around. Arlo doesn’t look back, but his shoulders tense as I step off the bottom step to his side. Like Arlo is being dragged, he follows Reign around the glass staircase and to the back of the property, which is one large room with one hell of a view. A large crescent-shaped room is pure glass on the one side, looking over the sea from its place on the cliff, and the sun is setting slowly in the distance, bursting lights across the blue sky.

Right in the middle of the room is a dining table for four, with a dark green runner spread across the table and steaming food on plates in the middle. The rest of the room is plain, nothing more than a white piano on one side of the room and several doors leading off. Reign sits on one side of the table, and I sit with Arlo on the other. There are four pieces of steaming salmon on a gold plate, a bowl of vegetables, and a bowl of sweet potatoes.

“Thank you for cooking. It all looks good.”

He inclines his head but doesn’t say a word, even when my stomach rumbles aloud. We serve ourselves, and I try to pretend Reign doesn’t have a glass of blood as a drink, a big difference to the glass of water I have. The salmon is amazing, and it doesn’t take me long to eat everything before I place my knife and fork down.

“The kitchen is behind me through that door.” He points at the door for me. “Do not let yourself go hungry, you may help yourself.”

“Why are you so fucking nice?” Arlo cuts in. “She won’t fuck you, you know that?”

I cringe at his blunt statement. Reign slowly looks at Arlo. “I am aware my kind has impacted your judgment of us, but we are *all* the same. Yes, we are dangerous. Yes, we need blood to survive, and humans are our food source, but we are not all cruel.”

Arlo, who hasn’t touched a bit of his food, stands up. He sneers. “Yes, you all are.”

“Arlo—” I try to reach out for him, but he dodges my touch and walks away, heading up the stairs. I awkwardly sit back, looking at the bottom of the stairs like Arlo is going to come back. I am well aware he is not going to.

“The damaged need time to heal.”

I turn back to Reign, watching the casual prince. “Why do you have such a modern home? Why do you have so much respect for human life while your brother has none?”

Reign purposely picks up his drink and takes a long sip. “Who says I have respect for human life?”

“It’s clear you do,” I counter. “Tell me why.”

He sighs. “My mother was taken from the stealers, not born on this island. She was a brilliant and kind woman, who loved humans even when she was turned into a d’vampire by my father before he mated her. She taught me to respect human life because we are not that different from them. I remember those ten years I had with her vividly. But Maddox never had that, she died within a year of his birth.”

That makes a lot of sense. Maddox only had a grieving family to bring him up.

“And your father? What was his opinion?”

He sighs. “Humans were food, end of. Maddox is more like my father than I am.”

I turn my head to the side slightly. “Can I ask how your mother died? And your father, the king?”

His hand tightens on the glass. “I’m sure if you ask anyone, they will tell you, so it might as well be me.” He pauses and takes another drink, this time his bottom lip is coated in red blood, which he licks away. “My father only ever wanted one heir, me, and that’s why he named me Reign, but my mother wanted more children. For vampires and d’vampires to become pregnant, they need a potion made by sirens and blessed by witches, and she took one—unknown to her, a witch had placed a curse on it. See, my father hid all the potions, making sure that he would need to be asked for a vampire to have a child and therefore always being in control of the vampires.”

“Can vampires or d’vampires not have children with humans?” I question when he leans back in his seat, pausing his explanation.

“No, that is impossible and never has happened as far as I am aware,” he explains. “Back to my story. The second Maddox was born, my mother got sick, the curse was simple and effective. A year of pain and suffering, which built up and took her mind in the end. The everlasting curse, it is called, and it attached itself to Maddox for him to bear one day, when he falls in love.”

“I don’t understand. Will the curse kill him like your mother?” I question with a frown.

“No, the witch who cast the curse claimed it would kill the woman he loves, and that’s why Maddox never lets anyone close. It is why you must choose to come here at the end of all this. Even if you have to lie and say you are in love with me,” he coldly tells me, his voice empty of emotion. “The curse will kill anyone who loves him if he loves them back. And no one should die the way my mother did. No one.”

I believe him.

“Is the witch dead?” I ask.

He smiles. “Yes.”

One word but, damn, it scares me down to my bones. I dread knowing what was done to her, but she clearly deserved it. We drift into dead silence, and another question burns into my mind.

“Why did the witch curse your mother and brother?”

Reign crosses his arms and looks out over the sea. “That, we have never known. The witch never said why she did it, no matter how much she was tortured. We never found a cure or a way to end the curse either. I will find a way, somehow.”

“You look for a cure?” I ask. “For your brother?”

Reign looks down at the table. “No one deserves the death my mother bore. No one, especially not my brother.”

I stare at him, realising for the first time that he loves his brother. They don’t hate each other, not one little bit. I gulp and drink some water just before someone knocks on the door. I jump in my seat, confused at who might be here when Reign made it clear he likes to be alone. Reign looks even more confused.

“Come in, whoever the fuck it is!” he bellows, his voice echoing around the room.

The door slides open, and even the footsteps of whoever it is sound bossy before a woman comes into view. She is in modern clothes, black tight trousers and a white silky top, with pretty impressive knee-high boots. Her black hair is braided on one side of her head and falls to just under her chin, and she is pretty.

The vampire kind of pretty.

“Why the fuck do you never answer your phone?” the woman asks, placing her hands on her hips, glaring at Reign. “You’ve made it clear not to come up here, and then you don’t answer? Like, what the fuck?”

“Katy, your reason for being here best be important,” Reign eventually replies, glaring right back at her.

“Two more of the demented kids popped up and killed three humans. We have them cornered in a house, but as usual, we need your help. I’m not letting any of our vamps go in there with them,” she states.

“Kids?” I ask as Reign looks even more pissed off. Katy turns her gaze to me, like this is the first time she noticed I was here.

“A human date, Reign?” Katy arches an eyebrow at me. “Unlike you, but alright.”

“This is Katherine Chathair, and she is the head of my royal guard who runs the island and keeps it safe,” Reign finally introduces me. “Katy, this is Riona, the human from the auctions I’m sure you’ve heard about.”

Reign gets up as Katy looks down at me. “I didn’t know she was blonde.”

“Does that matter?” Reign mutters. “Take me to the kids.”

“I’m coming too,” I say, climbing up off my seat and chasing after them. Reign picks up his keys off a glass side table and looks back at me, but Katy walks out of the door.

“No, this isn’t safe,” he tells me.

I snort. “Nothing on this island is safe, and I want to see what is going on.”

He shakes his head. “Fine. But only if you tell me something.”

“What?” I ask, crossing my arms.

“Did my brother get called away for anything odd while you were there?” he asks.

The memory of Maddox’s lips on mine flashes into my mind, including the interruption I was thankful for. “Yes, the night before I came here, he was called away to something. Another one of something that bit someone, and it burned them from the inside out.”

He nods with a grim look. “They keep coming.” Without waiting for me, he walks out of the house, and I jog to keep up with him. Outside, Katy is waiting by the Jeep, and the second Reign unlocks the car, she climbs into the passenger seat. Reign opens the back passenger door for me, and I climb

in, doing my seat belt up as Reign gets in the Jeep himself. Seconds later, we are heading fast down through the forest, and I look up to see Katy staring at me, her bright blue eyes like cut diamonds in water.

“Why is the human here?”

Reign ignores her question. “Tell me about the children this time. Everything you know.”

“As usual, no one claims they are their children or has ever seen them before. The kids this time are a boy and girl. The boy looks about eight and the girl about ten. They both have modern human clothing on them, but vampire teeth and witch powers. Anyone they bite literally burns inside until they die or the kid drains them. They are as rabid as the other ones.”

“Other ones?” I echo in shock.

“There have been thirty of these children, who appeared all over the island in the last year. We don’t know where they are from or what they are,” he explains to me.

“You don’t kill them, do you?” I ask, remembering what Maddox said at the meal about not harming children. I know why he made it clear to me now. “I *know* Maddox doesn’t.”

“No one is allowed to harm the children or any children on this island under eighteen. It is a law we will kill vampires or humans alike over,” Reign firmly states. “These children are innocent and too young to be held accountable for their actions.”

“If they are wearing modern clothing, then they aren’t from the island. How are they getting here?” I ask.

Katy looks back at me with a little disgust but answers. “They appear out of nowhere, much like a witch can do. These children are controlling elements, like witches, but they don’t smell like witches. Their blood is like nothing we have seen.”

“Could they be half witch and half vampire?” I suggest.

“One: it is impossible to create such a being. Mixing our races has been tried before, and each time, the child has died before a year is up,” Reign explains to me. “Two: we have taken blood samples, and there are no vampire or witch blood cells. They are something new.”

“And evil. The kids aren’t right,” Katy adds in. “They brutally murder anyone in their way except for the royals, and they laugh about it. The children are demons, and I think—”

“Enough!” Reign growls. Katy glares at him but goes silent.

Demons?

“They don’t attack Reign or Maddox?” I gently ask.

“No, they listen to them,” Katy tells me. “It is strange.”

Not just strange, but honestly, terrifying.



REIGN FOLLOWS Katy’s directions through the empty streets of The Onyx, and I spend the time looking out my window, spotting the lights in the houses that are silent otherwise. News about the children must be out, that’s the only reason I know of as to why they are all hiding. But then again, I don’t know much about this island to begin with.

Why I care about Reign and Maddox’s problems is a box I’d rather not try to open anytime soon.

“Stay outside,” Reign very clearly tells Katy and me before slamming the brakes on. Katy closes her eyes and rests back in her seat as Reign climbs out the car. Ignoring his warning, because there is no way I’m staying in the car, I undo my seat belt and grab the door handle.

“That’s not a good idea, newbie,” Katy warns as I pull the handle. “Actually, no, go. The demon kids can kill you and stop the war you’re going to brew between the princes.”

“Nice to meet you too,” I mutter, rolling my eyes when she chuckles. I climb out the Jeep, my boots sticking to the stone floor, and I glance down, lifting my foot to see there is blood everywhere, dripping down between the stone. Swallowing the nausea in my throat, I walk around the Jeep and look up at the row of terrace houses. None of them has a single light on except for the house right in the middle, and the lights of the Jeep illuminate the trail of blood going up the steps to the open front door. Cold air whips around me, the silence of the night eerie to say the least, and then Reign appears.

He isn't alone.

Holding one of his hands is a little girl of about ten, and holding her hand is a boy who must be about eight.

And they are covered in blood. It is sticking to their clothes, dripping from their hair, and I can just make out their cute faces and bright, bright green eyes.

“No!” Reign roars as the girl lets go of his hand, and both the children kick him hard in the chest in the blink of an eye. Reign crashes through the house, and then the children are in front of me.

“Hello...,” I whisper, taking a step back, and they just move closer, looking up at me. “Can you speak?”

“Yes,” the girl states, a thick British accent coming through loud and clear. “And you are like us. Aren't you? Did they send you here like us?”

“What—” I pause as Reign gets to my side and pushes me behind him. He looks back at me in confusion before turning to the kids.

“Why didn't they hurt you?” he demands. “No one is safe from them except Maddox and me.”

“I-I...” My mumbled words don't make Reign any happier. He doesn't face me, keeping his eyes on the children like a switch might flip any second. “Did they actually speak to you? They have never spoken. None of the ones before.”

“Yes,” I carefully answer. Wow, the demon kids have only talked to me? Why the effing hell do they think I'm like them? “They are British, and

they said someone sent them here. I can tell you that much.”

The girl looks at me in clear confusion, and she then turns to the boy. I would guess they are siblings from their similar features.

Reign shakes his head and looks around, seeing curtains flickering and lights turning on. “We should leave. Katy will drive you back home. I will take the kids to the others.”

Reign takes both of their hands, which they happily offer. Then they are all gone in a moment, moving in that incredibly fast way they do.

“Get in, newbie, and tell me how you did that!” Katy hollers from the car.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE



“Arlo, come on, it’s been three days,” I shout through the locked door. Arlo doesn’t reply, not that I expected him to. For whatever reason, he has locked himself in the bedroom and only comes out to grab food and water in the middle of the night, never speaking to me. Reign never came back after the incident with the children, but Katy came by to pass on the message that he will be away for a few nights. “This big mansion is boring on my own.”

Nope. Nada.

Sighing, I leave him to his moping, because I’m not sure what else I can do for him. The vampires messed him up, and clearly he isn’t coping with it very well. I think I’m the odd duck for being able to cope and wanting nothing more than to escape or kill the vampires who kidnapped me. When Arlo is off this island, he can heal, and Austin will help with that.

If Austin isn’t here.

I shiver, wrapping the blanket I found around my shoulders and heading back into the main area. It’s got the best views of the entire house, which I’ve explored and found isn’t as big as it looks. Other than two living rooms, three other bedrooms and a couple of bathrooms, this place is empty. There are two massive garages with only two cars in them. One is a black Jeep, and the other is a vintage red Jaguar in perfect condition by the looks of it. Like the entire house. Nothing is out of place unless I do it, and I’m bored out of my mind. Without planning it, I make my way to the garage

and stop in front of the Jeep, seeing the keys in the ignition. I gnaw on my bottom lip for a moment, thinking of all the many ways this could go wrong before deciding to just do it. Reign said I wasn't a prisoner, and I'm never going to escape this island by being trapped in this mansion like a damn princess.

No, I need to go into the town. Talk to people. Find out things the princes will never tell me. Maybe someone is already planning a way to escape the island. There must be a way. I clip my seat belt on and stare at the closed garage doors. Bugger. Undoing my seat belt, I quickly search around the edges of the garage door before finding a switch and pressing it. The garage door slides up, and I grin as I run back to the car. Climbing in once again, I do up my seat belt and turn the engine on after raising the seat a little bit. Once the garage door is fully open, I press down on the gas and get the hell out of here. It feels amazing to be driving, and the small amount of freedom brings a smile to my face. Clueless which way to go, I follow the road down through the forest and turn left at the end. The windy path is harder to navigate than I thought, and I only now realise Reign is a much better driver than he lets on. Strangely, I think under different circumstances, Reign might be a good person. The same can't be said of his brother, who is always popping into my mind. Why I can't stop thinking of his lips against mine, the way his hard chest felt under my hands...

How I felt in his arms.

"Dammit," I mutter just as the engine cuts out on the Jeep, and I harshly slam on the brakes, jolting my whole body forward. I gasp, sliding back in the seat and rubbing my shoulder where the seat belt jabbed in. Turning the key, I try the engine, and all it gives me is a limping whine. "No, no, no, no."

I try it a few more times, not wanting to accept my sheer dumb luck, before I look outside, just as it begins to snow. Fuck my life. At this point, the vampires should eat my stupid ass. I search the car and find a leather jacket two sizes too big and pull it on before leaving the stupid car and walking back the way I came. I don't know how long I walk before I realise I'm lost, and the road drifts off into a dead end in the middle of the forest. Gritting my teeth against the falling snow, which has made my trousers and boots soaked and the leather jacket stick to me, I keep walking in the direction of

the sound of the sea. If I can find a cliff, maybe I can trace my way back to the house and explain to Reign what happened to his car.

Kicking a stick across the ground, I wrap my arms around myself as I keep walking, the forest trees keeping some of the snow off me the deeper I head into it.

“Well, what is a girl like you doing out in the prince’s forest?” a man asks. Rather than feeling relief about someone else being here, I feel nothing but dread as I turn around to see two vamps a few feet away from me. They move silently, and I jar back a little bit. Dressed in camouflage clothes, one of them has a deer on his shoulder, its blood dripping down his clothes. Both of them have deeply tanned skin, bright hazel eyes, and muddy brown hair.

“I live with Prince Reign, and I’m lost. I’m sure he will thank you if you could direct me back to his home,” I answer, projecting as much confidence as I can into my voice.

They don’t answer for a long time, the only sound is the wind, and all I can smell is the deer’s blood mixing with the earthy scents of the forest.

“Do you think she is the blonde the princes are sharing?” one of them suggests.

I turn to the other. “Yeah, she must be. The princes could have any pussy on the island, why do they want to share this one?”

“Must be special,” the other answers, and a new fear starts to sink into me. They might do worse than just bite me. Oh god. Before they can even reply to each other, I turn and run on instinct. The vampires’ laughter is the only noise that follows me for a long time, and I know it’s because they could let me run for hours and still catch up to me within seconds.

It’s a game to them.

And I’m so fucked.

Swallowing down the fear, I focus on running and jumping over fallen logs, hoping that someone will come to save me. That they won’t get me.

But what feels like seconds later, I crash headfirst into one of the vamps, and I scream as I try to fight his grip as he wraps his arms around me.

“Let me go!” I scream over and over. He just laughs at me, like I’m nothing more than a toy, and roughly grabs my neck, turning it to the side. His teeth sink harshly into my neck, ripping my skin as he drinks from me. “No! Help! Please...please.”

Everything starts to fade, even as I feel the vamp ripping at my clothes, his hands running over my skin. Dark spots attack my vision, and I feel helpless. I feel alone.

Suddenly the vamp lets me go, and I collapse onto the floor, my legs feeling like jelly and unable to hold me up. Screams fill my ears, male screams and not my own.

And I laugh. I just keep laughing until my laugh turns into sobs.

“I prefer the laughing, if I must say,” Maddox claims, standing over me. He takes off his cloak and wraps me up, picking me up into his arms. The fear and loneliness drift away as I look at him.

I feel protected. Protected by the Mad Prince.

“How are you here?” I groggily question, feeling myself slipping away into the darkness, unable to hold myself awake much longer.

As I drift off, I swear I hear him reply to me.

“I could never force myself to be far from you. Damn my soul and yours.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO



For the third time, I wake up with blood in my mouth and feel tired before I've even opened my eyes. Sensing eyes on me, I turn my head to the side to see Arlo lying on his side, his big eyes watching me as I reach for my neck, feeling the torn skin is nothing more than scratches now with dried blood cracking as I touch it.

"Why did you run without me?"

Keeping my eyes on Arlo, I frown. "I didn't run. I just went for a drive."

"I can't lose you. I'm sorry, I should have been there," Arlo whispers, reaching over and cupping my cheek. I freeze for a second, unsure of what he is doing. "I shouldn't have pushed you away."

"What the fuck were you doing out in the woods without my mark?" Reign all but shouts. Sitting up sharply, I watch Reign storm over to the bed and stand over me, his arms crossed. His tail flickers behind him in the air, looking as angry as he is.

"I went for a drive." I pause. "And your car broke down. I wasn't planning a stroll through the woods in the snow. Nor did I expect for two of your people to attack me or Maddox to save me. It just all happened."

"You were so fucking lucky Maddox was there, or you'd be dead," Reign growls. "I didn't want to mark you so soon, but you can't leave this house without protection or my mark. Do you understand?"

"I don't want your mark," I firmly state.

He narrows his eyes at my neck where his brother's mark rests. "I see. Then I will hire a bodyguard to follow you when you leave. Same for you, Arlo, unless you will wear my mark."

Lifting his trouser leg up, he shows Reign. "I am marked by you."

Reign looks back my way and I turn to Arlo, pleading with my eyes alone. I don't want another mark on me.

"The bodyguard will be better for us. We seemed to have attracted unwanted attention," Arlo emotionlessly answers, and Reign nods, his lips falling into a grim line before he turns and starts to walk away.

"Wait!" I call after him. These damn vampires keep walking away from me all the time before I've gotten a word in edgeways. "What happened to the children? Are they alright? Has there been more?"

"Children?" Arlo asks, but I ignore him. He should have damn well answered his door when I tried to tell him what happened. Reign stops at the door and turns back, his eyes falling on me.

"They keep calling out a name. All of them, again and again, between eating, drinking and sleeping," he tells me, dread leaking into my core. "Your name, Riona Dark. Why is that?"

"I have no idea," I honestly tell him.

"The problem is, I believe you do not, and that worries me because someone knows why you're here and why you can resist compulsion. Why these demonic children call for you and talk to you," he replies, and if I weren't scared before, I am now. "My brother and I have called a truce to find out where these children are coming from and what they have to do with you before they cause more havoc than they already have. Every inch of your personal and family history is being pulled up. We have even asked the stealers why they chose the beach party they stole you from, to make sure it was just a random choice."

"And what did they say?" I ask.

His eyes narrow, anger seeping into his voice. "Not much before Maddox murdered them for talking about you. My brother will not have anyone

“speak of you, about you, or still breathe if they have touched you. He made that clear.”

I shiver as he slams the door behind him, and I lie back on the bed. Arlo wordlessly slides his hand into mine and locks our fingers.

“I’m not hiding anymore. I’m here for you, Ri-Ri.”

I roll onto my side and press my head onto his shoulder, something I used to do when we were young kids in the fields behind my house. That was before we became enemies because he cut all the hair off my Barbie dolls when I was six. We would sneak out at night and watch the stars. He, Austin and I would lie together for hours. “Good, because I need a friend.”

He doesn’t reply, leaning down and kissing the top of my head, but he is here for me, and that is enough.



“HELLO, PRINCESS RUNAWAY.” Katy’s sarcastic voice makes me jump, and the glass of water I was holding slips out of my hand. Somehow she moves fast across the room, catching the glass just before it hits the ground, and smoothly stands up, offering me it. “Princess Clumsy is a better name perhaps.”

“My name is Riona, and thanks,” I reply, taking the glass. She grins at me. “Why are you here?”

“Aren’t you bossy, Miss Perfect?” she asks with another nickname. “I’m here because Reign asked me to babysit you.”

“You mean you’re the bodyguard?”

“Babysitter, but sure,” she answers around a yawn. “Where’s the fucked up friend Reign mentioned?”

“His name is Arlo, and don’t be a bitch,” I snap. She turns back, arching an eyebrow.

“I could kill you in a second,” she warns.

“But you won’t,” I reply with a smirk.

“Don’t you acclimate well to the situation you’ve found yourself in. How many times have you been bitten? How much vamp blood have they given you?” she questions, walking right up into my face. “Why aren’t you screaming and running away at the terror your life is sunk in right now?”

“Because Riona is the bravest woman I’ve ever known,” Arlo answers for me, walking into the kitchen.

“Being brave is stupid,” Katy replies, her eyes on Arlo. “You must be the recluse.”

“Arlo O’Dargan,” he introduces himself, his eyes drifting from me to her. “You are?”

“Katherine Chathair, but I like being called Katy. I’m a vamp and your new bodyguard. I’m moving in for now, and I will be a scream away. Don’t fucking leave without me, or I will personally gut you both myself and then heal you before doing it all over again,” she warns, knocking Arlo’s shoulder on purpose on her way out the door.

“She’s a bundle of kindness and light, isn’t she?” Arlo jokes, walking over to the fridge and opening it up. “Has Reign or any of the vamps heard of milk before?”

“Doesn’t seem like it,” I say, pulling a grim face. “No tea either. They basically live like savages.”

Arlo laughs with me and grabs an orange juice bottle instead. I watch him as he takes a long drink, his top riding up and clenching around his muscular arms.

Shaking my head, I ask, “Were you here when Maddox brought me back?”

Arlo frowns. I don’t even need to hear his answer to know he was now. “Yes. The vampire prince threw me down the stairs when I tried to get close to see you.”

“He did what?” I question with wide eyes.

“I’m fine.” Arlo waves it off. “I’ve been fed vamp blood for a long time, Riona, I think it’s changing me. I was knocked out by the fall, but I woke up fine. Not a bruise in sight.”

“I don’t think it’s safe for us to keep drinking their blood to heal,” I point out as the toaster dings, and my toast pops up.

“I’m not the one who keeps getting seriously hurt and needing it. I have no intention of drinking any unless I’m forced,” he tells me. I ignore his almost accusing voice and carry on the conversation.

“So Maddox, did he talk to Reign?”

“Yes, Reign came storming in the house and woke me up. When I told him about you, we both ran up to find Maddox sitting with you in his arms on the bed. He looked...” Arlo drifts off, and I see his hand tense. “Maddox is protective of you. Reign was shocked, more so when Maddox offered a truce to sort out the current problem involving you.”

“He offered Reign a truce?” I ask. “I thought Reign would have made a bargain with him, to be honest. Maddox doesn’t seem like the truce sort of man.”

“He isn’t a man, he is a monster, Riona,” Arlo snaps. “Don’t forget that because he saved your life. He would just as easily destroy it.”

“I know,” I admit, turning my back on Arlo and spreading butter over my toast. I won’t be forgetting monsters exist anytime soon. Even if they save my life and kiss me in a way that is unforgettable. “I’m going to walk around the house, see if I can find a TV anywhere.”

Arlo doesn’t reply as I bite into my toast and head out the kitchen door into a corridor. I check the first two rooms, finding nothing in them, and the third one down is a different door. It’s a steel door, and it takes me several pushes to get it open before I stumble in. The lights automatically go on, but they don’t need to, as on the floor is a glowing orb under a floor of glass.

The orb spins on its own, floating on nothing, and I stare at it, feeling strange. I don’t notice my feet walking to it or when I lean down, seeing my

reflection in the glass. My eyes are glowing the same green as the orb, so brightly that I can't look at myself for long.

For just a second, I swear my body glows a bright blue, and I stumble back, reaching for the door. I rush out of the room as quickly as I can, letting the heavy door slam shut behind me.

I just found one of the orbs, and I never want to go near it again.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE



“Why is he sitting on a horse, and why is there a horse with no rider?” I question no one in particular. Reign sighs, the noise drifting over to me from his chair. Arlo lifts himself off the bottom step and comes to take a look through the window at the Mad Prince. Despite the fact it is strange he is on a horse, he does look the part. His horse is pure black, matching his thick and high-necked cloak and black trousers. Heavy boots rest in the stirrups, and bits of snow blow around the handsome prince. He looks like the devil. All things you shouldn’t stare too long at but you can’t help yourself. No doubt feeling my eyes on him, Maddox turns my way, locks of his black hair flickering in front of his dark eyes. His lips tilt in an amused way, and he lifts his hand, curling his fingers towards him.

Damn if that isn’t sexy.

Arlo clears his throat, and I turn to him, seeing him searching my face before he wraps his arms around me, pulling me against him. “Be careful and keep your distance.”

“Are you going to be okay?” I ask him, hugging him back.

“I’ll be alive,” he whispers. “And that is down to you. I won’t ever forget that, and I need you back.”

“Here,” Reign interrupts, and I’m a little bit thankful for it, as Arlo choosing now to be serious isn’t the best idea. I turn to see Reign hand me

my cloak, the red one Maddox gave me. He helps me slide it over my T-shirt and jeans, and I do up the buttons. Arlo opens the door, looking like he would rather be doing anything else. I try to give him a reassuring smile as I walk out and right up to the devil on a horse.

“Good morning, Riona. How is my violent little human?” he asks me, his voice thick with amusement. “I take it you haven’t stabbed anyone recently? I would hate to have missed that.”

“I’ve told you once before, Prince Maddox, if you wish to see me stab someone, give me something sharp that could kill you,” I counter.

He laughs and slides off his horse, taking a few steps towards me. “Your lack of respect is refreshing. I usually kill those who speak to me as you do, but for some reason, I like how you speak to me.”

His eyes drift over me when I don’t reply, and whatever he sees makes his smile drop, and he suddenly looks less than impressed. “Who is the human man who looks at you like you are his?”

“That’s Arlo, and he doesn’t—” I cut off as Maddox starts walking towards the house. I step in front of him, placing my hand on his chest, which makes him pause. His eyes trace my arm and up my neck, roaming across my face until he meets my eyes. “Don’t. Please.”

He stares at me for a long time, and my heart beats so fast through every second of it. I don’t expect him to listen to me, I don’t really even know why I stepped forward when it’s clear Maddox does what Maddox wants to do. So when he takes a step back and my hand falls, only for Maddox to catch it, I couldn’t be more surprised. He lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss on my palm. “For you.”

Holy. Shit.

Maddox doesn’t let go of my hand, tugging me over to the grey horse with no rider. “The last time I rode a horse, I was ten.”

“Good, so you won’t fall off, seeing as you have learnt,” he replies, letting go of my hand.

“No, I didn’t mean—” I end my sentence on a squeal as Maddox picks me up by my waist and lifts me onto the horse. I slide into the saddle, not really having a choice unless I want to fall off the other side, and grab the reins. “Maddox, I am not a good rider. I don’t remember how to be!”

“Then the ride should be amusing to say the least,” the jackass replies, pulling my left foot into the stirrup and adjusting the length for me. I narrow my eyes at him, which only makes him laugh as he walks around the horse and adjusts the other stirrup before walking off to his own horse. He effortlessly jumps and lands on the horse’s back, grabbing the reins and clicking with his tongue. His horse instantly goes into a trot, and my horse follows suit without a word from me, and I hold onto the reins for dear life.

I don’t think I ever liked horse riding as a kid, but my mum taught me everything she possibly could from piano to riding to gymnastics. But my heart settled on art, and now I remember the reasoning for it.

Maddox clicks his tongue again, and his horse breaks out into a much faster gallop, and of course, my horse does the same. This time, I keep my head down, my hair whipping around in the air as we speed through the forest and down the roads. I lose track of time, even as my hands start to feel frozen to the reins, and my thighs burn from the ride. But not wanting to be a laughing stock, I hold on all the way until we get to the edge of the town where Maddox slows down. My horse slows down at his side as I hear music playing.

“Why are we here?” I ask with some nervousness. For all I know, this could be a mass murder party, and knowing Maddox, the chances are high that it is. Or something worse.

“I have to collect something here before we return home,” he answers as we get to the first row of houses. Anyone we pass immediately falls to their knees on the street, even the few human children I spot around. Maddox doesn’t even notice them, steering his horse through the streets and past a party. The party music is so loud, being played on several loudspeakers, that they don’t notice us. The humans are dancing in a tight group of at least a few hundred, and their laughter makes me smile for a second. Other than their dresses being so different from anything I’ve seen people wear, it is

almost normal. I feel myself aching for that life I once had, where going to parties and dancing like this with Sophie until the sun came up was normal.

My horse comes to a halt, and I look over to see Maddox is jumping off his horse. He comes over to me and nods his head to tell me to get off before he pulls his hood up over his head.

“I can stay on and wait for you,” I suggest, because I’d rather sit here watching the party than join in collecting whatever he is here for.

“Off,” he instructs. I glare at him, which only makes his lips tilt up, and let him wrap his hands around my waist and pull me off the horse. He purposely slides my body down his, making me feel every hard inch of him, then lifts my hood up, tucking a wayward strand of my hair behind my ear. My cheeks are bright red as he gives me a devilish grin and takes my hand in his, tugging me along with him. I jog a little to keep up with his long strides all the way into the crowd of humans, and I shortly realize there are a few vamps in the crowd, dancing with each other or humans as we pass them. All the air leaves my lungs as Maddox wordlessly pulls my body against his and cups the back of my neck, arching my head up so he can look at me.

“What are you doing, Maddox?” I all but breathe out. My heart pounds as I stare at him, noticing how inhumanly beautiful he is. His soft black locks of hair float just above his shoulders, the silver rings and red small crystals catching the light, and his eyes are so strange, but there is no other word for them except enchanting. The red and black mix together like a hurricane meeting land, and yes, he might be the most insane person I’ve ever met, but I will admit to myself that he is hard not to think about. Not to stare at. Not to notice how good he smells, a mixture of cedarwood and almost cinnamon-like smell. It reminds me of home, of my mum’s cooking.

In Maddox’s arms, as he forces us to dance like two lovers, I feel safe.

And that is more frightening than anything on this island.

“Maddox...what are you doing?”

I repeat my question, needing to know his answer. His hips move in time to the beat, and his hands move my body along with his. Damn, he can dance.

“I am not sure,” he answers, breathing the words into my ear. “But I will never regret this moment with you.”

“But I might,” I whisper back.

He laughs, the deep throaty laugh making me shiver. “Dance with the monster, Riona. Just dance.”

And goddamn my sinful soul, I do. Pushing all thoughts aside about how wrong this is, I wrap my arms around his neck, his soft hair brushing my wrists, and I let him control the dance, our bodies plastered together. We fit. So perfectly, so naturally, and it feels so good to be this close to him. I close my eyes and move closer, resting my head against his shoulder, and his hand circles my waist under my cloak, his fingers brushing against my bare skin, making my skin break out in goose bumps. If anyone knows it is the prince, they don’t seem to care; they are all lost in themselves and their partners, in the music, in the dance. I watch them for a long time in Maddox’s arms, and I realize they are happier than I thought they might be. Yes, they are trapped and used as food, but their spirit is not broken.

“We must go,” Maddox reluctantly tells me as a song comes to an end, and he pulls away from me, his expression turning cold again. “Come.”

“What are you getting?” I ask once we are out of the dancers, and I try to pretend none of that happened even as every bit of where Maddox touched me is burned into my memory. Of course, he doesn’t answer as we head down street after street and around tiny corners, under archways, and finally come to a stop in front of four houses with their own little gardens around them. Maddox pushes the white picket fence gate open and walks down the path towards the house, but before he can get to the steps leading up, the door opens and a man walks out.

“This will get you what you wish, Prince Maddox. I do hope you keep up your end of the bargain,” the man coldly states, and in front of Maddox’s feet, a tiny red box appears.

Maddox picks the box up, sliding it into his pocket and turning around, walking away without saying a word, dragging me along by my hand. “Maddox, what was that? Is it to do with the children?”

Maddox shakes his head, pulling me into a nearby alleyway, pushing me against the wall with his body. “Careful what you say in public about that subject. Too many ears are listening.”

“Then tell me what was in the box,” I counter.

He leans closer. “Are you bribing me?”

“Trying to. Is it not clear?” I sarcastically reply.

His laugh almost, almost, makes me laugh with him. My lips pull up though, even when I can’t stop it. “For that little move, I am going to make us ride back up the mountain instead of taking the carriage. Don’t think you have any power over me, little human. I am always going to be the prince, and you will always be the human.”

He lets me go, roughly taking my hand and dragging me through the streets. I try to fight his grip, but it’s impossible, and all I do is hurt my own hand when he won’t let go. “You’re a bastard!”

He laughs. “I know.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR



“Ah, oui, madame, I missed you this week,” Hector claims when I walk into the kitchen, my legs still sore from the hours of horse riding up the frigging mountain yesterday. I barely remember walking into the castle or finding my way to my bed. After a warm shower this morning, I feel a little bit better, but I’m still pissed. Hector slides a cup of tea and a plate of pancakes with fruit over to me. “Make you smile, oui?”

“You’re too good to be working for Maddox,” I tell Hector, and he winks at me before going back to cooking.

“You should eat with me,” Maddox says as an introduction as he walks in the room, Cross at his side. Cross softly smiles at me, and I vaguely remember saying hello to him yesterday and him handing me a hot water bottle to take to bed. “This is the kitchens.”

“Maybe I prefer to eat alone and not with the man who forced me to ride up a mountain yesterday,” I reply, cutting up my pancake. I place a bit on my fork, and Maddox steals the fork from my hand, shoving the pancake in his mouth before handing me it back. “You’re an asshole.”

Cross coughs, hiding a laugh, and Maddox shrugs his shoulders as he sits, chewing his food. I cut my pancake up one more time, and he lets me eat it, making sure to watch me the entire time.

“We are going out for the day,” Maddox claims.

“No,” I answer, putting my fork down. “What makes you think I want to go anywhere with you?”

“What makes you think you have a choice?” he counters right back and slides off his seat. “Hector, make us lunch to go with whatever Riona likes and my usual.” He turns his eyes back to me. “Be downstairs in twenty minutes.”

“Have you heard of saying please?” I call out, even though he has used his vampire speed to leave and is likely too far away to hear me. Rolling my eyes, I turn back to my pancakes and eat them, feeling Cross staring at me from across the room.

“What is it?” I ask him, turning around on my seat. Cross has a notebook in his hands, and he is writing in it, but his eyes swiftly turn up to me.

He smiles, but it’s a tense smile at best. “Nothing for you to worry about. Perhaps you should get down to Maddox. He isn’t a patient man.”

“I think everyone on The Onyx knows that,” I point out, sliding off my seat. Hector pushes a picnic basket over to me, and I pick it up. “Thank you for breakfast and this. See you both later.”

“Have fun, madame,” Hector calls to me as I leave the room. Hearing Cross walk across to Hector, I pause by the door for a second, out of sight.

“Do you think she can be trusted?” Cross asks.

Hector instantly replies. “The only part of that girl I don’t trust is Maddox’s obsession with her and how clueless she is.”

“I doubt it is more than lust. Once it plays out, he will forget about her,” Cross replies. “The sooner the better for what we have planned.”

What the hell are they planning? And why does it have anything to do with me?

Hearing Cross move across the room, I quickly run down the corridor, something in the basket making a noise as I run, no doubt giving me away. Knowing I need to watch my back in this place, I make a mental note to dig for information on Cross and Hector, and what they could be planning. I’m

not sure how I'm going to do that, but I will figure it out like everything else. Maddox is waiting outside the castle, next to a horse and carriage this time. He gives me one of those terrifying but sexy as sin smiles as he opens the door to the carriage and waves me in. I shove the basket into his chest, ignoring his outstretched hand, and climb into the carriage, sitting on one side. Maddox chuckles as he climbs in after me and places the basket on one side before sitting right next to me, his whole body pressed into my side.

The carriage takes off a few minutes after a man shuts the door, and I rest back, watching out the window at the red snow trickling down the mountain.

"Can vampires feel the cold?" I question. "I know you feel hot to touch, but do you feel that?"

"We feel everything humans do," he answers. "Cold, hot, pleasure, and everything you can think of."

He purrs the word *pleasure*.

I roll my eyes and cross my arms, which only makes me brush against him further. "What did my boring as fuck brother do with you the entire week?"

My lips twitch. "Nothing much other than saving my brother's best friend and earning my respect."

"Reign is always the saviour, and I am the snake," he replies, and for a second I want to tell him he doesn't have to be the bad guy all of the time. He could change. But then I think better of it, remembering vividly all those I've seen him kill. "This Arlo, is he your friend or your brother's?"

"Both. We all grew up together," I tell him. "And if you kill him, I will find a way to kill you."

He looks down at me, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Don't say things like that, my violent little human. You make it sound like a challenge. And I love a challenge."

"Just don't, Maddox," I warn him.

“I find it amusing how you think you have power over me,” he replies with a cool laugh, and he looks away. My cheeks burn as I glare out the window at the mountain like it is the reason Maddox is such a dick. Of course, it isn’t, and I rest my head back as the carriage takes us down the mountain and through the forest. We stop suddenly, and Maddox kicks the door open, climbing out with the basket and offering me his hand once again. I laugh, pushing his hand away and jumping out on my own. My black jeans and light pink T-shirt do little against the cold of the air, and I almost wish I had the red cloak Maddox gave me.

“This way,” he instructs, pointing at a bunch of bushes and trees in the distance.

“Where are we?” I question as I walk alongside him. I don’t see where else I could go at this point.

“I found this place when I was a kid. I used to run through the forests a lot to escape my father and brother,” he tells me, his voice void of emotion. “I don’t know why, but I wanted to show you this place.”

“Like a date?” I question.

He gives me a malicious grin. “Ah, you’ve seen through my master plan. Now I have you all alone. All mine.”

I don’t respond to that as we get to the bushes and he climbs through. I follow, a few sticks and leaves sticking to my hair and scratching my skin, until we come out on a small beach. The sound of the waves must’ve been hidden by the thick trees surrounding the beach, as I never heard it. I would never have guessed this was here.

Thick waves brush against the nearly white sand, and it’s warm, oddly so when it was cold a second ago.

“How is it warm here?” I ask.

“This island was created by magic. This place is always warm, and the sea is as well, up to a point,” he explains to me, but his eyes stay on my face, watching me so intently. “Can you see why I like it here?”

“Do you bring every girl you’ve wanted here? I can see how it would charm them,” I counter. “But not me. A beach won’t make me forget who you are.”

He brushes off my comment. “No one knows of this place but you and me. Oh, and I guess the driver I compel, but he forgets everything I say after an hour.”

I meet his gaze, feeling the truth in his words. “I have nothing to swim in.”

His eyes burn with something else, a desire I’ve seen more than once there. “I like to swim without clothes. You are welcome to do the same.”

“No, thank you,” I mutter, walking onto the beach and away from the very, very tempting prince. I eye lots of seashells as I walk along, and I lean down, picking up a curved one before sitting down. Maddox sits next to me, leaning back on his hands and looking up at the sun. His golden skin looks almost luminous under the light, and it’s stunning, but another sharp reminder of who he is. “Reign told me about your mother and father, and the orbs. He told me about the children, and you must know they talked to me.”

“I do not like that my brother took you to them. They could have killed you, and it was reckless of him,” Maddox replies. “You are human, and he forgets it.”

“I’m sorry about your parents, Maddox,” I say, getting to my point. “And I might be human, but I am never safe on this island. I won’t stay locked in a room.”

“My mother did just that after I was born. The curse took almost a year to kill her, and she never left the room, worried somehow that the curse would affect my father or brother...or me. We only found out what actually happened and what the curse was many years later,” he answers, and I hurt for him. “I can’t remember her, but Reign and my father told me of her beauty, stories of her kindness, and I wish I had met her.”

This is a new side of Maddox. One I didn’t know he had. “Reign told me he looks like his mother, and you follow your father.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Maybe in personality, yes. My father taught me my place in the world.”

“So he made you cruel?” I question. Maddox turns towards me, swiftly moving with one jump and landing on top of me, pushing me back into the sand. My heart pounds as he looks down at me and very slowly brushes his body against mine. His knee forcibly parts my legs and pushes against my core, making me gasp as sparks of pleasure fly through me.

“I can be cruel,” he softly speaks, leaning down closer. I stay still, not fighting him, not even sure what I am doing. All I know is I shouldn’t be under him, and I certainly shouldn’t be feeling any of the things I am. “But.” He pauses, his minty breath blowing across my lips. “I can be yours.”

“I will never be yours, Maddox.”

His lips press against mine. “We will see about that.”

Then he pushes his lips harder against mine, his tongue sinking into my mouth and swirling with my own. Pleasure blasts through my body as he presses his knee harder against my core, controlling my mouth with every single movement. His hand slides down my chest, cupping my breast over my top and brushing his thumb against my hard nipple. Before I can stop myself, my toes curl in my shoes, and I crash into an incredible orgasm as I’ve never felt before, tightening around nothing and crying out against Maddox’s lips. Waves of pleasure don’t stop for a while as Maddox slows down the kiss and pulls me up onto his lap. He cups my cheek with his hand, gripping my hip with the other.

“You will be mine. That was only the start, Riona Dark.”

In a daze, I can only stare, wondering what the hell is wrong with me. I just let a literal monster get me off, and all I can think about is how I want him to do it again. How I want him buried inside of me.

I shake my head and quickly climb off his lap, stumbling backwards, and he laughs as I walk away to the sea, needing some space. The sea only seems to judge me as much as I am.

I’m addicted to a monster’s touch, and what exactly does that say about me?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE



Stupid betraying body.

Silly hormones that don't understand that hot guy is a vampire who kills people for sport and food.

I grab another set of weeds and pull on it hard, tugging the roots from the ground like I wish I could tug feelings from my chest. I've spent years in college and all that time in high school dating idiot boys and never letting them have more than a kiss because I wanted something special. Sophie could never understand it, and honestly, at high school, it was easier because Austin scared half the guys into never pushing it with me. College, there was so much opportunity, but I buried myself in work and lived for Sophie's stories of guys rather than experience it myself.

Then I'm forced out of my comfort zone into a world of vampires, blood and pain. And this is the point I choose to lower my guard to a sexy vampire prince who has no morals and is more dangerous than I could possibly imagine?

He has literally murdered people in front me, and yet my body still lights up like a Christmas tree the second he walks into the room. The betrayer.

"If you rip those weeds out any harder, you might end up pulling the whole bed up," Cross warns me as he comes into the conservatory. I sigh, dropping the weeds into the wheelbarrow, and wipe a layer of sweat off my forehead.

“Morning,” I reply, standing up and turning around.

“Prince Maddox wanted you to join him for breakfast,” he tells me, explaining the reason he is here.

I huff. “Tell him I’m not hungry, thank you, and I want to get this section done today.”

Cross sighs. “You really want me to be punched today, don’t you?”

“Tough luck,” I answer, turning around and getting back to work. I dig my hands into some weeds as Cross comes over and sits on the edge of the water fountain near where I’m working. He watches me silently for a long time until I can’t take the weirdness of the situation much longer.

“Do you want to leave this island?” I ask him.

He nods once, clearing his throat. “That is a subject we shouldn’t speak on in a castle with many ears.”

“If you’re going to stay here with me, you need to talk about something. The silence is just...well, I don’t like it,” I tell him, “unless I’m alone, but even then I would have music on back home or at uni.”

“What is your favourite music?” he enquires.

“I like a bit of everything, but my heart lies in indie pop,” I explain, chucking the weeds in the wheelbarrow and grabbing another one. “What about you?”

“I like a bit of rock, if I’m being honest,” he replies with a deep chuckle. “I should tell you there is a guest coming tonight for dinner. A witch I’ve not met or heard of before. Maddox doesn’t invite any strangers into his home unless he plans to kill them, and he won’t kill a witch because it might break the truce.”

“There is a truce?” I question.

He picks at the cotton shirt he has on. “Yes. The witches and sirens made a truce after the vampire queen passed and everyone found out what had happened. They all worked together to try to find the witch who made the curse, but no one could find her for a long time. Then she just appeared,

like a gift and none of us knew who sent her. She was destroyed, but they still meet every month for dinner, the one you attended, and keep the truce for their people.”

“So why is this witch coming here then?” I ask.

“I am unsure, but I know Maddox has a dress on its way for you,” he answers. “I thought you might like to be aware in advance.”

“Thanks,” I tell him as he stands up. He pauses, looking down at me. “Don’t give up hope, Riona. I believe our fate is not on this island.”

“You believe in fate?” I ask.

“Do you not?” he counters.

“No, I believe we all make our own way in life, and even though I’ve seen magic is real, I struggle to believe there is some higher power guiding our lives and there is nothing we can do about it,” I say.

He stares at me strangely for a second before walking away, leaving me in the cold greenhouse once more. I spend the next few hours ripping out all the weeds and using the cutters to sort out the edges of the plant, which I’m not sure what it even is. Now it will have a chance to grow at least. I grab the broom and tidy up around the bed, proud of myself for having one-quarter of this place done already.

My stomach rumbles, reminding me I haven’t eaten or had anything but a glass of water since I woke up. Knowing I can’t avoid the whole castle, I head up to the kitchen, seeing no one on the way. Hector isn’t in here, but there is a plate covered in foil with a note on top with my name on it. I unpeel the foil to find jam and peanut butter sandwiches and some strawberries and a banana. I quickly eat the food, not realizing how hungry I was until I take the first bite. When I’m done, I find a bottle of water and clean my plate before going back into the corridor.

Walking to the bottom of the steps, I look at the doors to Maddox’s rooms, and I start walking towards them without giving myself a reason why. The two reception rooms are empty other than the roaring fires in the fireplace and little else. Slowly I walk through into the corridor, past Maddox’s closed bedroom doors and to the room with the paintings. Walking up the

winding staircase to the top, I expect Maddox or Cross to find me, but the castle is silent. The floor creaks as I walk up into the dimly lit room full of canvases in piles and dozens of them on easels. But right in the middle of the room is a plain canvas on an easel, and written on it is:

For you, Riona.

My cheeks burn in the cold room, and I sigh, looking at the canvas and wishing that I could accept the gift, but it came from him. I try to ignore the gift and look around at the paintings. Most of them are abstract and plastered with red, white and black paint. I drift around the room, wondering what he was painting, fearing what the red in most of them actually is, until I come across a painting in the corner under a spotlight built into the roof. It's a blonde woman from the neck up, lying on a red blanket, and she is looking away at something in the distance. I recognize the woman's slanted nose, the bow-shaped lips and dimpled cheeks. I recognize every inch of the woman because she is me.

And Maddox has made me look beautiful in a way I know I am not. If he sees me like this, no wonder he kissed me. In the painting, I am flawless and almost glowing, and I spend what seems like a long time staring before I force myself to look away and suck in a deep breath to calm myself down.

If I didn't know better, I would bet Maddox is after more than sex from me, because of this painting alone. But I do know better, and I have to remember he is a monster.

And monsters can't love. Right?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX



He is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

And he looks like the devil. The hottest devil I've ever seen, but still. Prince Maddox, aka the Mad Prince, is in a black designer tux that is well-fitted. The suit looks like it was made to shape the body of a god, and boy, does Maddox wear it well. His long black hair is straighter than usual, and the crystals all look as exotic as always. Maddox's eyes drift up and down my body in the tight red dress he clearly had made for me. The red dress is simple enough, a princess shape falling to my feet from a sweetheart neckline, but it has a slit all the way up my leg, making the dress and me far more revealing. When I get to the bottom of the steps, right in front of him, he meets my eyes.

"There is no one as beautiful as you in this moment, Ria."

My breath halts, even as I force myself not to react, force myself not to show how I think that is the best thing anyone has ever said to me. I don't know what his game is, or if it is just desire, but he is clipping away at my heart, and I don't like it.

I turn away and walk around him, even when I sense he doesn't like it. "Who is here tonight then?"

Maddox storms past me, not answering, slamming his shoes onto the tiles with every step, and I sigh. I've well and truly pissed him off now. This dinner is going to be fantastic, I can just tell. I struggle to keep up with

Maddox on his mission down the corridor, and he pushes the doors open, heading inside the dining room and letting them swing shut on me. I push them open and head inside to see a woman standing by her chair. And the woman is definitely a witch, the markings on her face and arms a clear indication. They aren't black like Sabina's were, these ones are yellow almost.

"And you are?" the woman asks, a slightly American twang to her voice. Almost southern, possibly Texas.

"Riona Dark, this is Gillian Brack of the Crow clan of witches," Maddox introduces us. "And perhaps we all sit down as not to be rude guests."

"Careful, Prince, I am here only to make a trade and not as your friend like my sister clan leader is," Gillian warns him, and he arches an eyebrow at her. They both stare each other down, and I get the sneaking suspicion Maddox might snap at any moment, and it's kind of my fault for being a bitch to him earlier. I clear my throat and walk past Maddox, gently placing my hand on his shoulder as I pass. He turns from Gillian, watching me instead as I sit down, and I gently smile at him.

"So how many clans do the witches have?" I ask as Hector and two human guys I have never seen around the castle come into the room. They place plates down in front of us all and fill our drinks. Well, I have water and so does Gillian. Maddox, of course, chooses something a little more red. "I'm sorry if that's rude to ask. I'm just new to...well, everything magical."

Gillian crosses her hands in front of her. "I do not mind. There are five clans, four are in alliance with each other and follow one leader. I believe you have met her. My clan is separate for many reasons, and I lead them."

"What are the reasons?" I question, well aware I'm being more than nosy at this point.

Gillian tensely smiles, her eyes drifting to Maddox in what I think is slight fear. "My mother, the previous clan leader, did something terrible and cruel. We pay her price."

It was her mother who cursed Maddox's mum.

What the hell is she doing here? I turn to Maddox, who is sitting sideways on his chair, his legs kicked off the side with a zero fucks attitude on his face. I don't believe it though.

I tuck into my food, knowing at some point, this night is going to go bad, and I want to have at least eaten the steak and potatoes for Hector's sake. Gillian eats with me, but Maddox sits in his chair, drinking his blood and staring at nothing on the wall behind me.

"Tell me, do you enjoy your new life on the island?" Gillian asks when she finishes her plate.

Well, other than getting an epic orgasm from an insane prince, it's been pretty shit. I don't say that, mainly because she might think I'm as mad as Maddox. "Yes, but I miss some of my hobbies. Like playing the violin or painting. But I'm learning to be a good gardener."

"Will you play for me?" Gillian questions and holds her hands out. Smoke appears all over her hands in the shape of a violin case, and then it's suddenly there. My eyes widen, and I reach out, touching the case to see if it is real, and it is. "I would very much like to hear you play. Don't you agree, Prince Maddox?"

I look down at him, expecting anything but the answer he gives. "Yes."

Damn, I've got to stop expecting the worst from the Mad Prince. I take the violin case from Gillian and set it down on the table in a spot clear of dishes. Undoing the zip, I find a beautiful dark wood violin and bow inside. I pick them both up and step away from the table a little before resting the violin on my shoulder, holding it with my chin. I lift the bow and close my eyes, thinking of a song I've always loved called "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" by Charlie Daniels. Kinda fitting for this situation. I slowly play the notes, the music taking me away and making me feel like I'm not actually here. I'm just back in uni, playing in my room or at practice. It's just me and the violin, the music, the song that makes me relax in a way I haven't ever felt before. The song speeds up and then is over too soon, and I lower the violin, tears in my eyes as I look at Maddox, needing to see his reaction.

And he looks...amazed. Maybe even more than I hoped he would be.

“You are truly talented, Riona!” Gillian tells me, clapping her hands, but I stay looking at Maddox as his lips part a little. His eyes burn with a desire that almost makes me want to close the space between us and kiss him.

He watches me, his eyes feeling like they are burning a hole through my head as I sit back down and place the violin carefully in the case. When I close it, I try to offer it back to Gillian, but she shakes her head. “It is a gift. Your talent should not go unpractised. I hope to hear you play once more in the future.”

“I would love to play for you again. Thank you,” I tell her with a real smile.

Then Maddox ruins it.

He wipes an arm across the table, spilling drinks and food onto the floor in a massive crash, parts of food splashing onto my dress. I sigh and cross my arms as Maddox pulls out the small red box that he got the day we danced together, and places it in the middle of the cleared table. Gillian stares at it as Maddox opens the box, and inside is a gold ring with a clear blue crystal in the middle. I might not be a witch or vampire or siren, but I know something is weird about that ring.

“I almost did not believe it was true!” Gillian exclaims, her eyes staring at it with nothing but longing. “This was lost so long ago to us, I assumed the ocean had washed it away.”

“Nothing lost cannot be found,” Maddox smoothly replies and snaps the box shut. He makes a show of leaving the box on the table and looking at Gillian. “Now do we have a trade?”

“I want ten human virgins of good stock and one other thing,” Gillian replies.

“What on earth would you want ten humans for?” I blurt out and turn to Maddox, who looks at Gillian, no doubt ignoring me. “You can’t give her ten of your people.”

“Vampires are his people, sweet girl, humans are not,” Gillian replies, and I glare at her. For a moment, I liked this crazy bitch, but it turns out she is just as insane and heartless as the rest of them.

Maddox sighs. “What is this extra thing you wish for? I only agreed to the ring and humans.”

Gillian smiles, her eyes flickering between the ring and me. “If you wish for me to tell you the whereabouts of the orb and an answer to what the demonic children are and where they are from, I want Riona to come with me.”

“No. Fucking. Way.” Maddox’s answer comes swiftly, and his tone is without argument.

My cheeks burn at the possessive and protective way Maddox looks at me for a moment, and we both stare at each other.

“I see,” Gillian coldly replies, distaste thick in her voice. “Then we will have no deal.”

Despite what she says, her eyes flicker to the ring with clear longing. Maddox picks the box up and pulls the ring out as he stands. He moves to the back of my chair, grabs my hand, and slides the ring over my index finger. It fits perfectly, and I bite back the urge to pull my hand away. Maddox looks down at me as Gillian stands up, pushing her chair over as she does. “Do you like your new gift? I’ve heard it’s priceless and one of a kind.”

“Maddox,” I carefully warn him. He might be able to escape a witch’s attack, but I’m a sitting target with this ring on, and he damn well knows it. Plus, the ring just gives me the creeps.

“Our clan is not one to be messed with, Prince Maddox. I knew coming here to trade with you would be a mistake,” she hisses out.

He lets my hand go but stays put at my back. His laugh fills the room. “The only mistake you made was believing I would trade what is mine.”

“I shall leave,” Gillian claims, and she looks directly at me. For a second, nothing happens, and then a screeching noise fills my head. I cry out, slamming my hands on my ears, closing my eyes. When I open them, the room is frozen. The first thing I notice is the flames of the tealight candles are still, and then I glance up at Maddox, seeing he is frozen, his mouth open to shout.

“What did you do?” I ask Gillian, knowing it was her. Her body is frozen, but her lips move as she speaks. It’s seriously creepy.

“When you leave his side, and you will, come to my clan. We will tell you the truth of your parents and who they really are. I will teach you what is in your blood and how to control what will come,” she promises, speaking like we are dear friends and I should believe her. “The vampire prince will not last the years to come; he is weak at heart, and you are not. Leave soon and find us.”

The screeching noise suddenly comes back, and I scream once more, even as it drifts away, and I find myself in Maddox’s arms. I gasp, a small sob coming out of my lips as I lower my hands and see my blood coating my fingers.

As my hands start to shake, Maddox pulls me to his chest, tucking my head under his chin. In the arms of a monster, I feel protected and safe.

And my soul is damned.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN



“Long day, madame?” Hector asks as I walk into the kitchen, soil stuck to my clothes and hands. I shrug and head to the sink, washing my hands as my stomach grumbles.

“I finished two more parts today. I’m slowly getting ready to ask for more plants to build up the areas I’ve cleaned up,” I answer. “What about you? Busy?”

His expression changes for a brief second. “The prince has not been in the best of moods today. I’ve kept myself busy by staying out of the way, and I suggest you do the same, madame.”

“Why is he moody?” I ask, wondering if it was because of the meal last night. I know he was pissed off, but he carried me back to my room and said goodnight. He seemed...strange but not moody. Not moody enough to have clearly freaked Hector out. “And is Cross hiding? The girls?”

“Cross was sent to the town today for supplies,” Hector answers. “As for the girls, I believe you are the only girl in this castle alive at the present second.”

“What?” I blurt out. Before Hector can stop me, I run out of the room and head down the stairs and into the living area, freezing at the sight in front of me. Blood coats the floor like water, sticking to every inch, and dotted around are bodies. I count five before I have to turn away, sickness rising in my throat.

“Ah, you’re here!” Maddox shouts, sounding drunk. Swallowing the sickness in my throat, hating that I’m somewhat getting used to seeing dead bodies and blood, I face the Mad Prince. He is shirtless, wearing only tight black leather trousers, and blood is smeared all over his chest.

He lifts a bottle of wine, toasting me almost and taking a deep sip. “Want some? I’m afraid there might be a little blood in it, but I find it adds to the taste.”

“Why? Why, Maddox?” I ask, waving at a few of the dead bodies. I don’t recognise a lot of them, but two of the girls I do. I have to look away, even as tears prick my eyes.

Maddox doesn’t answer as he stumbles over to me, frowning. “You look upset.”

“Maddox, I am upset!” I all but scream, slamming my hands against his chest, not caring about the blood that marks me. “You killed these innocent people! Why? Why would you do that?”

He smiles at me as I hit his chest, again and again, burning out all the anger and frustration I can possibly feel towards him and myself for ever liking him. For getting close to a monster that will never change.

Eventually, I give up, stumbling back and staring at him. He shrugs and takes a deep drink before throwing the bottle across the room where it smashes into pieces, making me jump. “I kill because that’s what I do. Do you think because I kissed you and made you come you could change me?”

He keeps walking closer, and I stand my ground, refusing to cower. “You could be a good man; you choose not to be, Maddox.”

“I think you have me confused with someone else, Riona,” he states and tips my chin up with his blood-covered hand. “I am not good, I am not a man, I am a vampire. I am a monster, and I take what I want, when I want it.”

Before I can tell him how messed up that is, he kisses me. His wine tasting lips move across my own with pounding desire and lust, making it impossible to think straight. He picks me up, spreading my legs around his

waist, and then we are moving. I gasp at the sudden pounding of air against my body before Maddox drops me onto his bed.

“Maddox...,” I warn him as he leans down and grabs my dress. I might hate the dress, but I suddenly miss it when he rips the dress off me in one smooth movement. Only in a bra and panties, none of which are sexy, he stares down at me in a way I didn’t expect.

“You are so beautiful,” Maddox breathes out. “You were made for me, I am certain of it.”

“I told you once before, you don’t get to have me,” I breathlessly reply, even as my body all but begs me to shut the hell up.

He smirks as he climbs over me on the bed, pressing his body into mine on purpose. “And I know you were only hoping I wouldn’t take you, but we both know you want this. We both know I will take you as you are mine.”

The second the word *mine* leaves his lips, he kisses me harshly, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth and grazing his teeth across it. My body comes to life under his, betraying my every thought, even as I’m aware this is so wrong. But he feels so good on top of me, his body pressing into mine, his lips devouring my mouth. Those lips begin to move down my body, and he unclips my bra, pulling it off me. His hand cups my breast, and I gasp into his mouth as he flicks his thumb across my nipple. He takes my nipple into his mouth, grazing his teeth roughly against the hard tip. I moan despite myself, and I feel his smug grin as he kisses his way down my stomach with more urgency.

“Maddox, we shouldn’t—” my breathless warning escapes my lips as he presses a kiss to my core over my panties, and then he hooks his fingers into them. Ever so slowly, like he is unwrapping a damn present, he pulls them down my thighs and my legs. He stares down at me, his eyes fixed on my core, and then he dives in, parting my thighs with his large hands. The world feels like it spins at the first touch of his hot tongue against my clit, waves of pleasure crashing into me. His tongue licks up and down my clit, twirling around as he holds me in place with his hands on my thighs. The sensation is too much, too powerful, and I can’t stop myself crashing into an orgasm that he controls with every movement. My body is shaking with

pleasure as I hear him undo his trousers and push them off. Our eyes meet for a second and I get the impression my monster of a prince is waiting for me to run away. To walk away while I have the chance. But I can't. I'm swimming in hell and he is the only devil I want to save me. I only get a chance to see his large and thick cock before he is climbing on top of me and pushing at my entrance.

He looks down at me the entire time he slowly inches inside of me. Maddox looks in heaven. In pure pleasure, and it's the sexiest thing I've ever seen. He cups the back of my head and presses his lips to mine just before he slams all the way into me, and I cry out from the sharp pain. He groans against my lips, a masculine groan of pleasure, and I gasp, trying to calm down from the pain. He doesn't move, letting me get used to the feeling of him stretching me, filling me.

"Fuck, you are too perfect," he groans against my lips, and he pulls out of me, pushing all the way back inside, but the pain slowly drifts away as he picks up speed, and pleasure takes over. Maddox slams into me again and again, pounding into me like he wants me to never forget him, and I know I never will. His lips descend on mine again as I start to feel myself tipping over the edge of another orgasm, every thrust of his cock pushing me closer to the edge.

"Come for me, I need you, Riona," he whispers against my lips. And that's it.

"Maddox!" I cry out his name as I come hard around his cock, tightening around him and feeling him spill his come inside of me, a pure groan of pleasure escaping his lips.

He stays inside of me for a while, staring at me in a way I can only think is shock as we both get our breath back. When he pulls out of me, I already miss him, and I hate myself for it. I grab the blanket and pull it around myself as Maddox lies back on the bed.

"Do you have any morality, Maddox?" I question, forcing myself to walk to the door.

He doesn't look at me, staring at the ceiling. "No, not since the curse took every chance of truly living. Not since my father beat every bit of good out

of me. I have nothing good for you to save, Riona. You should leave and pretend this never happened.”

“I am going to,” I whisper, feeling tears prick my eyes as I leave his room and rest my head against the cold wooden door the moment I shut it behind me. I just lost my virginity to a Mad Prince.

I pull myself from the door and head towards the study.

“You should wait a few minutes.” Cross’s voice makes me jump, and I nearly drop my blanket. He steps out of the shadows and walks past me, glancing at Maddox’s door as he passes it before getting to my side. He stands too close, and peeks into the study. “Hector was the study a second ago, and he doesn’t use vampire speed to move around. I’m sure you don’t want anyone else to see you.”

“Right, thanks,” I mutter. My cheeks are burning red as Cross looks at me.

I walk past him and stand by the door to the study, expecting him to leave as he no doubt silently judges me. “I heard the girls and some of the guys were planning on killing you in your sleep to get back at Maddox for killing their friends. I see Maddox found out the same rumour at some point while I was out.”

I freeze in shock, realising that Maddox killed all those people to protect me. They were going to hurt me, so he killed them, and it wasn’t just a mad choice he made. It wasn’t selfish. It was protective.

It makes what just happened oh so much worse. Cross leaves me with my thoughts, though his judgment sticks to me like wet feet in quicksand.

But the only one who is sinking is me.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT



Returning to Reign's home feels like I'm a teenager again, and I got busted sneaking back into my house at three a.m. after drinking at a friend's house. Reign is silent the entire car ride back, and I'm thankful for it, especially after yesterday. My skin remembers Maddox's touch ever so well; I feel his lips on my skin even now, even hours after he was inside of me. I don't know if I ever will be able to forget last night or if I am ruined for every man now that I have Maddox to compare to. I sigh, leaning back on the seat as we travel fast through the forest.

"I am taking you to see the children. Two more arrived last night and killed fourteen humans including a child of just eight," he coldly explains to me. "I don't give a fuck how you can get them to talk or if you're hiding secrets from me, but I need to know how to stop them arriving. I need to know who has sent them."

"And you want me to ask them?" I ask, even though I am sure that is his point.

He grips the steering wheel harder. "Yes, and I would appreciate it if you didn't tell Maddox about this. He is adamant that you go nowhere near the children."

Reign's eyes flicker to my ring and back, and this time I don't mistake the anger in his jawline as it tenses. I don't know why I haven't taken the damn ring off, but now I wish I had before Reign saw it.

Considering I haven't seen Maddox since I left his room, not telling him shouldn't be an issue. "Sure. And, by the way, I am not keeping secrets from you about the kids or anything to do with them."

He doesn't answer me, not that I blame him. I do look suspicious. I change the subject before I say anything I might regret. "How is Arlo?"

Reign turns off on a dirt track in the middle of the forest. "Watching out the window for you like a lost puppy."

Frowning, I lean my head on my bent arm against the window. "I'm sure that isn't true."

"I have no need to lie to you," Reign states. "I care little about your feelings or his. But I answered your question. If you were to ask about the mental state of your friend, I would give you a much different answer."

"What would that answer be?"

Reign pulls the car up in front of a clearing with storm drain in the middle, and nothing else around. "Arlo is one of those many people in life who cannot handle the chaos sent their way. He needs something he won't get on this island or with friends like you."

He turns the car off and looks me in the eye. "Arlo needs peace."

"Your vampires broke him. He wasn't always like this," I explain. "And he will get better. I'm going to make sure of it."

"I doubt it, but I will watch you try," he replies before climbing out of the car. I follow suit, jogging over to his side and up to the storm drain, which appears to have doors. Reign places his hand on one of the doors, and it glows red before setting on fire. The fire spreads, making a large enough gap for Reign to step through. I pause for a second before stepping through the gap, and then turn around to see the fire snap shut, leaving a red glow for a second before it disappears. Reign walks down steps, automatic lights turning on the deeper down the stairs he goes. Watching my step, I head down the many, many stairs and into a big warehouse of some kind. The room is full of plastic boxes on one side and a row of cars on the other, all of them new and expensive by the looks of it.

“If you have all these cars, why doesn’t everyone use them?” I ask.

“They belong to my brother, not me. Only the vampires are rich enough to import what they like, and most prefer to run everywhere. Maddox included,” he comments, and I’m shocked to learn Maddox knows anything about modern life, let alone owns enough expensive cars to buy another island if he sold them. I shouldn’t be surprised they have a lot of money, the auction made that one very clear. Reign leads me through the boxes and past the cars to a big open plan space, and the children are all here. Some are sitting on the rows of bunk beds or on the floor. Others are on the many sofas, staring at children’s toys but not touching them. The kids are silent, which they should not be. Children are never silent, not a massive group of them like this.

A shiver runs down my spine.

I take a step closer, and at the same time, all of the children look towards me and Reign. They focus on me, and I watch as a small blonde girl walks over. She must be about six, and she has bright blue eyes.

“We will talk to Riona Dark alone.”

Her voice, although childlike, sounds much older than she is.

Reign tenses and leans down, facing the girl. “No, you will speak to her now, or we will leave. I do not allow children like yourselves to make demands.”

The girl looks back at the others, and suddenly they all move, making a circle around us. The girl steps back into the circle, turning her head to the side. “We will make you leave then.”

“Wait!” I shout before any of them can move, holding my hands out. I don’t want to see Reign fight these children, because at the end of the day, they are kids. I keep my hands held out. “Reign has done nothing but help each of you and help me. He is not the enemy, and neither am I. You said I am like you, but what are you all?”

“Vampires cannot know our secret,” the girl replies, looking between Reign and me. “You should know this. To speak to them is forbidden. They are cloaked in sin and broken.”

“Even humans are a little broken and sin a little too much,” I reply, leaning down in front of her. “What’s your name?”

“We are not given names, only told what to do and sent here,” she replies, and I sigh.

“By who?” I ask next.

“The one who speaks your name. They told us you would be here and that you could be trusted,” she replies. “That you would know.”

“I don’t know, that’s the problem. Can you remind me?” I gently ask.

She shakes her head. “No.”

I go to ask her another question when a phone rings out, and I turn to Reign. He looks pissed off as he pulls out an iPhone from his pocket and answers the call. There’s that phone Katy mentioned. I need to get hold of it, and then I can call my parents. A little hope fills my chest, but I know it won’t be easy to get it off him. “Got it. Be there in ten minutes.”

He puts the phone down and shoves it away in his pocket. “We have to go. Now.”

“Alright,” I answer, looking back for the girl, but all of them have silently moved back to exactly where they were before. “Do they ever do anything but sit there?”

“No, they seem clueless about how to act. How to be themselves,” Reign answers. “It’s almost like they have never seen toys or people. They always seem shocked at food, making me wonder what they were fed before.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help,” I tell him as we head back, and part of me itches to go back to the kids and give them each a big hug. They need love and guidance, and I think maybe then they could all be saved. “Please promise me you won’t hurt them. I know there is good in them, they are just confused.”

“You can see their confusion in action; we have one more to pick up,” he tells me, not promising a single thing, and a sinking dread fills my chest for what I’m about to see next.

And for the fate of these kids.



I STAND in the crowd by the Jeep, watching as Reign walks over a pile of bodies to pick up a child sitting on top of a woman's back, her blood and so many others dripping down his chin. The woman is clearly not alive, nor are any of the people lying around, by the looks of it. No one in the crowd makes a move towards the child except for Reign, and I wonder what exactly they have been doing to calm the kid before Reign got here. This kid is maybe eight or older with curly red hair and bright brown eyes. His shirt has a famous pig on it and his shorts match the blue top. He doesn't have shoes on, but he does have yellow socks, which are now smothered with blood. Reign leans down and offers the boy his hand, and he looks at him for a long time before standing up off the woman and taking Reign's hand.

They both walk back to the car, and I turn around, heading for the door when I feel something smooth slide into my hand. I feel the paper in my palm, and I turn around, searching for who it was, but no one is looking my way. Feeling like I should keep this a secret until I've read it, I pop the note into my jean pocket and get into the car. Reign is putting the seat belt on the kid in the back seat, and the kid stares at me.

"I want to go home," he tells me. Not in a pleading kid way, but like an adult telling me they want a coffee or something similar. I open and close my mouth once, unsure what to say, feeling Reign's eyes on me.

"Where is your home?" I eventually ask. He cocks his head to the side and then points at the ground.

"Underground?" I ask, and he nods, turning his head away, clearly done with talking to me. Reign slams the back door shut and climbs into the driver's seat, pulling the car away through the streets as I clip my seat belt on. I lower my voice. "What do you think he meant by underground? Is there much under this island?"

“The tunnels and room you saw is the lowest I am aware of, but witches built this island. They might know more than we do,” he replies. “I will contact Maddox to speak to his witch friend.”

“Which one?” I ask, and Reign looks sharply towards me for a second, confusion in his eyes.

“Only one witch clan leader speaks to us, her people are not allowed on this island. Who else did my brother see?” he demands.

Feeling like I’ve just said something I shouldn’t have, I sink back in my seat. Too late to go back now. “A witch called Gillian. She was here to make a trade with Maddox for this ring. He wanted to know where the third orb is and why the children keep appearing.”

Reign doesn’t speak for a long time, not until we are out of the city and driving through the forest. “We do not deal with that clan.”

“I understand why,” I reply.

Reign frowns. “So my brother does talk to you a lot. I hope you are not changing your mind about our deal. I have noticed how you smell like Maddox much more today than ever before.”

My cheeks burn as I look away. “I have not changed my mind.”

“Good, because once you live with me, I will not let you see Maddox. It is for your own good as much as it is his,” he tells me, and something in my chest hurts at the idea of not seeing Maddox ever again and living in Reign’s house for the rest of my life. But somewhere along the way, this island has made me forget my true plan.

To escape.

Vampires and whatever I am feeling for Maddox be damned.

“I understand,” I reply.

His voice goes sharp. “No, you do not or you wouldn’t wear that goddamn ring! You wouldn’t fuck Maddox!”

My voice raises a little. “There is a kid in the car, watch what you say!”

“He is a murderer. I’m sure a swear word won’t hurt him,” Reign snaps back.

“God, you and Maddox are alike in some ways. You both know how to be a total ass,” I growl.

“Ass is a swear word,” Reign cockily points out.

I smirk. “Technically, it’s a donkey.”

His laugh fills the car, and I find myself laughing with him, shaking my head at all of this. We both drift into silence, and I look back at the kid, finding him staring at me like I’m his long-lost mother or something. It’s creepy, and I awkwardly smile back at him before turning away. The car journey seems long, and the paper in my pocket feels like it’s burning as Reign pulls up at the house and stops outside.

“I will take the kid to the others. I don’t think it’s a good idea you go there,” Reign remarks. “Plus, I don’t want the hassle from Maddox if he found out.”

“Gotcha,” I reply, opening my door. I actually don’t want to be around the kids right now; I’ve had enough for today with Mr Redhead back there. I climb out, and as I’m about to shut the door, Reign speaks.

“That ring was my mother’s and the only thing my father ever gave Maddox from her. Do you understand why I am bothered that he gave you it?”

“Yes,” I whisper and close the door before he can hear the catch in my throat. Reign speeds backwards and spins the car around before driving off, leaving me with my own treacherous thoughts about Maddox, the curse and this damn ring I still can’t force myself to take off. When I can’t hear the car anymore, I quickly glance around me, not seeing Arlo or Katy anywhere in sight. Pulling the paper out, I unfold it to find a note.

Riona Dark,

At midnight this night, walk outside to the cliff if you want to escape this island alive.

Your friend and watcher.

I READ the note a few times before slipping it back in my pocket, making a mental note to flush it down the toilet later on tonight. The last time I snuck out of this place, I was nearly killed by vamps, and I don't have a good feeling about doing it again.

But this offer might not come twice, and I need to get off this island, or I'm going to be stuck here for the rest of my life.

And on The Onyx, I think that life will be short.

Especially when Maddox finds out about the deal I made with his brother.

"You're back," Arlo calls out, and I jolt, looking up at the door. Arlo jogs over, leaving the door open and pulls me into a hug. "You look in one piece. I'm guessing being in the vamp castle wasn't too bad."

Something like that. Definitely something like that.

"I need a favour."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE



“For the record, I don’t believe this is a good idea,” Arlo whispers to me, wrapping his hand around my upper arm as I walk away. “But...look, just be careful.”

I turn around and wrap my arms around him, hugging him tightly. “I will do. We both need to get off this island.”

“I’m glad you still feel that way,” he whispers to me, rubbing the top of my back. “Austin and Sophie are out there waiting for us. Your mum and dad must be going out of their minds. We need to get back.”

“Why would you think I’d want to stay?” I ask, even as a single name pops into my head, followed by so many feelings I am ignoring that threaten to swallow me whole. Pulling away from Arlo, I clear my throat and force myself not to think about Maddox. I can’t tonight. I have to do this for me and Arlo, for the future. And being real with myself, I doubt Maddox wants a future with me anyway. He kicked me out of his bed, and for him, that was just sex. He had been drinking and murdering, and that seems to make him happy. I was just another notch on his bedpost. Nothing more. But something in my chest doesn’t believe it, the betrayer. “I want to get back to uni and my life. I need to.”

“Good,” he softly says and crosses his arms. “I best go and distract the psychotic vamp babysitter while you escape through the garage.”

I chuckle and wave him to the door. He straightens his back and walks to the stairs, looking back at me once with a strange expression before he jogs

down the steps. Knowing there is a second staircase at the back of the house, I jog down the corridor, past Reign's room and Katy's, even though they are both not in there. Reign hasn't come back from the children, and I bet he is still with them now. Part of me suspects it's because he has a kind heart and he doesn't want to leave them alone, even though I don't think he would admit to that.

I find the door in the corridor Arlo told me about and open it to see a small winding staircase, most likely used in case of a fire. I rush down the steps and come out into the garage. Seeing as Katy hasn't jumped out from anywhere, Arlo must be doing a pretty good job of distracting her. Being as silent as I can, I run across the garage and slip out of the door into the night, breathing in the cold air and scent of the forest.

The sound of the waves crashing against rocks fills my ears as I walk through some trees and out onto a clearing on a cliff a few seconds away from the house. The waves are harsh tonight, blowing sea water into the air every few seconds, and I wipe a few drops from my cheek as I stare out. The moon hangs high in the sky, a full moon, fitting for this night.

I hear the bike first, the engine noise just about exceeding the sound of the waves, and I turn to see a man riding an all-terrain vehicle through the forest. He comes to a halt right in front of me, kicking up sand and dust around us as he takes off his helmet.

"Cross? You sent me the note?" I ask the second I recognise the red hair and grumpy face. "You have a way to get off the island?"

He offers me the helmet. "Get on and trust me, Riona. You have two minutes to make the choice."

I grit my teeth, unsure if I can trust him, but I'm desperate enough to have no real choice in the matter. Taking the helmet from him, I slide it on and do up the clip before climbing on the quad bike behind Cross, wrapping my arms around his chest. "Hold on."

I close my eyes and do just that, remembering my sixteenth birthday party when Austin and I rented out a dirt track and several of these bikes. Our parents paid for us to have lessons with our friends, and then we all raced. Austin beat me by a second, Arlo somehow got lost on the track, and many

of my other friends gave up, knowing Austin and I were always the most competitive ones. He won a football match, and I would win a violin competition. He would break a record for the fastest swimmer at our school, and I went and did a painting of the school they hung up and celebrated. But that was us, always competing, always in each other's shadow. I know some people might not have liked that, but we did. That's why we chose the same university, why we were always close, and since coming to this island, I feel like a ship without an anchor. Arlo is my only real reminder of home, and when I'm around him, I ache more than usual for the things I miss.

Cross drives us for a good hour before slowing down and pulling into the clearing. There is a fire lit in the middle with at least thirty people standing around it. They all turn to watch as Cross climbs off and I take off the helmet.

"Everyone, this is Riona Dark, the one we discussed," Cross calls out. "Of course, you are aware of her, Hector."

"Hector?" I question, jumping off the bike, and he walks over to me.

"Oui, madame, not all vampires are free to leave the island, and this is my one chance," he tells me, the flames flickering light across his features. He waves towards the group. "It is yours as well, Madame Dark."

I take a wild guess that everyone here is human from the way they are crowded around the fire, the way they stare and move every so often in a nervous manner. I join Cross's side with Hector on my other, looking around at the people in the group. Most of them are young and men, but there are three women on the ground. One is an old lady, I would guess in her seventies, and she smiles at me.

"Never before have we had a chance to escape like now. We do not know the exact time, but there will be a ship coming to the island that is not with the stealers, but with a vampire who owns it. He rarely comes back to the island, but I have heard from Prince Maddox he is visiting soon to see Riona Dark, the famous human who can't be compelled," Cross shouts out, and my cheeks burn as they all stare at me.

"Want to tell us how you can do that, kid?" the old lady calls out.

“I have no idea. If I did know, I’d bottle it up and hand it out like candy,” I reply, making a few of them laugh.

“Deborah, please let me finish,” Cross chuckles and clears his throat when everyone is silent. “With Riona’s help, I believe we have a shot. Nothing about this plan can go wrong. Deborah, would you explain your part?”

“Of course,” she states, stepping forward. “I have spent years of my life finding just the right ingredients to make a powder to knock out a vampire. We all know that only a blade enchanted by a witch’s death can kill a vampire.” She pauses. I did not know that. “But if you scrape the iron of the blade and mix it with several other ingredients, it does knock them out without seriously hurting them.”

“Thank you, Deborah,” Cross takes over. “I’m sure many of you would wish to see your captors dead, but many of us do not. We just want to escape.”

There are dozens of murmurs in the crowd. “When it is time, I will get the powder to you, and we will meet at the docks at midnight. Be ready to leave.”

“What if they find us?” I question. “What will stop them from murdering us all?”

“The orbs,” Cross replies. “You’re going to steal Reign’s orb after knocking him out, and that is your payment onto the ship. I will take Maddox’s as I know where he keeps it. If the vampires find out, we can bribe our lives with the orbs.”

“Arlo is coming too,” I tell him. “And you must search for my brother, Austin. I need to know for sure that he’s not on this island. I also want a girl named Ann found; she comes too. She was on the ship with me.”

Cross stares me down, and he sighs, nodding once. He looks towards a man in the crowd, a dark-skinned man with several long cuts down his cheeks. “Will you find them for me, Simeon?”

“Yes,” Simeon replies and looks towards me. “I work with Merethe as one of her slaves, and she records all the humans that come in and out of The Onyx. I will be able to search the records for the day you arrived.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, a little bit of hope filling my chest. “Has anyone ever escaped The Onyx before?”

“No,” Cross is quick to answer. “Not alive, anyway. We will be the first and forge the pathway for all the humans trapped on this island as slaves. We will show them we are not theirs to own.”

“For our children,” Simeon calls, and many repeat the saying as I look up to Cross. He calls for everyone to leave and directs me back to the bike.

“Why didn’t you just tell me this at the castle?” I ask.

“Because Maddox is always close to you. Always watching,” he replies. “You’ve become an obsession, and in some ways that has been good. There hasn’t been a murder party since you’ve come, and I haven’t buried as many bodies as usual.”

“He isn’t...” I pause, shaking my head. “Maddox could be better. I know it.”

Cross laughs. “Don’t fool yourself, Riona. He is a monster, and nothing you can do will change that. One day you will beg for your life, and he will rip out your heart. That’s why you must leave with me.”

“I’m leaving because I want to see my family, not because I fear Maddox or anything on this island. They may think they own my body, my blood and soul, but they don’t. I am free no matter where I am because I make it that way,” I counter, climbing on the bike. “Maddox is broken and sinned, but I don’t believe he is truly evil.”

“Then you’re more of a fool than I already thought you were, Riona,” Cross coldly states. “Just keep your deal and get the orb. Then we can both get off this fucking island.”

I shove my helmet on as he starts up the bike, and hold onto Cross as he rushes through the trees.

Even though I hope to escape, I know a part of me will be stuck on this island with Prince Maddox Borealis no matter how far I run.

CHAPTER
THIRTY



Since explaining to Arlo all about the escape plan, Arlo has been a different person. He smiles and laughs, makes breakfast and even the occasional joke. He feels like the Arlo I knew before we came here, but then, just sometimes, I see him pause like he is right now, staring out of the window.

I fold my feet underneath myself on the sofa and gently put my hand on his shoulder. “Will you tell me about what happened with the vampire woman in that house?”

Arlo picks my hand off his shoulder and slides our fingers together. “Her name was Durya, and after she bought me, she was actually kind. I was surprised after seeing the brutality of the vamps in the auction and on the ship; I thought she would be the same. Two nights after I was there, she made it clear she wanted more from me when she climbed onto my lap and took her clothes off. I said no, but she looked me in my eyes and...”

“She used compulsion?” I gently question.

“Yes. Part of me knew I didn’t want to sleep with her or let her bite me, but I couldn’t fight what she was making me do. I was a slave from that point on, doing whatever she wanted, with whoever she brought over. Her friends treated me like a toy they could borrow when they wanted, but oddly Durya wouldn’t let them have sex with me. I was only for her.”

The disgust in his voice makes me shiver. I move closer and gently place my head on his shoulder, feeling his whole body shaking. “I’m so sorry,

Arlo.”

“When you came, she had just had her friends over, and I don’t remember all of it. They just drank a lot,” he tells me. “So many bites, so many mouths on me. How can I ever move on and just be normal? How can I ever forget?”

Then he cries. I’ve never seen Arlo cry in my life, not even when he broke his arm at seven years old, or at any other point. I pull him into my shoulder and rub his back, humming a song under my breath in the hope it will calm him down. When he finally relaxes and wraps his arms around me, he lifts his head and meets my eyes.

“That vampire was evil. Pure and simple,” I softly tell him. “But you, Arlo? You are full of light and kindness. It makes me laugh now to think back to how much I used to think of you as an enemy, when the truth was, you’re family. You’re the sweetest guy I ever knew, when you want to be, and a brilliant friend to my brother. Even when you wound me up something silly, I knew for certain you would be there in a heartbeat if I ever needed you. I trust you, and Austin does. You’ve always been my family, Arlo. Always.”

I wipe some of the tears off his cheeks, grinning at him as he stares at me. I don’t see the kiss coming or even notice until his lips meet mine. I freeze, which he takes as a sign to kiss me more, and before this can go further, I all but throw myself off the sofa onto the floor.

Arlo looks confused as he watches me stand up, holding my hand out. “Arlo, you’re upset and you didn’t mean that. I think we both should pretend that didn’t happen.”

He looks shocked for a second. “I did mean that. I’ve liked you for years, Riona. Didn’t you know that?”

“No...,” I whisper, crossing my arms against my chest. “Look, Arlo, it’s just not the right time for us to be even talking about this. At all.”

Arlo doesn’t say anything, he just looks away, and I take that as my cue to leave. Just as I’m getting to the door, he calls over. “How do you feel about Maddox? What exactly is going on there?”

I answer in the only way I can. “He owns me, and I won’t be free until I leave this damn island. Neither will you.”

I slam the door on the way out and run right into Katy standing in the main area, looking over at the sea. She turns her dark gaze my way and slowly drifts her eyes to the door. “The Onyx breaks a lot of people, and they do reckless things.”

“It’s rude to eavesdrop.”

“I’m a vamp, it’s hard not to hear,” she replies with a wave of her hand. “Arlo isn’t a bad person, and I find that interesting.”

“He isn’t,” I agree, walking to her side and following her gaze out to the ocean. “Whereabouts is this island anyway?”

“In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, pretty much,” she tells me. “That’s why it’s always freezing cold.”

“Were you born here?” I ask next.

She loops her fingers in the edge of her jacket pockets. “Born and raised for fifty-two years. I spent ten years spying on the humans recently, though, and I found I like their clothing more than the style of The Onyx.”

“I can see that,” I say. “Thanks for all the clothing you’ve found for me and Arlo.”

“I like clothes,” she replies like it’s nothing. “Now tell me, why are you sleeping with the Mad Prince?”

I nearly cough on thin air, not expecting her to blurt out that. I lower my voice, checking the door to the living room where Arlo is. “How did you know?”

“Vampire sense of smell,” she explains with a wave of her hand. “Now, why?”

Isn’t that the question of the year?

“I have no idea,” I murmur. “But when I’m around Maddox, he makes me feel safe and in danger all at the same time. It’s overwhelming to be near

him.”

“There is no place for love on The Onyx, Riona,” she whispers to me. “Be careful with that heart of yours or it will stop beating in Maddox’s hands.”

“Why are you giving me advice?”

“Call me stupid, but I think you and I will be friends. It’s what friends do,” she replies. “Plus, you bring much-needed drama to this island and its princes. They are finally talking after ten long years, it’s impressive the effect you’ve had.”

“They are talking because of the demonic children,” I reply, and she shrugs, looking like she doesn’t believe that. “Why do you call them demonic? I mean, I’ve just picked up on the nickname from you, but is there a reason?”

“When the first kid arrived, a vamp told me she saw the kid in flames. Sounds like a demon to me,” she replies. “Reign said it must be bullshit, which is most likely right because demons don’t exist. The title is just a rumour made by vampires to give them a name. It’s what humans outside The Onyx used to call us many years ago, and people remember it.”

“What do you believe?” I ask her.

She looks down at me. “It doesn’t matter. One way or another, the secrets those kids are keeping are going to come out. I would be careful if I were you; people are talking, and they know you have something to do with them.”

“I don’t know why they talk to me,” I reply.

“Yeah, I guessed that, but those kids have killed vampires and humans. Their friends and family will want revenge,” she warns, and we both drop into silence after that.

“Katy, why are there no vampire children on the island? I’ve not seen one of them,” I ask.

This time her smile drops. “The last king banned all children after Maddox was born, because of the curse. Without the witches’ elixirs, vampire women cannot get pregnant. Neither Maddox or Reign will overthrow that

decision until they are king.” She pauses. “And the orb has been missing for twenty years. Twenty years of no vampire children on this island. You can imagine how much people despise you for having a connection with the first supernatural children seen for a long time.”

“I get it,” I whisper, my eyes widening. “This island and its laws are messed up.”

She laughs as she walks away. “Finally figured out you’re in hell, have you? Congrats. You’re not a newbie anymore.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE



Stepping out the car, I resist the urge to puke all over Cross’s shoes. On the walls of the castle are four men’s bodies, their heads missing and their blood dripping down the walls and into the red snow.

“What happened?” I whisper, shutting the door behind me and hearing Reign take off instantly, wanting to get the hell out of here. I don’t blame him right at this moment.

“I solved a problem and had fun,” Maddox answers me, his voice coming from my back, his breath blowing against my ear. Cross bows his head and turns around, walking into the castle, but I stay very still.

“What was the problem?” I ask him, feeling the heat from his body warming my back. His fingers reach out and trace my lower back, drifting around my hip as he walks to my side before dropping his hand. I can’t help the sigh that almost leaves my lips. “Why did you kill them, Maddox?”

“I like it when you say my name,” he informs me, amusement in his voice. “I like many things about you, Riona.”

“Maddox, why did you kill them?” I repeat, trying to ignore the effect his seductively spoken words have on me.

Rather than answer me, he starts to walk towards the castle. I jog and catch up to his side, grabbing his arm, and he stops. He could easily throw my grip off him, but he doesn’t. “I need to know you’re not a monster, so give

me a reason why you killed these four men. I know there is a reason, this isn't you."

He steps into my space, his face drifting into the cold heartless monster he pretends to be. He roughly grips my neck, pulling me against his body. "We have barely known each other, Riona. I've been alive for nearly a hundred years, and you are only just twenty-two. We can't know each other, and you should be running as fast as you can away from me. Haven't I made it clear I am a monster?"

"Yes," I bite out, even as this very moment reminds me of how we met. "But I don't believe you."

He growls as he lets me go, just like I suspected he would, and then he grabs me, holding me to his body. He uses his vampire speed, the force of the movement plastering my body to his and stealing the air from my lungs. When we stop, I dizzily stumble back and breathe in the cold air surrounding us before I see the view. We are on top of the castle in a tiny circular room, and the views are just of clouds. I've seen this view from an aeroplane, but it is nothing like this, this is out of this world. I grip the stone brickwork around the window, staring out at the clouds for a long time before I turn back. There are no doors, no other way to get up here unless you are a vampire, I suspect.

Maddox stands in the middle of the empty room, his eyes never leaving mine as he lifts up a strange dagger. The blade of the dagger glows white, hurting my eyes to look at for too long, and I can't see the hilt from the brightness of the light. Very slowly, Maddox walks up to me and picks up my hand, curling it around the handle of the dagger as my heart pounds away in my chest.

"This dagger killed a witch and trapped her soul inside of it. There are only two of these on the island, and they are the only way to truly kill a vampire," he somewhat softly tells me, letting go of the dagger. He moves the blade around and places the tip over his heart. "I've done nothing but think since the night I took you. I've done nothing but think about you and what I should do. I've never done the right thing in my life." He laughs and picks up a strand of my hair, running it through his fingers. "I've never wanted to do the right thing by anyone, but then you turned up and, fuck, I

wanted to push you away for your own good, but I couldn't. I'm a selfish bastard."

"Maddox..."

"But I'm giving you this one chance. You can kill me here and now, I won't fight you. You should kill me, Riona, because I am a monster. I am a killer." He leans into the dagger a little, and a trickle of blood starts blooming onto the white shirt. "And I can't resist you. I can't stay away, because you are mine."

"I c-can't do this!" I exclaim, my hand shaking around the handle. "Just tell me why you killed those men?"

"I'm a monster, Riona, and I won't change. This is the only chance you will ever get to escape me, because if you let me live, I will never stop. I will never let you go. I will never stop claiming you as mine," he firmly tells me, his voice rising with each word, anger spilling into the space between us and forcing one of us to make a decision. He looks me dead in the eye. "Do it, Riona!"

Suddenly I realise he wants me to do it. He knows it would be the best thing for me and him. We are destructive towards each other, two people who really, really shouldn't be together. We both know it.

But I don't think either of us feels like this is something we can walk away from. I just can't.

I could tell myself a million reasons why I should stab him in the chest and let him die.

But I can't.

I let the dagger fall to the floor, the clanging of the metal is the final bit of resistance gone from my chest, and I lean forward, kissing him with everything I'm feeling inside. He groans and picks me up, pushing my back into the brick wall and ripping my top off. I tug at his shirt, and he pulls it over his head, pushing his trousers down as he kisses my neck. Maddox puts me down long enough to pull my jeans, boots and panties off before picking me up and thrusting into me in one long stroke.

“God,” I moan, throwing my head back at the sheer pleasure coursing through me.

“I prefer the name Maddox,” he teases against my neck, sucking and nipping on my skin as he thrusts in and out of me.

“Maddox...I...can’t...” My words are a jumbled mess until his lips claim mine once more, his tongue slipping into my mouth. The mixture of my nipples rubbing against his hard chest with every thrust of his hard cock inside me sends me over the edge in seconds. I moan into his mouth, and he swallows the sound as I contract around his cock, and he thrusts harder, staring into my eyes as he stills, his hot come filling me.

We both stare at each other as he holds me against the wall, his hand buried in my hair, his other holding my ass. “You’ve just signed your soul to the devil.”

“I know,” I whisper, and then I kiss him again. I might as well get my soul’s worth.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO



“I’m surprised to see you outside Maddox’s bedroom or the conservatory with him,” Cross states, making me jump out of my skin. I spin around, nearly dropping the plate in my hands, and glare at him.

“How did you get in here so silently? The door was shut,” I mutter, putting the plate down. “And for your information, Maddox is sleeping, and I was going to make us breakfast. Then I burnt the toast, so I’m starting over.”

Cross shuts the door behind him and walks over, lowering his voice. “Be careful.”

“I always am,” I whisper back, ignoring the fact that I’m totally and completely lying. The last four days with Maddox have been nothing more than orgasms after orgasms. I mean, he did feed me and showed me more of his paintings. Maddox explained each one of them, and it was like looking into his mind, understanding a part of him I didn’t know about before. He is a tortured soul, I can see that, and for some reason, I think I make him better. Cross is right, we have gotten a lot closer in this last week. He walks over, flicking on the tap, and the loud water noise fills the room.

“I don’t think you are,” Cross replies. “Are you in love with him?”

“If I was, wouldn’t I be dead? The curse and all,” I say, waving a hand. “Clearly, I’m fine, so that answers your own question.”

“The curse is for Maddox. I know he doesn’t love you, because as you put it, you are alive,” he replies, and a sinking feeling hits my chest.

“I’m not in love with him. I still want to leave,” I snap back with a little too much emotion than I should have. Cross raises an eyebrow but says nothing. “It’s just sex. Nothing more.”

“If you say so,” Cross replies, switching the tap off. “Perhaps you should go to Maddox’s living room. He just ordered his own breakfast,” Cross suggests, waving at the door.

Furrowing my brow, I leave my half-arsed attempt at breakfast on the side and go out of the door. Cross doesn’t follow me, and I pull my red cloak around my shoulders to ward off the chill in the castle. I take the steps two at a time until I get to the bottom and head to the doors. One of the doors is open, and I hear heavy breathing before I step through the gap. Maddox has a woman in his arms, a red-headed woman in a brown sari, and he is drinking from her neck. His black hair covers his face, and her eyes are wide, almost parted in pleasure as she heavily breathes.

I don’t move, not for a long time, and he doesn’t notice me. If he does, he doesn’t make a move to stop feeding on her. I know he is going to kill her and I turn around. Angry tears fall down my cheeks as I storm outside the castle, ignoring the bellboy’s attempts to talk to me. The red snow pushes against my boots the further I walk away from the castle, down the pathways.

I’m so stupid.

Of course he hasn’t stopped feeding on people. I just pretended he wasn’t doing it and convinced myself that he might change, he might not be the monster I know he is. I’ve been playing with the devil; I don’t know why I didn’t expect to get burned. I find a rocky ledge to the cliff, a smooth piece of rock, and I climb off the path and sit down with my back to the rock. Part of me knows it is dangerous to sit here, but another part of me doesn’t care all that much.

I could do with advice from Sophie, but even then, I don’t know what she would say to me about all this. She was always team Arlo and Riona, but I never was. I know for certain from that kiss, because I felt nothing.

Nada.

It was like a family member kissing me. It didn't rock my soul or make my heart jump or give me butterflies.

Not like someone else does. And all he has to do is look my way.

But he isn't good like Arlo, he is fifty shades of fucked up.

My thoughts drift away when I hear water dripping. I look up, seeing the clouds all look white and clear, and I can't feel rain on my face. The water dripping sound gets louder and louder, and I follow it to the edge of the rock where water is appearing out of nowhere, slowly building up and up. Suddenly the water spins around like a hurricane and then disappears, leaving Natalia standing on the edge of the rock ledge. Her black hair falls around her, and it's the only bit of cover she has on. As the wind moves her hair, I pretty much see everything.

"You are difficult to get alone, Riona Dark," Natalia claims, with her French accent. Wiping some of my tears away, I stand up as she walks over. She reaches across, touching my cheek with the tip of her finger. I freeze, wondering what the hell she is doing. "Did you know sirens were once human? We are created in the ocean, and the sea takes our feelings away with our memories of our human life."

"You were once human?" I softly ask. Strangely, I don't feel like she is going to hurt me. Maybe it's the effect sirens have on people as, even though I'm aware she is a magical being with great power, I always feel unthreatened in her presence.

She lowers her hand, looking away for a second. "I was, and I wish I could remember my past." She turns back to me. "But you could choose the way of the sirens, wash all those feelings of pain away in the sea. I would help you."

"The good feelings come with the bad," I reply. "So no, thank you for your offer."

"Shame. I believe you would make a beautiful siren in my clan," she sighs. "But the offer will remain there."

“Is that why you’re here?”

“No, I am here to show you something very special, and I want no one else to ever see it,” she tells me. “But perhaps some knowledge on sirens will explain this better.”

“Maybe,” I reply with a small smile.

She smiles back. “Sirens can channel the sea’s energy, the energy the sea receives from the humans and animals who die in the waters, to see the future for a few seconds. I dived down into the deepest oceans to use this power, to see what is in our future, and it was about you.”

“Me?” I ask with wide eyes. She steps even closer to me and places both her hands on the side of my head.

“Let me show you,” she asks. Curious, I nod. She closes her eyes and suddenly her hands feel like ice, and I scream as pain shoots through my head. I close my eyes, and then I see a blurry image. The image slowly comes into focus, and I see myself. I’m standing on a roof, and the city is on fire around me. Flames touch everything in sight, and I’m holding a ball of light in my hands, staring down at it. The image fades and blurs once more. This one slowly comes into focus, and it’s me and Maddox. His forehead is pressed against mine, and this time we are on a ship. The ship is on fire, but neither of us seems to notice. The image fades once more, and I suddenly feel sick as I start to hear my heartbeat in my ear. My heartbeat sounds slower and slower as one more image comes into focus.

This time I’m on the floor, a man standing over me, but I can’t make out more than his jean-covered legs and folded arms. I’m dead, that’s clear. Five glowing white daggers are plunged into my body.

I gasp as I suddenly drop to the ground, my head ringing and a headache there that wasn’t before.

“You didn’t mention how much that would hurt,” I mutter, climbing to my feet.

Natalia simply laughs and shrugs her tiny shoulders. “Great knowledge always comes with a painful price.”

“So I’m going to die?” I ask.

She turns away, looking over the city I just saw on fire in her vision. “Yes, but death is not always the end in this world. Stay on the island, Riona, embrace your fate.”

“Staying isn’t as easy as it sounds,” I reply.

She turns back to me, turning her head to the side. “Love never is, not true love. Not the kind of love you would burn the world for.”

Natalia starts walking away. “I thought sirens couldn’t feel, so how do you know so much about love?”

Her laugh echoes around the mountain as water starts spinning around her feet. She looks over her shoulder at me. “I feel because I choose to, and I know love because I’ve seen it in my future. Our futures are linked, Riona Dark. Stay on the island, and may the sea bless your way through fate.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE



Staring at the ceiling, I barely flinch as the door flies off the hinges and slams onto the floor.

“I’m bored of this.”

“Hello, Prince Maddox. Can I help you with anything?” I question, sitting up in bed. I cross my arms as Maddox leans against the door frame, his arms crossed tightly against his chest, his dark navy shirt stretching over his muscular arms. Black leather trousers make his thighs look thicker than usual and outline certain things very well. I gulp and force myself to plaster a fake smile on my face. “You broke the door.”

“I am aware, Riona,” he spits out, walking over said door. He leans down, placing his fists on either side of me on the bed, his face inches away from me. Damn, he smells good. “Why are you avoiding me? Why aren’t you in my bed? Why the fuck haven’t I been inside you for an entire day?”

His crude words make me blush, but they don’t wash away my anger. Or the memories of that woman in his arms and his teeth buried in her neck. “I saw you with that woman. The one who seemed to really enjoy your teeth in her neck!”

His eyes widen in realisation, and he slowly smirks. That dangerous smile I have grown to fear and enjoy all at the same time. “You were jealous of my food?”

“Humans aren’t food!” I shout, slamming my hands into his chest, but he doesn’t move. “Is that all I am to you? Food?”

He still doesn’t stop smiling as he grabs me, pulling me against his chest. His lips fall onto mine as he moves us out of the room fast, and I can’t pull away from the kiss until we are in another room and he lets me go. Maddox steps back, and I quickly take my eyes off him to see we are in the dining room with pasta and various breads on the table. Two bottles of white wine sit on the table, and it is set for two, the seats right next to each other. “I am hungry. Are you?”

“Yes, but I’m not playing nice with you when you haven’t said sorry,” I counter. Maddox sits down and shrugs before clicking his fingers. Five human men walk into the room in a perfect line, and then they just stop. Maddox picks up a knife off the table and flings it through the air. I scream as it lands in the first man’s throat. He coughs out blood, his brown eyes widening before he collapses with a thud.

“One,” Maddox coldly states, picking up another knife. “Shall I count to two?”

“No,” I bite out, walking on shaky legs to the chair and sitting down.

Maddox clears his throat and puts the knife down. “Shame.”

“You’re a monster!” I bite out as Maddox picks up a piece of bread and uses the knife he was about to kill someone with to spread butter on it. “Are they compelled? Would you compel me to love you? To not care about your actions if you could?”

He narrows his eyes at me, resting back in his seat. “No. I don’t compel women I want to fuck.”

“Oh, so you do have some morals?”

“No, but I prefer to see the fear in their eyes when I bite into their necks or thighs. Or wherever I want. I like your fear,” he comments, watching me slowly. Oddly, I feel jealous that he has never done that with me. “I like how you know fucking me is wrong, and that’s why you are always so turned on.”

I gulp. “That isn’t true.”

“It is, and it is also true that you want to know why I haven’t bitten you while we have been fucking,” he smoothly replies, and I narrow my eyes at him. He leans closer. “I am waiting for the perfect moment, the moment where you trust me so much that you never see the bite coming.”

My heart beats fast in my chest as I stare him down. He wants to hurt me. “You bit that girl in front of me to remind me of my place in your life, didn’t you?”

“No,” he grits out, but the way his jaw tightens and he looks away tells me I’m bang on. “You are saying this all now and killing more people because you need to push me away because you worry I’m going to hurt you.”

Silence drifts between us, and I never stop looking at him. Eventually, he turns to me, the rage and anger in his eyes only proves my own point to me. “I pushed you away because I am fucking bad for you. I will destroy you, Riona.”

“Isn’t that my choice to make?” I ask. Part of me knows I’m leaving this island, leaving him soon, and I want to take every second we have and embrace it. He doesn’t know that though, but I struggle to see how he plans on destroying me. He did that the first moment he kissed me, destroying me for any other man. “Maybe I like you, Maddox. Maybe that sheer fact scares you.”

“Fuck,” he mutters and moves quick, picking me up off my seat and shoving everything off the table before he kisses me, sitting my ass on the edge of the table. His lips devour mine with every moment, his tongue exploring my mouth and driving me crazy with every stroke.

I feel alive when he kisses me. I feel perfect.

And that is so dangerous for my betraying heart.

But Maddox doesn’t give me a second to think about us, he only makes me want him, want everything he can give me. He kisses down my jaw, digging his hands into my hair at the same time he grinds into me.

“Make them leave,” I breathlessly plead. He pauses and pushes me down on the table and looks up. He doesn’t say a word, but I hear them walking out of the room, and the sound of dragging lets me know they are taking the body with them.

“I’m still hungry,” he murmurs, running his hands down my body, cupping my breasts. He rips at the dress, splitting it down the middle and leaving me completely bare to him.

“Then bite me. Just me, Maddox. No one else,” I demand of him. “Promise me.”

His eyes find mine as he runs a finger up my slit, and I moan as he gently presses on my clit. He lifts his finger, licking the wetness off. “Agreed. Recently I’ve been thinking you’d make a good queen. You know how to bargain.”

“I will never be your queen, Maddox,” I whisper, meaning every word as he undoes his trousers and pushes them down. He grabs my hips, pulling my ass to the end of the table and lining himself up.

“We will see,” he groans as he pushes inch by inch into me, filling me perfectly as he always does. I moan, arching my back as he thrusts hard into me, and each thrust feels like a punishment for resisting him, for not giving him everything he wants. Maddox lifts me up, staying inside me as he carries me to his seat and sits down. “Roll your hips.”

Following his instruction, I roll my hips, and he meets my thrusts, both of us slowly losing control. Just as I’m getting close, he turns my head to the side and places his lips against my neck. I speed up my hips, grinding harder against him as his thumb moves to my clit. At the same time, he sinks his teeth into my neck and rubs my clit, the mix of pain and pleasure sending me over the edge into a blinding orgasm. Pure pleasure courses through my body as Maddox groans against my neck, the pleasure indescribable as I moan, digging my nails into his biceps. He thrusts harder into me with every second, stretching the pleasure, and then I feel him still, his hot come filling me.

He softly pulls his teeth from my neck and leans back, cupping my cheek. He kisses me, forcing me to taste my own blood as he is still inside of me.

“You taste like a goddess,” he whispers to me, brushing the words against my lips. “You were sent here to destroy me. I know it.”

“Maybe we were meant to meet to save each other,” I counter. He shakes his head, slipping his cock out of me but keeping me on his lap. I touch my neck, feeling the bite mark, but it isn’t as bad or rough as the others I’ve had.

“The bad can’t be saved.”

“I don’t think you’re all bad,” I counter. “You have family, you have friends. Bad people are not respected, and I think you are by your people even though you don’t particularly rule them.”

“I have no interest in ruling them. My brother was born for the crown, and he would make a better king,” he replies, stroking his fingers through my hair. “I don’t know why I was created.”

I frown, stroking my fingers down his chest. “Maybe it’s not for us to know why we were created but to find a way to make our lives worth it.”

His eyes search mine for a moment. “Tell me something about you that I don’t know,” he softly asks me, changing the subject.

“My favourite colour is pink or red, but then I came here. I think I need a new colour,” I reply.

“I think green suits you,” he replies. “If it wasn’t my brother’s colour, I would enjoy seeing you in a green dress.”

“I prefer jeans.”

“Dresses are easier to rip,” he states. “Tell me something else.”

Even though I’m not sure why he wants to know things about me, I start talking. “I love dressing up for nights out, but I also adore movie nights in. I love my best friend, Sophie, and I miss her here, but I’m glad she isn’t here. She would judge me so bad for this,” I tell him, waving between us.

“I care little for other people’s judgment.”

“Lucky you,” I say, making him laugh. “I was studying art to become a teacher. Painting has always been an escape for me, and I wanted to give that gift to children. My twin brother, Austin, is a wonder child, always the one who did everything right the first time. I guess that’s why I love painting, because if it’s not right, I can just brush it away and start over.”

“Yes, I understand this,” he replies. “When I’m painting, I can pour my emotions into the paint and wipe them away, making something beautiful.”

My heart pounds as I look at him. My tortured prince. “Are you close with your brother?” he asks, clearly changing the subject.

I nod. “I was.”

“I am not sorry you came here, but I am sorry he did not,” he replies. “I would have liked to meet your twin brother.”

“I wonder if he has the same gift as I do,” I ponder even though the thought of Maddox and Austin meeting scares me. Austin is protective, always has been, and Maddox is insane alongside possessive as hell.

“I have found no vampire ancestors in your bloodline, or witch or siren. Your family are very human, but you taste like magic. You taste better than anything I have tasted before,” he replies, cupping my cheek. He brings my lips down to his, softly moving them against mine. “I will never let you go.”

He keeps kissing me, possessively showing me how certain he is I won’t leave.

But I have to. Even if it might break my heart.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR



A scream clogs in my throat as I step out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, and find Cross laying out a strange sort of coat on the bed. He turns to me, his eyes widening a little as he looks at me before he swiftly turns away. “Inside this jacket is the powder. It’s hidden well inside a pocket.”

I walk over, keeping my eyes on him as he steps back. The jacket has long sleeves, is made from a thick blue material, and it has gold leaves designed from the neck down to the breast. It will fall to my knees, I suspect, and the collar is high with no hood. The buttons are thick, and the material is soft to touch with silk inside. Black leggings, a white T-shirt, underwear and black socks are folded next to the jacket, and my boots too, which have been cleaned. The underwear is lacy and black, and I’ve never seen it before. Cross answers my unspoken question. “These were made for you. Maddox’s order. Maddox isn’t here right now; he has gone to meet his friend who just arrived in his ship.”

The ship we have been waiting for.

My heart pounds in my chest as I realise the chance to leave this place is finally here.

“I doubt I will see him before I go, he doesn’t do goodbyes. I’m actually glad he isn’t here,” I reply, my mouth feeling dry. I fold my arms across my chest, holding my towel tightly in place. My wet hair drips water onto the floor; each drop is the only noise as Cross stares at me.

“Are you sure you can go through with this?” he sternly asks.

My instinct is to say no. That I can't leave Maddox because I damn well know I feel something for him, something dangerous and addictive. Every second I spend with the Mad Prince makes me see him in a new light and understand his actions a little bit better. If I stayed, maybe, just maybe I could rein in some of his crazier tendencies, and we would love each other.

But...the curse.

But...he is a monster.

And if I stay, I fear there is a chance he could turn me into one too.

“I want to leave. My feelings for Maddox aren't going to interrupt our plan,” I reply, lifting my head high. “I was stolen from my family. My parents and twin brother need to know I'm alive, and I need to see them. I miss my best friend, and I need to get Arlo off this island. It is destroying him.”

“He might come for you. You can't just go home,” Cross softly warns. “You will have to stay hidden.”

“Arlo and I have a plan. We just need to get off this island,” I reply. The plan is to go to France, to a cottage my uncle owns in the middle of nowhere, and no one knows he owns it. He made sure to tell me that once, and after his letter...he will understand. He is the only one in the real world I think has a chance of hiding me and keeping me safe.

He rubs his chin. “Tonight. At midnight, be outside Prince Reign's house with the orb, and someone will come and pick you up. They will bring you to the harbour, and we will leave.”

“How are you going to control the harbour?” I ask.

He just smirks and steps back. “If I wanted, I could take down The Onyx, Riona.”

I frown, wondering how the heck he could manage that. “But we just need the orbs and our freedom. That's it.”

“What do you know of sirens and their prophecies?” I ask before he gets to the door. The visions of the future that Natalia showed me are glued in my mind, and every time I go to sleep, I see them.

All three of them, and how in each one, everything was so broken.

“Be wary of the sirens and their visions. The sea only shows you the way they wish for the most, not all the possible rivers the future could take.”

“Thank you,” I reply, and Cross inclines his head before stepping out of my room and pulling the door shut behind him. I sit down on the bed, wishing there was someone I could tell all my secrets to without total fear. I can’t tell Maddox anything about the sirens or what I saw, and Arlo would never understand because I’d have to explain my relationship with Maddox.

After Arlo’s kiss, I know it’s better he never finds out and I keep my distance from him. Arlo is sweet and a good man, but my heart is staying locked up after I leave this place. All I want is to be free.

That’s it.



REIGN NODS his head at me as I open his car door and climb inside, pulling it shut behind me. Sensing eyes on my back, I look out the window as I pull the seat belt on to see Maddox on the steps, and Cross is right behind him.

Watch the man who will stab you in the back.

My warning never leaves my mind as I keep my eyes on Maddox, and he takes a step forward. I shake my head, even as a part of me wants him to come closer.

But I make him pause. I make him stay in this castle, and I hate myself for it as I turn away, pushing down a sob that threatens to leave my lips as Reign takes off. Tears fall down my cheeks, my body mourning for the man we have to leave behind in the mission to be free.

I have to put Maddox and this island in the past.

I have to.

“You seem upset. Why?” Reign questions. “Has my brother hurt you?”

I almost laugh. No, it’s me that is going to hurt him, and he won’t see it coming. I’m going to hurt you as well. “Maddox is many things, but he isn’t a monster, and you shouldn’t expect the worst from him. You will never fix your fucked up relationship with your brother until you see that he is a good person who thinks everything he touches dies or turns to shit. He blames himself for your mother, for your father’s bitterness and anger, and for your hate of him.”

“I don’t hate him,” Reign spits out. “I never have done.”

“What made you walk away then?” I demand. “Can’t you see he needs you?”

Reign speeds up, zipping around the corners of the mountain. “He killed a woman I loved!”

Breathing out the shocked gasp that leaves my lips, I stare at him. “She was human, fragile, and a fight between my brother and me ended in her death.”

“Did he do it on purpose?” I ask.

“Does it matter?” Reign retorts. “I will always love my brother, but when I look at him now, I see the woman I love, dead on the floor.”

“Then you both will spend eternity sad and alone,” I reply, crossing my arms. “Personally, I think you both have lost a lot and only have each other left. Why you don’t work together and build a better world, I don’t know.”

“Humans forgive easily because their lives are short. Vampires have forever,” he replies. “And my brother is a monster. Wait and see what happens when he finds out about our deal.”

I don’t say another word for the rest of the journey back, not until we come around the corner and see Reign’s house.

And the six people in front of the door. Katy and Arlo are unconscious lumps by the side of the road, and my heart pounds as I take in the six people. Five of them are kids, maybe eleven or a little older, and they all

stand behind an adult. The adult doesn't look like a vamp or a witch or a siren. I don't know how I know it, but I am certain this man is like the children.

He looks like the kids with his long fangs slipping out of his mouth, his glowing brown eyes and how he is dressed in a modern suit.

"Does he smell like the kids?" I ask Reign as he slams the brakes on the car and I jolt forward, my seat belt holding me in place.

"Yes, and I've never seen an adult one of them before," Reign replies, and he looks at me, a grin on his lips. "Finally, one I can torture for answers. Stay in the damn car!"

"Torture?" I mutter as Reign gets out of the car, and using his vamp speed, he is right in front of the man in a second. The man says something that makes Reign tense and look back at me. Then the man attacks with magic.

I've seen siren magic, I've seen the witches a little bit, but this is like nothing else. Flames spread across the ground in a wave before stretching up into the sky and turning into a dragon shape before diving down straight towards Reign. He moves quickly, dodging the flames, and punches the man straight in the face. The flames jump and spin like they are alive, and I almost scream as the five kids walk into them and disappear. Reign and the man are nothing more than blurs thanks to vamp speed, but occasionally they crash into the glass house, and I see them. Blood leaves trails behind them, and I can't do anything but watch.

I can't fight a vamp or whatever these kids are. The kids reappear in more of the flames, one of them so close to Arlo, and without thinking, I push the door open and jump out of the car, running right towards them.

"Stop!" I scream at the kid in the flames. The kid looks towards me, and I come to a stop, digging my feet into the leaves. The little boy runs over, the flames staying with him the entire way, and stops near me.

"Come into the flames. You will be reborn as your true self like your brother and parents," the boy says, offering me his hand. "They are waiting."

“My brother? Austin?” I question, looking at his hand covered in flames. “How could you know that?”

The boy just offers me his hand one more time, and I shake my head, taking a step back. My brother is at university and waiting for me, not in flames or wherever the boy thinks I should go. “If you know my parents, then you should know they wouldn’t want me or Arlo hurt. So tell your friends to go.”

“As you wish. We came to invite you, and our keeper came to warn you,” the boy replies and turns around. The flame-covered children all look at him, and at the same time, they all disappear.

“For a vampire prince, you are too easy to beat!” I hear the man shout right before Reign is thrown over my head and into the far distance. As his body crashes down somewhere, I turn back to see the man walking right up to me.

Knowing running is pointless, I dig my hands into my pockets and walk to meet him in the middle of the driveway.

“Why did you refuse to come into the flames?”

“What are the flames?” I question.

He cocks his head to the side, his long blond hair moving with him. He is really pretty, too much for a man, and I struggle to see a single flaw. “You live a half-life.”

“The boy said he knew my parents and brother. Is that true?” I ask. The man doesn’t reply to me, stepping closer and breathing in a long and dramatic way. “I see why they hid you now. Your twin brother is not the one.”

“You’re not making any sense,” I reply.

“It is not time for you to come with us, Riona Dark, but it is time for your death,” he replies. I step back as he roughly grabs my throat, lifting me off my feet. I scream, the noise never leaving my lips, and I dig my nails into his hand. Nothing works, he is so strong against me, and I gasp for air.

All I think of is Maddox, how I want him here. How I want him to save me.

The man jolts suddenly, and I scream as he throws me into the air. The whistling air only lasts a second before I slam harshly onto the car roof, hearing a cracking noise in my chest. Pain shoots through me as I roll onto my back and touch the side of my chest where the pain is from. Hot, sticky blood drips down my left eye as I struggle to sit up as Katy jumps on the hood of the car and looks at me.

“You alright?” she asks with a frown. She lifts her wrist to her mouth, but I hold up my palm.

“No vamp blood. It’s a broken rib at the worst and a cut. Check Arlo and Reign,” I mutter. Katy is gone instantly, and I climb to the edge of the car roof, looking down to see the man’s head on the floor and his body a good distance away. Blood pours around his body, and it seems to move, making the shape of a flame for a second just before I feel myself pass out.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE



I wake up feeling fingers brushing something against my forehead, and I open my eyes to see a woman I don't know leaning over me. She backs up, taking a white cloth away from my head that is dotted with my blood. The woman is human, with a short grey bob of shiny hair and bright blue eyes that look paler than her skin. Her clothes are nothing more than a dark brown sari dress that has seen better days.

"Who are you?" I groggily question. My chest hurts instantly, and I reach down, picking up the small blanket I'm covered in to see I'm wearing my bra and leggings, and my chest is wrapped tightly in a white bandage.

"I was a doctor before I was taken," the woman explains to me. "Turns out the people on this island needed my medical skills far more than the hospital I worked at before. A lot of people die out here from lack of modern medicine, did you know that?"

"I guessed. I'm still confused about why you are here, and did you do this?" I question, pointing at my chest. The doctor helps me sit up on the bed, and she starts putting things into a leather bag at the end of my bed as Arlo comes into the room, followed by Reign.

"You're okay!" I exclaim to them both. Arlo smiles, a little tense considering how we left things, but Reign just looks pissed off.

"Katy made sure to force me to understand your desire for no vampire blood, so we needed a human doctor," Reign answers my question, even though I didn't ask him.

“Will you keep our deal? Will you get the medicine I need for your people?” the doctor asks. Reign pulls his eyes from me and nods once to the doctor. “As long as Riona doesn’t die, then yes, our deal stands.”

“Thank gods,” she breathes out, and I swear I see a bit of guilt in Reign’s eyes, but it’s gone quickly. “As for Riona, as long as she keeps that wound clean, rests and doesn’t do any exercise for a few weeks as her ribs heal, she will be fine. I would like to check on her in a week to make sure there is no infection.”

“Come when you wish,” Reign replies. “Riona will not be leaving until she is healed.”

“Brilliant,” she replies and turns to me. “Stay in bed and heal up. I will see you soon.”

“Thanks,” I reply. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Doctor Fost, at your service,” she replies with a smile before stepping around Arlo and Reign, and leaving the room. Arlo comes over and sits on the edge of the bed, picking up my hand. I quickly glance around the room, seeing my coat hanging on a nearby chair, and I breathe out a sigh of relief. I haven’t lost my chance.

“So when’s dinner?” I ask.

Reign frowns. “I will bring it up to you.”

“No, I’d rather eat downstairs. I’m honestly not feeling that bad,” I say. Total lie. “Whatcha cooking?”

Reign stares me down. “I would like to speak to you about the attack, but I was going to give you tonight to rest. If you would prefer, I will have dinner ready in half an hour.”

“I would like to talk about that too,” I reply with a smile that hides how much pain I am in by just moving a little in the bed. Reign leaves the room, slamming the door shut behind him on the way out, and Arlo frowns at me.

“I want to use the bathroom and shower the blood from my hair. Will you help me?” I ask Arlo, who looks confused.

“Are you sure you want to get out of bed?” he asks. “You look pale.”

“I’m sure,” I reply, glancing at the blood marking his own hair on the side of his head. “What happened today before we got there?”

“I don’t remember,” he admits, leaning down and pushing his arms under me. I didn’t mean for him to pick me up, but I don’t have the strength to stop him as he gathers me up in his arms, keeping the thin blanket wrapped around my chest. The jostling movement hurts like no tomorrow, but I bite down on my lip. “I remember sitting with Katy and someone knocking the door. Then nothing.”

“Does Katy remember?” I ask, breathing out the pain as Arlo gets to the bathroom and gently places me on the toilet seat.

Arlo looks down at me. “Nothing either, but I heard Reign say we both stink of the magic that the kids have. He thinks the man made us forget, and he has never heard of any creature that is able to invade a vampire’s mind and make them forget. It’s impossible.”

“The longer we are on this island, the worse it gets,” I admit. I look at the door, and Arlo follows my sight. I know we won’t have long to talk, and I have to hope vampire hearing doesn’t stretch over the sound of water all that well. “Can you switch the shower on?”

“Sure,” Arlo replies and switches the shower on, pulling the door shut. He comes and kneels in front of me. “What is going on? If this is about the kiss, then I—”

I stop him by reaching out, placing my hand on his shoulder. Even that small movement hurts. “Tonight we are escaping, and I have a powder in my coat that I need to pour in Katy and Reign’s food or drink. Better the drink, to be honest. Then we can escape at midnight and get off this island,” I tell him. His eyes light up, and a big smile fills his lips. I grin back at him, even when part of me doesn’t want to leave Maddox.

It’s going to hurt him.

“You look sad suddenly. Why?” he asks me.

I clear my throat, plastering on a smile. “It’s nothing. Anyway, we need to get the orb when Reign and Katy are out of it.”

“There is a lot that could go wrong here,” he replies, running a hand through his hair. “But the end goal is worth the risk. We will need to make a plan and hope to god it works.”

“So this is the plan,” I say before starting to explain my idea as steam fills the small room, looking like smoke as it wraps around us, protecting us from vampires’ ears.

I hope.



“LOOKS DELICIOUS,” I say, glancing at the jacket potatoes, various fish, and vegetables on a platter in the middle of the table. The pain in my ribs is more than an ache now, it feels like I’m being stabbed with every little movement, and I can feel the pressure on my stitches. Arlo glances down at me as he pulls a chair out, and I sit in it before he carefully pushes the chair in.

Turns out sitting down hurts just as much.

“For gods’ sake, take these,” Katy mutters, slamming a packet of pills onto the plate in front of me. “They are good shit and will take the edge off that pain. That’s what the human said.”

“Did you go and get these for me?” I ask her in utter shock as she sits down opposite me. Reign sits next to her as Arlo takes the seat on my side.

She waves a hand as I pick up the pills, seeing they are very strong painkillers. “The doctor mentioned you needed them. Don’t read too much into it.”

“I am,” I reply, popping out three of the pills even though I think two would be the recommended amount. I’m going to need more than that tonight. I swallow them with some water, praying they kick in quickly. “And I’m thankful.”

“You were brave in the face of that man,” she replies. “I respect that.”

“Now the girl bonding is over, what did the man say to you?” Reign interrupts, and I flash a little smile at Katy before I look to Reign. Arlo wordlessly starts serving himself food and placing some on my plate for me.

“Nothing that makes even a tiny bit of sense. Did you get his name?” I ask.

“One of the children called him Halvor,” Katy remarks. “Shitty name for a bad guy.”

“Depends on what it means,” I reply. “Well, Halvor claimed to know my parents and brother, but anyone with google could have found out my basic family history. He sniffed me and then said he was going to kill me.” I pause to lean back in my seat. Reign and Katy start moving food onto their plate. “But Katy stopped him, and he threw me back.”

“He told me this island would burn,” Reign claims, and the vision of the future that Natalia showed me flashes into my mind. I’ve seen the island burn, and I was right in the middle of it. “It’s clear Halvor was wrong about many things.”

“It seems so,” I reply, pushing my food around my plate. I glance up at the clock on the wall, seeing it’s nearly ten p.m. and we need to get a move on with our plans. Katy and Reign dig into their food, and I almost sigh in relief, even as I feel a little guilty. We made a great plan earlier tonight with me distracting both Katy and Reign by pretending to fall off the bed and Arlo pouring the powder into the food.

Then all we had to do was not eat.

I see the moment Reign realises something is wrong. Katy gasps, clawing at her throat before she falls off her chair.

“Wha-t you-done?” Reign manages to gasp out, reaching a hand across the table for me.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t belong on this island, and I need to get off it before I end up dead. This is the only way,” I tell him, leaning away. He stares at me in shock before he suddenly collapses headfirst onto the table.

Then there is silence as I turn to Arlo and smile softly. He is grinning, which bothers me a little bit. Reign and Katy have done nothing but look after him, and they have never bit him or used him for food. They don't deserve this, but they needed to be out of the way. I just don't seem to enjoy this as much as Arlo clearly does.

Possibly because I don't hate vampires as much as he does.

"Let's go and get the orb," I say, knowing I can't get distracted right in this moment with anything other than the plan ahead and dealing with the pain in my ribs. Arlo helps me up off the chair, despite me telling him I'm alright. We head straight to the room with the orb, and Arlo picks up a hammer he found just this day from the kitchen cupboard.

"I will grab it, you can just stay near the door," Arlo explains. "I'm going to smash the glass."

"Alright," I reply tensely, just wanting to get this bit over with. We get to the door, and Arlo opens it, heading inside. Staying in the door frame, I watch as he walks over the flooring to the glass. Without waiting, he lifts his hand with the hammer and smashes it down on the glass. It cracks a little bit the first time, and the second time, big cracks spread across the glass like a spiderweb. When it shatters, the noise is so loud it hurts my ears, and then I feel like I've been hit by a train dead in my chest, and I fly across the corridor, landing harshly on my back. Wheezing, I stare at the ceiling, unable to focus because of the pain as I realise the glass must have been magically protected.

"Arlo!" I call out, struggling to sit up as the room spins, and I see nothing but a green light floating towards me. The orb slowly comes into focus, and I reach out to it, drawn to it like I was before.

The second the orb touches my fingers, it explodes into a cloud of dust. The dust floats around me for a second, so many different and vibrant colours of green, before it all suddenly slams into my body and disappears.

"What was that?" Arlo asks, limping out of the room. "Where did the orb go? What was that dust?"

“The dust was the orb,” I all but whimper. Arlo moves quickly to my side and helps me stand up, letting me lean on him as I hold my ribs. “Let’s—”

I pause as the ground starts shaking. Just slowly to begin with, nothing more than a small vibration, and then it gets worse. Screaming, I fall away from Arlo in the shakes that rock the walls and make the floor jump with every movement. I can do nothing but hold my head, begging for it to stop until it suddenly does.

I only get a second to look up before the ceiling cracks, and dozens of bricks fall onto me, knocking me out for good this time.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX



Gentle rocking wakes me up, and then I hear screaming like no other, the sort of screaming that comes from pure pain and nothing else. Above me is nothing but stars, and I can smell saltwater and hear the gentle waves a little bit under the screams. I sit up, tasting blood in my mouth and realising I've been given vamp blood right away. I'm not in pain anymore.

“RIONA!” I hear my name being screamed, and right away I recognise it as Maddox. But I've never heard him in so much pain before. My heart pounds as I climb to my feet and see I'm on a ship, the gentle rocking should have given it away. I don't see anyone but Cross, who steers the ship at the back, and he doesn't look my way as I rush to the back of the ship.

Maddox is at the end of the dock, fighting humans that come at him with everything they have. They die left, right, and centre like nothing more than bugs he rips apart, covering him in blood from head to toe.

He sees me right away, and I can almost taste his pain like it's mine. Because, in a way, it is.

“I know you can't hear me, but goodbye, Maddox. I'm sorry,” I whisper, crossing my arms against my chest. Maddox never stops fighting or screaming my name on repeat as the ship takes me away from this island.

Away from him.

I turn away when the island becomes little more than a dot, and nearly jump out of my skin to see Arlo right behind me. He hasn't taken any blood, guessing from the cut on his head.

"What happened?" I ask. "How did we get here?"

"You nearly died under the bricks, but I managed to get you out, and I had to cut Reign to get his blood and give it to you," he quickly and quietly explains. "Then I waited with you for Cross. If he was surprised about the orb, he didn't show it and took us to this boat. There is only us humans on board, no one else but a knocked-out girl in the rooms. Something is wrong, and I think Cross is a witch. There are other witches here."

"I don't understand," I mutter, confused. "I thought this was the way for all of us to get out. Cross isn't a witch! He can't be!"

"Yes, he is, because he is my brother," a familiar voice claims. Arlo turns around, stepping out of the way so I can see Sabina standing next to Cross, and a line of witch women are right behind her. They have all their heads bowed, all of them have red hair, and I realise straight away Sabina looks like Cross. They have the same hair, the same features, and I've been stupid to trust him. She hisses at me, and I step back.

The urge to jump into the sea is high right about now.

"Sister, we could not retrieve the third orb, but she has taken one of them," Cross tells her, almost lovingly. I glare at him, wishing I hadn't been so stupid to fall for his lies.

"How could you lie to me!" I scream at Cross. "All I wanted was to go home!"

"That island is not your home," Sabina replies, taking a step forward. She seems to think better of it and holds her hand up. Like a snake wrapping itself around me, I am jolted forward, the toes of my boots scraping across the floorboards as I try to get myself free. "Don't think about moving, little boy. I will kill you and the other human on board. Both of you are useless to me but serve to make Riona play along."

"Play along with what?" I breathlessly demand.

She turns her head to the side. “Your parents kept many, many secrets. Especially your sweet dear mother. My sister.”

“No...,” I whisper. “My mother isn’t a witch!”

“Oh, she is, and she was meant to be head of our coven,” Sabina sneers. My aunt sneers. “Then our mother sent her to this vampire island to work with the old king, to make sure our alliance still held when he died. Then she disappeared, along with an orb that decides the next ruler of the vampires and gives them incredible power.”

“My parents wouldn’t do that,” I reply, gritting my teeth, trying to fight the invisible hold on me. Sabina walks up closer, so close I can smell the deaths she has caused stuck to her skin like a perfume. “They just wouldn’t lie to us for years!”

“Oh, they have lied to you for a long time. I don’t know what happened on this island or what your father did to convince my sister to leave everything she ever knew to run away with him, but it happened, and now I’m finally understanding it. When I met you, I saw why.” She pauses and looks at Cross. He tensely smiles at her before they both look at me. “The king gave the orb to your mother, and she did a spell to absorb the magic when she was pregnant.”

“So my mother had the orb?” I ask.

She smiles at me like I’m stupid for not knowing this. “Yes, and that is why you can’t be compelled, and it’s why you feel at home on the island. The orb might have even made you feel out of control, uncomfortable, because it drew you in. The orb seeks its counterparts, and now you have successfully taken the second orb. When you have the third, which will be soon, you will die by my hand, and I will rule the vampire island, taking back what is rightfully ours.”

I shake my head. “One small problem with your plan.”

She steps closer, grabbing my chin roughly with her hand. “What is that then, my niece?”

“Maddox will never give up the orb,” I laugh out. “He would rather kill every witch in his way.”

“But the mad prince has never been in love before,” she softly replies, forcing my hand into the air with her magic. I stare at my hand with her, seeing white root-like veins crawling all over my hand.

“What is that?” I question, tears pricking my eyes as I already know.

“The curse of being in love with the Mad Prince. You have a year, Riona Dark, and one way or another, you will die.”



EPILOGUE

PRINCE MADDOX

Wiping blood from my mouth and eyes, I lift my foot and kick the door open. My brother is slumped on the dining table, his arm hanging off the side of the table. Bricks have fallen from the ceiling, destroying most of the room. The vamp girl he is always with is collapsed on the floor under a wooden beam, and I ignore her.

“Wake the fuck up!” I growl, moving to Reign’s side in a second and kicking his foot. He jolts awake like a lion, roaring as he looks around and finds me.

“Your human poisoned me!” he shouts in frustration, and then he sees the room. “And she fucking destroyed my house!”

I wait for him to finish his meltdown. “The human girl is more destructive than you, and that is saying something.”

“Yes, I am aware,” I bluntly state. “And I need to get her back. Now. We are leaving to murder an island of witches and start a war. Grab your swords.”

“I’m not helping you get her back if the witches have her,” Reign calls after me. I come to a stop. “Let her go, Maddox. She isn’t safe around you, and you will only lose her. Starting a war over a woman is not a good move.”

I told myself the same thing a million times as I ripped apart every human in my way on that port, but when I saw her on the edge of the ship, it felt like my heart was leaving with her. I’m fucked up and cruel. I’m a monster, but she is my redemption.

I can’t let her go.

“I love her.”

I've never said that about anyone, not my mother, or father or my brother. I never knew I could feel what I do for her so intensely. But I realised it the second I woke up, the second I read Cross's note explaining who he is, how he has lived with me for so many years as a spy, and how Riona is theirs.

His.

Fuck no.

Reign sighs, leaning back on his table. "Then Riona Dark is a dead woman walking."

"The witches have her," I explain. "And I need her. I want her. I love her. Fucking hell, are you going to make me force you into helping me?"

"Perhaps begging will work," he coldly responds. "It didn't work for my human who you killed."

"Fuck you," I snap. "That was an accident, and I am sorry."

He slowly smiles. "I never thought I'd see the day you asked for my help or apologised. Alas, I promised our father I would help you if you ever asked for it, and I promised my mother to always forgive our family."

"Help me burn them all down and make them respect our rule," I respond. He inclines his head, and I slowly smirk.

The witches are going to pay.

And I'm getting what is mine back in blood and fire. The witches are going to burn.

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DESCRIPTION



There's no love in a world of witches and war.

Riona Dark's plan to escape The Onyx and the vampire she left behind there all went up in smoke the moment the witches revealed their true intent.

The Quartz island is the home of the witches, and it's full of more horrors than Riona thought possible. Protecting Arlo, finding out her family's secrets, and learning the true power of the orbs make surviving The Quartz near impossible.

With war on the horizon,
Death chasing her soul,
and a vampire prince demanding her back with him...
Riona doesn't know which way to turn.

Riona won't be a tool for the witches or die for the vampires without a fight. The Onyx may have let her escape, but one vampire will never let her go.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN



“Get off me!” I demand as Cross shoves his hand into my back and pushes me into the dim room. I spin around as Arlo walks in after me, and Cross grabs the door. “You’re a betraying bastard, you know that?”

“I’m well aware, niece,” he drawls before slamming the door shut in my face. With a frustrated scream, I kick the door and smack my hands against it until Arlo wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me to him. Fury makes my entire body shake, and Arlo can’t fix this. I push away from him and hold my hand up as I back away until I find a wall. I use it to steady myself so I do not fall over. My eyes flicker from Arlo to my hand where my veins are glowing a white, almost silver colour. It’s beautiful, but in the most disastrous way.

It means Maddox, the Mad Prince, is in love with me, and the curse has been placed on my soul. I’m going to die.

“You’re in love with Prince Maddox?” Arlo asks, but the disgust and pity in his voice makes me lift my eyes to his. “The monster who murders humans like sport? You’re in love with him?”

“Maddox isn’t just a monster,” I tell him and cross my arms. “You do not know him.”

“He has you under some spell. It’s the only way—”

“It’s no spell,” I cut in. “It’s no trick, but I do not want to talk about that right now. We need to discuss how we are going to escape the witches.”

He shakes his head and sits down on the floor, stretching his legs out. “Unless you developed magic with those orbs inside of you, we are well and truly out of our depth. We do not get out of this.”

I grit my teeth. “I’m not letting Sabina win. My mother never spoke once about a sister or brother. In fact, she never mentioned her family at all, and I can finally understand why. Our family is evil and clearly has plans for a war.”

“A war they want you to be right in the middle of,” he replies. “And I’m stuck as bait. Along with that girl over there. Who is she?”

I look over to see a bundle on a daybed next to the wall, and most of her is hidden in the shadows. The small lightbulb in the centre of the ceiling isn’t bright enough for me to see her. I walk over, pulling the woman onto her back and recognising her straight away.

“Her name is Ann. We were on the ship that brought us to The Onyx, but then I never saw her. I asked for her to be saved, and Cross clearly saw her as bait,” I mutter. “I do not know if I put her in more danger by saving her from the island. This isn’t a rescue.”

“Let’s wake her up,” Arlo suggests. “We need her to be awake and ready in case we get a chance to leave.”

“Did you...well, did you ever see anything odd about Austin?” I question. “Apparently, our mother is a witch, and that’d mean we both have witch blood. I’ve never been able to do magic, but—”

“If he had magic, one of us would have known,” he cuts in, looking down at me in the shadows. “I never once thought I was the normal one of us three, but look at us.”

“I’m sorry,” I say as we both stand over Ann. “I wanted to save you, and I’ve just dragged you from a kinda safe place to an island of witches who hate humans as much as vampires love to feed on them.”

“This wasn’t your fault,” he finally replies. “But I wish you’d told me about you and Maddox. It would have saved me from making a fool out of myself by kissing you.”

“You’re a good man, Arlo...” I drift off, unsure how to end that sentence, when he does it for me.

“But I’m not a psychotic vampire prince. Got it.”

Before I can reply to that statement, Ann jolts up, her brown hair flying all around her face before she wipes it away. Ann looks a little paler than when I last saw her, but she is still as beautiful with her big eyes and tattooed arms.

“I never had you down for wearing dresses,” I say with a smile. Her eyes widen, and she grins as she sits up. I hold my hand out, and she takes it, climbing off the bed and holding the side of her neck. I do not need to see what’s under her hand to know she was bitten.

“My vampire owner likes dresses,” she mutters. “I did like the woman. She was kind, and I’d happily go back to her.” She pauses and looks around. “Where the hell are we?”

“You can explain this,” Arlo states and leaves us, going to sit by the door.

“In the very short version, the witches have taken us as hostages. Well, me. You and my friend Arlo over there are ways of making sure I do as I’m told. The witch leader is my estranged aunt, and she wants something from me. To wrap up, I’m sorry I dragged you into this, and I’m going to do everything I can to keep you alive.”

“Wow,” she breathes out, and we go silent as we look at each other, and she processes everything I’ve just said. “Alright, sounds messed up, but how much worse can witches be than vampires? They do not drink blood, right?”

I wrestle with how much I should tell her before deciding the truth is the best way to go. “They use human body parts for their spells and sacrifices for magic. They could be worse, but I’m not a hundred percent sure.”

“Great,” she rubs her forehead before giving me a brave smile. “I’m going to silently freak out over there. Good to see you again, Riona.”

She walks away and paces by Arlo, both of them close by but feeling a million miles away. I sit down on the bed and then lie down, holding in the anger and pain in my chest. I should never have left Maddox, even if it was the best thing for both of us. The worst has come to pass anyway. I’m cursed, and if Sabina is right, I have a year left to live.

I’ll be damned if I spend that year in the witches’ hold. Maybe it’s time I act more like Maddox. A little darkness could really help my escape before Maddox comes after me and that final orb ends up in my soul.

I do not want it or the magic that comes with the orbs.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT



Being stuck on this ship just reminds me of the first time I was kidnapped and taken, but this time it's so much worse. The witches actually have a plan for me. It's me they want, and I'm not just another human to be sold. I'm family, whatever that means to them, and they think they have some claim on the orbs I've somehow got inside my soul. And they've got two people here who I know have no problem killing me if I do not do exactly what they need.

Everything feels different now, and I'm not sure how I'm going to get out of this. The sea sounds calm outside, even as the ship crashes through the waves and is rocked. I can't smell anything over the seawater and damp in the room, which makes me feel sick with every rock.

I stare at the wooden beams on the ceiling, seeing people above move around through the tiny gaps and occasionally hearing the boards creak. I wonder how many witches Sabina's got on board and how long it took me before it ever crossed my mind that someone could betray Maddox. Someone so close to home. Cross McGowan. If that's really even his last name. I doubt it. I've gone over every time that I've been around Cross, which was so many in the weeks I was on *The Onyx*, and not once did I ever suspect that he was a witch or capable of doing the things that he has done. He was so close to Maddox, and Maddox is going to be so angry when he finds out Cross did this. I wouldn't want to be Cross when Maddox gets here.

And he will. Part of me misses him so much already, and another part of me fears what will happen when Maddox comes for me. He will destroy every witch on this ship and burn it to the ground.

What scares me more is that I would let him.

Ann and Arlo are silent and have been for the last few hours. Or what feels like hours with no actual way to tell the time.

I know Arlo isn't speaking to me because he learned about Maddox, and I wish it was me who told him instead of Sabina. Part of me will never forget the look in his eyes as he realised what he had been missing. I didn't tell him, because I didn't want to hurt him and because a part of me knew he would never understand my relationship with Maddox. Another part of me wasn't ready to admit how I was feeling. But here we are, and there's not much I can do about it now. Arlo no doubt feels betrayed.

And that is on me.

Ann, on the other hand, just looks terrified, and I've never seen her any other way. The sad fact is, I likely never will do. Ann hasn't opened up to exactly what she went through before she got here, and I know the vampires aren't all as kind as Reign can be.

I'm tired of the silence. Tired of hearing the witches move around and the sea crashing outside, reminding me where I am. The silence just makes me think more about the curse and makes me wonder more about the orbs and the effect they are having on my body. Can I even die under this curse with this magic inside of me? What exactly do the orbs do? I know they want to make me feel comfortable on The Onyx island, but what else? The one orb made me impossible to control, but I suspect that was just the start of the magic those orbs contained. I try to remember everything that Maddox told me about his father, who had all three orbs at one point, but he never absorbed them into his body. So I think it might be a moot point, anyway.

Really, I need to talk to Reign and Maddox. They might be able to give me some answers. I do not trust a single thing that comes out of the witches' mouths even if they decide to tell me the truth. I sit up on the bed and walk over to the door to bang it a few times.

“Hey, witch bitches! Let me out!” I shout and bang on the door a few more times to make my point. But no one replies, and I rest my head against the wooden door. I give up and sink to the floor, wrapping my arms around my knees and resting my head against the wall by the door.

“How long do you think it’s going to be until we get to the witches’ island?” I enquire. “Do you know anything about the witches, Arlo? Did Reign or Katy talk about the witches?”

“You should know, you’re the one who hangs out with the prince and apparently knows that witch,” he sourly replies, lifting his head until his green eyes clash with mine.

“I met her once at a meal in Maddox’s house. She was apparently a friend of Maddox’s, but I do not believe it much anymore. There were two other witches there who said they were friends of his, and he seemed closer to them. I’m hoping that we see them around and they might actually help,” I suggest. “Other than a miracle, they are the only plan I have.”

“We do not need help from witches,” Arlo snaps. “Or vampires, for that matter. They both clearly are using you for different reasons, and I think we are better off trusting anyone who isn’t supernatural.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of with your friend over here,” Ann finally speaks. “I wouldn’t trust any of them.”

“I do not mean trust them, because I get why we shouldn’t,” I say. “I just meant that they might help us escape or get a message to Maddox for help. They could just get you guys off the island, and I will figure out something.”

“I just do not see that happening,” Ann replies with a sigh. “There is no such thing as a good witch. They are made with dark magic and revel in it, from what I heard.”

“Where did you hear that?” I ask. I believe her, because the little time I’ve spent around Sabina, I would never call her a good witch. She lives and breathes darkness.

“I was taken in by an older vampire woman, and she wasn’t too bad. Other than occasionally feeding on me, she kept pretty silent and looked after me

like a pet. Better than I saw other humans being treated, so I kept my head down and did as I was told," she explains. "I know because she talked about witches with her friends occasionally, and I overheard them, but yeah. Witches are nothing to be messed with. Everyone thinks Prince Maddox is insane for having witch friends with everything that happened to his mother."

"What happened to his mother?"

"The witch's curse killed her and destroyed any goodness in his father. Their family was a mess from that point onwards," Ann answers. Arlo's eyes drop to my hand, and I hide it at my side, refusing to meet his eyes.

"So witches are bad news. We have literally nothing else," I sum up our conversation. "It's not going to be easy once we get off this ship. It's just going to get worse. And whatever you do, do not aggravate them."

"Alright," Arlo agrees, and I see Ann nod.

We sit in silence again for hours and hours, but Arlo looks at me the entire time, and I can feel the questions burning in his mind. I do not want to tell him I'm dying because I fell in love with a vampire prince. I do not want to say it out loud or even look at the curse. This curse destroyed Maddox once, and if I die, I do not know what it would do to him. I know he cares about me, and because of this curse, I know he loves me. The Mad Prince in love with a human. It's something that should never have happened.

As the hours pass by, my stomach rumbles, and I'm desperate for a drink of water as I lick my dry lips. But there's nothing in this room except the droplets of saltwater that come in from the sea. I highly doubt the plan is to just let us die. So one of them must be coming with food and drink soon.

The ship seems to stop a little later, and I hear the sound of an anchor dropping into the sea not long afterwards. We all stand up, our eyes saying everything, and we silently make an agreement that we need to do something when this door opens. We're only humans, but we aren't going easy. We're against witches, but they need me alive for whatever reason. If I could just get a weapon, I might be able to find a way to make them listen to me and not let them just use me. The door swings open seconds later, the lock magically opening by the sounds of it. Cross walks in, followed by two

female witches who have marks all over their faces. I've never seen them before. Their blonde hair is hidden under a deep red cloak, and Cross is wearing the same red cloak as the others, but I've never seen him in it in the past. It must be a witch thing. He is a witch, and it annoys me how Maddox never knew. It must have been one hell of a spell to hide his true side.

"Hey, Betrayer, what are you doing here?" I joke. He scowls at me. "I know, you're here to set me free before I try to jump right off this ship into the sea. It seems warmer than your sister's cold, dead heart."

He sighs. "Let's not pretend you won't do anything to save your friends, niece."

Cross roughly grabs my arm and starts dragging me out of the room as I struggle in his grip, and he shakes me still. I glare at him.

"Bring the others to the holding cabin and make sure they're not harmed. Make sure you feed them as well," he tells the witches, and they bow their heads.

"Seems you have power here, Betrayer. Were you always that jealous of Maddox?"

"Shut up," he growls at me, harshly pulling me next to him. I'm dragged out of the room, and I try repeatedly to pull my arm from Cross's grip before he stops. He pauses in the corridor and looks down at me. "Stop it. Sabina wants you alive, but my sister is cruel, and she will kill one of your friends. Do you want that?"

"No," I bite out. "Why the hell are you doing this if she is so cruel? Why follow her?"

"Family," he simply states as I start to hear something loud in the distance. The sound goes on, and I have no idea what it is.

"I'm apparently your family, and Maddox treated you like family too. He protected you!" I shout.

"Maddox is evil and corrupt. Reign is reckless and proud, and neither of them should be allowed to be king. I agree with my sister," he replies. "Don't you? You saw up close what they were both like."

“He will come after you for this, Cross. Maddox will rip your world apart. That’s how well I know him.”

Cross looks a little thrown back for a second before he hides it. “You do not know the power of witches.”

“But I know Maddox. He’ll never stop, he’ll burn the entire island down,” I warn him.

“Not with you on it, he won’t.”

“You do not know him,” I tell him. “You’ve got no idea what you’ve just done.”

He shakes his head to start pulling me up steps to the deck. “I lived with him a lot longer than you.”

“Yes. Then you should know more. This is far more complicated than you think. Whatever you want with me, you won’t get it.”

“You’ve got no idea what we want from you,” he replies as he continues to drag me up into the light. “And you do not want to know. The orb bearer has been predicted by witches for centuries, and no vampire prince can stop what must happen to you.”

“Watch him,” I breathe out with my eyes closed, feeling the hot sun soaking into my skin. Bright light burns my eyes as I open them, and it takes me a few minutes to readjust. And when I do, I’m left staring at an island in front of us. The island is not far from the ship, and the loud noise that I once heard I now recognize as waterfalls. Waterfalls surround the bottom of the island, crashing into the sea, meaning there’s no way our ship could get up there. The island itself has massive trees stretching into the sky. The tall trees are so strange as they look like they’re made from diamonds, sparkling so bright it’s hard to look at them for long in the sun. I wonder what they look like in moonlight.

The trees’ leaves are black, falling around the island, constantly mixing in with the waterfall below it. I can see outlines of houses, dwellings made of black wood, inside the forest that surrounds the entire outskirts of the island. It’s beautiful and dark, kind of exactly what I was expecting for the witches’ island to be like.

“Welcome to The Quartz. The home of the witches and where your mother was born,” Cross claims. The Quartz? I can kinda see it with the shape the island is. It looks like a massive crystal.

“How do we plan on getting up there?” I ask.

Sabina is the one who answers me, her voice drifting from behind as she walks around to face me. A red cloak like Cross’s is on her, but her cloak has four gold wing-shaped pins on her collar.

Her red hair flows down and around her shoulders, and her cruel eyes land on me. For some reason, I get the impression she is searching my face for something. “We fly, of course. This is how we know the vampires can’t get there. Any witches can get out to our island, though. Makes it quite impossible for an attack.”

I smile at her, my words coming out cold and smooth, the very opposite to how I actually feel. “It won’t stop him, and you should be scared.”

“That’s the point. I *want* your prince to come for you. You will help us. In fact, you do exactly what we want you to do, which is to be bait,” she replies with a sneer. “He will follow you anywhere. Young love. So sweet. So tragic. So pathetic.”

Fear trickles into my chest. She wants Maddox here? Why?

“What do you want with him, and who else could you possibly want?”

“I want someone else to come for you. Someone who I have been seeking for so many years.”

A deeper feeling of dread inches into my heart as I know her answer before she even says it. “Your dear, sweet mother. I want my sister back, and she’ll come. She’ll come for you.”

“No, she won’t,” I reply, and she keeps her expression flat, but I see her frown. “She must have known I was taken by vampires, and she never came for me there. What makes you think she’ll come here?”

Her laugh fills the air. “Because she knew you were never really in danger on the vampire island. Here? You are.”

With that, she turns away and nods towards Cross. He wraps his hand around my waist and pulls me hard to his side. I try to fight him off, but he's so strong, making it impossible. And then Sabrina starts chanting words underneath his breath. The chanting gets louder until suddenly there's a blast of magic that fills the air. My feet leave the deck, and I wrap my arms around Cross just as we lunge through the sky. We shoot into the sky with nothing other than Cross's arm around my waist to hold me to him. I can't open my eyes against the speed of the wind, but I feel it blowing around me, whipping against my body harshly. I barely suck in a breath among the flying before we are landing between trees, slowing down until we crash onto the ground. I pick myself up off the black pebble stones around me as quickly as I can, feeling more than a little sick and dizzy. I search around the place we have landed, no doubt on the island, and see sparkles of light that float all around the trees, making it bright enough to see everything.

"I can heal your flight sickness," Cross offers.

"You should know by now that I do not want your help," I snap.

"I am still loyal to my friendship to you, niece," he replies. "Even if you do not see it. This is best for you. You were confused on The Onyx and lured in with vampire seduction. Here you can be free."

"Bullshit. You're nothing to me anymore," I spit out at him. "Uncle or not."

"I hope you change your mind," he replies. "I hope you see that we're doing the right thing for you. Hasn't it occurred to you that the only way you're going to break that curse that is currently killing you is by being nice to us? Witches are your family, witches made the curse in the first place."

"A curse that killed the vampire queen. No witch knew how to stop the curse, or they would have come forward by now. I have nothing to gain by being helpful to you guys," I reply. "Stop trying to get into my head and pretend you're my friend. You're nothing but a liar, Cross."

"I am not just that," he replies.

"You are. In fact, I will not help you at all. If anything, I'm just going to make you pay for what you've done."

“Really? How do you intend to do that?” he asks, walking towards me. He grips my neck tightly in his hand. “I could kill you right now, and you couldn’t stop me.”

“You’re really an evil monster, aren’t you?”

“That should make you like me,” he retorts with a laugh, letting my neck go, and I step away. “Considering you fell in love with the evillest monster you’ve ever met.”

“Bite me,” I snap. He laughs as he drags me through the forest and down the path straight towards a town full of houses. The houses are all made of black wood with white windows and strange half-moon shaped roofs with balconies. We pass several of the smaller dwellings for a while until the houses get larger. The pathways are made of small black stones littered with the sparkling lights that float just above our heads. It’s a little while before we see witches, and when we do, each of them has those deep red cloaks on and their heads hidden in deep hoods.

This place reminds me of *The Handmaid’s Tale* but with witches. It’s messed up. Several children pass by, and I sort of stare at them for a while, remembering the demonic children on the vampire island. I wonder if they’re having that problem here and how exactly they’re dealing with it. That brings to mind the demonic man who appeared not so long ago and attacked me, and then the little boy who mentioned my parents and Austin being reborn in the flames.

We eventually come towards the end of the road, which curves into a massive courtyard. The courtyard has three waterfalls in the middle, and the water inside runs green, with ivy wrapped around it. It seems like the only thing with colour here.

The place is silent despite the fifty witches around us, who never look away from the ground in their walks. There’s no laughter, no joy, no nothing. It’s just silent.

“I can see why my mum left. This place is, you know, really fun,” I sarcastically say.

Cross grumbles and pulls me along. “The witch way is to be silent in public,” he tells me, “except in our homes, and you would do well to learn silence.”

“Wow. Cross, you’re a real life of the party,” I mutter. “It must have been an absolute shock for you to be in Maddox’s home with all the parties he likes to hold.”

“It’s not so much different from my home. There’s definitely blood and gore in both places,” he comments. He starts dragging me towards the biggest building, which clearly will be Sabina’s. She seems like the type to have the grandest place. It looks like a castle made of black wood with three moon symbols on top of three towers and dozens of windows spread over four floors.

“Ready to meet the clan leaders? They have been eager to meet you,” Cross questions as we stop at the bottom of the steps.

“Unless they are more fun than you, no,” I reply.

He looks down at me, his eyes cold. “Keep talking, niece, and they will cut your tongue out. They love to do that. It’s *fun* for them.”

I close my mouth, and he drags me up the steps. I hate witches.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE



Cross roughly pulls me up the steps towards the giant house that seems to tower above everything else outside. By the door, four witches in red cloaks stand still and silent. Each one of them has their head bowed and their hands resting on large white sticks in front of them. As I look closer, I see the sticks are more like staffs and made of woven wood, with carved symbols that glow silver. Two of the witches move at the same time, turning aside and pulling open the large black doors. The doors creak with the movement, and a gust of warm air washes over us as Cross drags me into the house. Inside, the warm light and its brightness are a stark contrast to the black wooden building. I can't help but gaze around in wonder when I see the ceiling is full of floating black lit up candles that hover. The lights cast a warm yellow and orange glow around the room, which smells like herbs.

The first room we walk into is pretty empty, nothing but black hardwood floors and a few strange paintings in heavy frames on the walls that I look upon as we pass. The pictures are all of women, each with red hair, marks all over their faces, and each one of them looking eviller than the next. There's nothing in their expressions, no light, no love, and I find it hard to figure out how my mother, who is full of light and love, is from this place.

Then again, I haven't gotten my head around how she lied to me about who she is, and I'm not sure I even believe it all. Does my dad even know? What about my uncle? They always said he was crazy, but he wasn't.

I come to a stop, making Cross pause with me as I see the last picture in the row, the one next to Sabina. It's my mum. I'd recognize her anywhere. Her high cheekbones, her beautiful long blonde hair, her bright eyes, everything except for she's so much younger, and in this painting, she looks as cold as the other women. I do not think I've ever seen a picture of her this young. Now that I really think about it, I realise there was a reason. She wasn't camera shy, as she once told me.

She's a witch.

"Your mother was well-respected here," Cross tells me, looking up at the photo.

"She is everything the witches here are not," I say, trying to come to terms with the fact my mother seems like she was someone else on this island. "I knew nothing but love from her."

"Keeping you from your world was never love."

"I've seen your world for a short time and, trust me, it was."

He shakes his head and looks away down the corridor of paintings, his eyes searching each one. "As you can see, your mother was the first blonde in our family. She was known as being strange for many reasons."

I do not reply to him, not seeing where he is going with this. "See, both your grandparents have dark red hair, making her odd. Are you looking forward to meeting them?"

"Are they like you and Sabina?" I ask, and he smiles down at me.

"Yes," he replies.

"Well, no thanks then. I would love a drink of water or some food," I answer.

He mutters something under his breath as he grabs my arm again and starts dragging me towards the doors on the left. I spot a staircase at the bottom of the corridor and two other doors, which have witches outside guarding them. This is the only one that's not guarded.

The doors open for us when we get close, and I see witches holding them as we head inside to what is a massive dining room. It is not as big as Maddox's dining room, but still quite a grand and old room made of stone walls instead of wood. I wonder if the house was built around this room. A long glass table is in the middle, with at least twelve black chairs surrounding it. The candles float in the air above us, casting deep shadows mixing with orange and yellow light. There's a roaring fireplace on the left that has blue flames inside instead of red, and the mantelpiece is a large stone snake with two heads that connect at the bottom.

Standing next to the fireplace is Sabina, who is talking with an older woman with greying red hair. The woman turns to me, and I know exactly who she is from her eyes. She shares my mother's eyes and mine too. Our blue eyes remind me of the sea and nothing else. Mine might be calm, but hers look dead. My grandmother does nothing as she stares back at me, running her gaze down my body before turning back to Sabina. That alone makes it very clear where her loyalty lies. I can't trust any of them, I remind myself repeatedly as Cross drags me further into the room and pushes me into one of the seats. A glass of water is in front of me, and I do not think for a second before drinking it as Cross sits to the left of me. Sabina comes over and sits to the right of me, and my grandmother sits next to her.

My grandmother's sharp eyes look over at me. "I asked the witch elders for a few minutes for our family to have a brief talk."

"I would say it's nice to meet you, but considering the circumstances..." I drift off.

"Do you know who I am?"

"You have the same eyes as my mother and me. I can take a wild guess who you are to me," I answer.

"And you seemed to have inherited her endless sarcasm. It was one trait I disliked the most about her."

"Interesting. I think it is one of her best traits," I reply.

She lifts her head, and I can tell I've pissed her off by the way she frowns. "I am elder Glenda," she introduces herself. This chick isn't the Good

Witch of the East. I wonder if witches have last names at all. I've not heard them mention their last name. "I am one of the many clan elders here. We have one leader, Sabina, but we always have elders come to offer advice and make important decisions with a vote."

"We have a very important decision to decide about you," Sabina finally speaks.

"I can make it for you. You let me go, or Prince Maddox is going to come here and destroy this entire island to get to me."

"You're so confident that he will?" Glenda questions.

I lift my head. "I am."

"How confident are you that my wayward daughter won't come first?"

"Perfectly," I reply. "Since I've learnt very recently"—I pause and look at Sabina, who rolls her eyes at me—"that she is a witch, and she knew all about this magical world yet never came for me, I highly doubt she's going to now."

"That will be debated," Glenda replies. "Aubery has always had a weakness for that father of yours, and I'm sure the same love applies to you. It will draw her here."

"How did you know my father? Who is he to you?" I ask. Part of me hopes he is actually human and that not everything has been a lie.

Of course, Glenda decides this is the perfect time to cut the conversation. She inclines her head and clicks her fingers. The doors open again in the room, and this time at least ten witches in red cloaks walk in. All of them walk around the table before taking their seats.

No one lowers their hoods so that I can see their faces, but I sense they are staring at me under the darkness of their hoods. I'm in a room of witch strangers who are here to decide my fate, and I have no idea how to plead with them. I've always given myself the idea that I didn't belong in this world. That I had been taken and forced into a world of darkness that I had no place in. But the real truth is that I was born of this world. I was hidden from it, but it is exactly where I should be. I now have to decide whose side

I'm on in this supernatural world. I think the decision has been made easy for me, thanks to their actions. But I can't tell them that yet. A little pretending might just keep me alive longer and give Maddox some time to come after me.

If he'll come after me. I left him. After all that happened, he might decide that I'm better off being left here. I'll never be able to tell him why I left, and I need to. I need to tell him how I feel and stop hiding from it.

I lean back in my seat and relax a little bit, even if on the inside I'm a mixture of scared and exhausted.

Sabina stands up, and all the hooded witches turn to her. "You are all very aware of the situation and the mission that has now been concluded. But there has been an issue." Sabina looks down at Cross, and a second wave of anger burns in her eyes. It's not just anger, it's disappointment, and I can't help but feel a tiny bit sorry for Cross.

I might have even understood him. But I only know him as a betrayer and nothing else. He has literally lied to me the entire time we have known each other. "Not all the orbs were taken. The orb bearer has only two of them. Without that third orb, we are at a loss, but there is hope."

Sabina clicks her fingers once, and my body starts rising from the chair as her magic surrounds me. It flickers against my skin, making me feel like someone is pinching me as I try to move but find I can't. Her eyes are glowing as she looks over at me. My hand moves of its own accord and stretches out so they can all see my hand and the white, almost silver veins crawling over it to my wrist.

"The curse has been cast," Sabina announces. "The old magic lingers on her soul. Just as strong as the vampire queen's once was."

"Let me go!" I manage to breathlessly shout. Sabina looks at me, a little surprise in her eyes before her magic disappears and I slam into the seat below me. The chair wobbles, but Cross reaches over and grabs it, holding it still. "You could have just asked me to show them!" I snap at her.

"Where's the fun in that?" she replies with an arched eyebrow. One of the witches takes down their hood, and I'm surprised to see it's one of the twins

who claimed to be friends with Maddox. And he might be my ticket out of here. Vero's eyes meet mine across the table.

"Wow, I never expected to see the day Maddox fell for a human," he jokes. "Well, not so much human as a witch."

"It seems everything is changing," Cross replies, and Vero smiles at him.

"Indeed, it is."

"The curse is unbreakable, and Riona is not to die before she has the third orb. It can't save her, but it will give us time to take the power from her," Sabina carries on her speech, making it very clear I'm a dead woman walking. I'm bait for a vampire prince and her sister, and a way to get power. Dread sneaks into my chest, stealing any words from my mouth. They do not need me alive for long, and they only want the power from the orbs. The second I have that third orb, they will kill me.

"We all know that there's no witch alive that could help us. The vampire king killed the entire clan because of that curse," Vero replies, and there is silence.

"There may be an answer the king could never have found. I will take Cross with me to make preparations," Glenda claims, and Cross bows his head at her. "We will need to travel quite far. Do keep Riona in good health for our return."

"Of course, mother," Sabina replies, but I know it's a lie. Glenda is getting out of her seat as the doors crash open and a witch comes running in. She has long brown hair, which is mostly tucked behind her ears, and she has a red cloak on with a gold pin in the shape of a book. She bows instantly when she gets to Sabina.

"Mother, shit, I mean clan leader," she blurts out, and I arch an eyebrow. I seem to have a cousin, who looks younger than me. She can't be more than sixteen. "There's been a report from the west side of the island. The vampire princes are here for Riona Dark. Both of them. They're killing witches with a small army of vampires, and our magic isn't working on them. They have something blocking it."

Maddox.

I smile as Sabina looks down at me. “I told you so.”

She sneers with a short hissing noise before she grabs hold of my wrist, and it instantly burns. It’s not the same burn as Maddox’s mark on my neck, which damn well hurt. No, this feels like it’s burning all the blood in my entire body all at once. I scream and fall off the chair, but she never lets me go as I wiggle in pain on the floor, the room blacking in and out. Eventually the pain disappears, and she lets go as black spots drift across my vision. I lift my arm up into the air, and I see a black snake marking wrapped around it, moving constantly in a circle around my wrist just before I pass out.

CHAPTER
FORTY



“Well, we certainly know how to make an entrance,” I announce, snapping the neck of a witch who just tried, and failed, to attack me. Fire flickers around the edges of my cloak as I step over her body and admire the destruction, the houses on fire, the witches running, the fear. It soaks into my soul, feeding my need for revenge. Our plane flies over our heads, blowing leaves from the thick trees around us as a hundred skilled vampires jump out after us. Witches are so backwards thinking. Humans have their own magic that they never even think about: planes.

A witch runs out of her black wood house and throws a spear at me, and I catch it mid-air, spinning and throwing it right back at her. Screams fill the air as these witches realise their magic doesn't work on us when we have their blood and some siren magic in our system. It's a well-hidden trick that my father figured out a long time ago in his mission to save my mother.

The old bastard left us a few gifts, even if he couldn't save her. I will save Riona from the curse. She doesn't deserve to die because of how I feel about her.

Reign glances over at me as he grabs a blonde-haired, middle-aged witch and throws her into a building, letting it collapse into dust. Women run with the children out into the forest, and we watch them go as dust and fire settle around us. We won't hurt the young, that's a rule, but everyone else is fair

game. Twenty witches make a line in front of the pathway to the forest, and I smile as I crack my knuckles. "I'm going to enjoy this."

"That's what I am worried about," Reign dryly comments. Spoil sport. Our vampires flock around our back, but I hold my hand up, stopping them from making a move.

"This is personal," I state before running straight into the witches, through the blast of fire and wind they throw at me. The elements do not stop me, and I grab a witch, barely looking at the male's brown hair and green eyes before ripping into his throat with my teeth. His thick blood tastes divine. I throw the witch's body aside and chase after the others who dared to stand and fight.

This whole island is going to burn if they do not give her back to me.

Riona Dark is not theirs. She is mine.

And they should have never touched her.

I see nothing but blood and feel nothing but fury for so long that it seems endless. I do not remember how many houses we rip through or the witches who fail at their attempts to stop us, but the villages all pass by, and we do not stop until the sky is thick with smoke and the floor is covered in blood.

"Stop."

Finally, a commanding but weak woman's voice rings out. The witch I was hoping would come and join our big party.

I wipe blood off my bottom lip with my thumb. "Well, hello, Sabina." Deliberately, I step over a body. "I wondered when you'd get my message."

"Your message has been clearly understood with the line of bodies you've left. They were innocent!"

"No witch is innocent when you have what is mine," I growl, my voice echoing around the courtyard we are standing in. Reign steps to my side.

"I am surprised to see you allowed this madness. This means war, vampire prince who will one day be king. Do you want your people at war?" Sabina directs her question to Reign.

Reign crosses his arms. “War was a given when you took Riona. Do not pretend you meant anything less when you calculated to take Riona and the orbs.”

“I want her back, unharmed, Sabina,” I say, tilting my head to the side. “Or you are about to see just how fucking insane I am when I rip this island apart to find her myself.”

She hisses at me, and I just smile, waiting for her little tantrum to be over. Sabina might be their leader, but she is too quick-tempered and cruel to make rational decisions. I never liked her, but the saying “keep your enemies close” always worked with the witches. “You are not welcome on this island, vampires.” She finally makes actual words instead of cat noises.

“I’m not leaving without her,” I firmly state. “And I really, really do not mind fighting my way to her.”

“Then war it is. Riona Dark is not leaving this island,” Sabina coolly replies and spreads her hands out, her eyes draining of colour in the creepy way they do.

The ground below our feet shakes seconds before a massive crack stretches down the middle of the courtyard. Dust blows out around us, and I cover my eyes for a second until it settles.

We aren’t alone anymore.

A man stands in the middle of the courtyard, right between us. Blond, tall and familiar, he looks back at me, and I frown. Why is he familiar? The man is wearing worn jeans and a tight black shirt, all things that look modern, but I can’t shake that I know him from somewhere. He looks me dead in the eye before turning away.

Who the fuck is this?

“Where is my sister?” the man asks, but he turns to Sabina as he speaks.

Something flashes in her eyes, and she slowly smiles like the cat that got the mouse. “You look so much like your mother, Austin Dark. It seems you have your own powers now. How is my sister?”

A lot of the pieces of a puzzle click into place in one mere second, but I keep my expression blank. This is Riona's twin brother, Austin, and Sabina's sister is Riona's mother, making Riona a half witch. It still doesn't explain how she can resist compulsion, but the missing orb from my brother's home might do. The fact Cross tried and failed to steal my orb makes no sense until now. I remember the stories of Sabina's sister, Aubery, who came to help my father around the time I was born. I bet Reign even remembers her.

When I get my hands on that fucker...

"You didn't answer my question. That's not nice, auntie," he almost playfully comments, but it's sarcastic and reminds me of Riona's sass. Turns out it runs in the family.

"We are looking for Riona as well," Reign interrupts. Austin turns back to Reign for a second, but then he looks at me instead.

"I know who you are, princes. Why the fuck do you want my sister?" he demands. "She can't give you the orbs back, and she is done being your slave on that island. Go back to it before you open a can of worms you can't close."

I hold his gaze. "Because Riona is mine, orbs or not. I do not care about the magic, but I want to see her. She was never anyone's slave."

He holds my gaze for a long moment before looking away. "I will make a deal with you, Sabina. If you take the princes and me to Riona and my friend Arlo, then I will tell you where my mother is. You will get to see her."

Sabina's eyes light up in greed. She wants to see her sister desperately enough to give in. Austin has her right where he wants her, and if he can get me to Riona, then I fucking like him for now. "You can see her, but not them."

"Then we have a problem," Austin replies, crossing his arms, humour marking his tone. "What do you want?"

"The real question is, do you want to gain something, like seeing your dear sister again, or lose everything? Either way, Riona will be with me by the

time the sun sets today,” I threaten Sabina, meaning every single word. “You know me well enough to know I would enjoy ripping this island apart, and you will be first.”

“We would win and rip you apart,” she counters.

I flash her a toothy grin. “Want to bet?”

Silence drifts over us as she stares me down across the courtyard. The siren magic I have in my blood won’t last long, but she doesn’t need to know that. I need to get to Riona soon and get off this damn island with her.

I do not care what Austin’s plans are, and he isn’t getting in my way.

“Fine,” Sabina finally agrees with gritted teeth. “But my niece is not leaving.”

We will see. I do not respond to her, and she turns, walking away with Austin following. Reign catches my eye as we follow behind him.

“This all just got more complicated,” he quietly murmurs. My eyes track the sparks of lava and embers on the ground where Austin appeared. Embers and lava, which I’ve seen around the demonic children back home.

“Yes, it did,” I reply, clenching my fists together. All that matters is getting to Riona.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE



I wake with a jolt, my hand instantly wrapping around my sore wrist before I pull it up in front of my eyes. A snake mark that looks alive moves constantly and slowly around my wrist. My skin is bruised purple all around where it touches, explaining the pain, and I touch the snake but feel nothing other than my skin as my fingertips disappear through it. If it weren't Sabina's magic and didn't hurt so much, I would be impressed by the magic that looks like something out of a movie.

I look around at the bed that I'm sat on, knowing I need to move. The bed has a small patch of blood that's from my wrist, from the snake mark no doubt and the cuts it has made into my skin. The bedding is white and crisp, and there's a dusty smell to the room, mixed in with the smell of fire. The sheets are a stark contrast to the black wooden walls and the candles that are floating all around the ceiling, casting deep shadows and light everywhere. My head feels like it's spinning as I sit up on the bed and look around at the room. Other than a pair of massive double doors, there's nothing else in here that I can see but the bed. The bed itself is simple, just a wooden frame with a mattress and white sheets on top of it, nothing I could use as a weapon. At the end of the bed is a plate of food and a bottle of water. Reluctantly I drink the water, desperate for more when it's gone, but I do not touch the food even when it looks nice.

I have to get out of here. I trust the witches far less than the vampires, and considering the vampires have tried to kill me a few times, that's saying a lot.

The walls look exactly the same as the rest of Sabina's house, and it has the same smell. Sabina's home is cold and empty, making me wonder once again why Cross would want to come back to this.

And why my mum never told me. I would have understood, on some base level, even if I couldn't have imagined this world.

I stare at the black walls, remembering the only hope I can hold on to.

Maddox.

He's the only vampire that I know who could take down such an extensive amount of witches and would do it for me. He's coming for me. I know it. Part of me is happy, and the other part of me is more nervous than I ever thought possible to see him again. It's going to be different when I see him this time. I can't lie about how I feel because the evidence is on my hand, wrapping around my fingers and destroying my soul.

I'm done running from what I feel for him. I ran because of his darkness and because I thought going back to my own world would save me from my feelings for him. It wouldn't have, because I knew the second the witches' ship took me away, I only wanted to go back. The saying "you do not know what you have until you lose it" is hitting me deeper than I thought it would do.

Standing up, I almost slip as a wave of dizziness washes over me and makes the room spin. I walk to the doors, feeling better with every step. I try the circular handle, but it's clearly locked, and I jiggle it a few times, but it doesn't budge.

Eventually, I leave the doors and go back to the bed, sitting down and staring at the doors for what feels like hours, but I'm sure it's not that long. It feels like hours when I'm lost inside my head, my toxic and complicated thoughts that spiral into anxiety that I can't shake. After some time, I hear footsteps outside the door in the distance, getting closer. Heavy boots on hard wooden floors. I straighten up off the bed, looking down at dusty, dirt- and blood-covered clothes and the many cuts visible on my pale skin.

Even so, I still want it to be Maddox who opens the door, but it's not. Cross steps in and frowns when he looks at me. His eyes drift to the food on the

bed, and his frown deepens.

“What do you want?” I demand, crossing my arms.

He clears his throat, looking a little paler and less smug than the last time I saw him. My heart pounds in my chest, realising why. “You know who is here. He wants to see you.”

Maddox.

I try to hide my feelings, my instant reaction, even if it’s pointless because my hand gives it all away. The curse speaks for itself. “Are you looking forward to seeing the person you betrayed? It’s worse for you, because he trusted you, and he doesn’t trust many. I wouldn’t like to be you right about now.”

“Says the woman who drugged his brother, stole a magical royal orb and schemed to run away from him forever,” he growls at me, storming towards me. When he puts it like that, it sounds kind of bad.

“Any rational woman in my position would have done the same,” I snap. “But I’m not explaining myself to you. Your entire life is a lie based on what? Your mother and sister’s love? What do they give you?”

“Loyalty that only family can have,” he replies, grabbing my arm. “One day, you will see I am your family and I am doing what is best for you. My entire life has been sculpted into being on that island, close to Prince Maddox so I could save you from him.”

“This isn’t saving me, Cross,” I reply, shaking my head once. “You’re condemning me to a fate worse than anything Maddox could have done. This is worse, and Sabina is using you.”

Cross doesn’t give me an answer, pulling his eyes away as he drags me out of the room and down the corridor. This corridor is similar to the other one, but there are two staircases, one going up and one going down. I count six single doors, and I bet Arlo and Ann are behind one of them. I just need to get to them to make sure they are okay somehow. Cross takes me down a flight of stairs, back into the hallway that we came through before.

We go straight towards the double doors where that dining room is. The doors open by witches in cloaks, and we head inside once they're open. I'm not sure who catches my eye first. Both of them shock me. Maddox and my brother stand in front of the table end. Both of them look like light and dark.

When Maddox's eyes latch onto mine, it's like all the air leaves my body and I can't breathe. My heart seems to go still as we stare at each other across the room, so many words unspoken. So many feelings turning into a tension that makes the air thick.

I wanted to run from him, but it was like running from a part of myself. I know that now.

I feel that now.

Maddox's eyes are filled with a mixture of longing and fury, making him look like the deadliest creature in this world.

And he might just be. Blood coats his black clothes, his cloak is ripped, and ash marks his cheek, but he is the most stunning man I've ever seen. He always will be.

I missed him, missed him on a level I didn't know I could miss someone.

Maddox growls low, a possessive and uncontrolled outburst as he moves across the room. Anyone else would be terrified, but I'm not.

I want him closer. He is my monster. My vampire.

And he would never hurt me.

His hand gently cups my cheek, and I lean into it, making him close his eyes for a second. Just a second, and when he opens them, he looks stronger. Like touching me completes him as much as it completes me. His fingers drift down my cheek, making me ache for him to be closer.

He picks up my hand, and I silently watch as he traces the white veins before he looks up.

"I am sorry," he tells me, and those three words floor me.

“I’m not,” I whisper back, feeling tears in my eyes. His hand drifts down my arm to the snake, and his eyes narrow as his jaw clicks.

“My Riona is hurt and weak,” he angrily bites out the words, turning to Cross. The look he gives him scares me, and I wouldn’t want to be on the other end of it.

“Do not do anything—” Cross doesn’t get to finish his sentence as Maddox lifts his hand and punches Cross straight in the face, sending him flying across the room with a harsh crash into the wall. The wall cracks, and dust fills the space as he collapses.

But it’s not over. Fury and hate burn in Maddox’s eyes, and he takes another step towards Cross. I put my hand on his chest to stop him.

He pauses.

“No,” I gently tell him. Killing Cross won’t make him feel better.

“For you,” Maddox replies. “But he will suffer for taking you from me.”

“He didn’t exactly...” I drift off as I meet my brother’s eyes across the room. For a second, I almost forgot he was here. Maybe I tried to block it out, because seeing him means I have to admit he is in a room of witches and not looking like a prisoner at all.

Austin stands completely silent and confident in the middle of the room. He looks just like the last time I saw him in university, on his way to his class. Jeans and a white T-shirt, messy blond hair and dark brown eyes. But the playful, kind, overprotective and slightly goofy brother is long gone.

I hardly recognise the man here. This isn’t my twin I remember. He has changed, or he was playing a game for years that I knew nothing about.

Maddox’s hand goes around my waist, as if he feels how weak I am and how this is a shock I’m not sure I can handle. Austin looks between us, his brown eyes flashing in disgust for a second. He could never possibly understand what Maddox and I are.

I do not care if he doesn’t.

I cannot understand why he's here, but I suspect one question will tell me everything. I'm still terrified to say it, even if I have to. "Did you know what Mum was? That she is a witch?"

My voice comes out colder than I'd wanted, but I'm tired of all the secrets and the fact that Mum has clearly lied to us our entire lives.

"Yes."

I push away from Maddox, walking straight across the room to my brother, feeling nothing but anger and betrayal like a hot poker in my chest. "How? How could you not tell me?" I demand. "You do not know what I've been through because I knew nothing about this world! And you knew!"

"Ri—"

I cut him off. "Arlo was on that island, too! He is broken, and didn't you care? You know, your best friend? Your sister? How could you know and not come for us? How?"

He doesn't reply to me, not even a trace of emotion cracking in his eyes, and I hate him for it. I hit him hard in the chest, and he stumbles back, but he does nothing.

"You're my brother. My twin!"

I keep hitting him over and over again until the skin cracks on my hands, and it doesn't make me feel even a little better. "You lied to me. Mum lied to me!"

I stop, breathless, and back away. He looks down at me, those cold eyes frustrating me so much. "Did Dad know? Or did you two lie to him too? Is he even human?"

"Dad knows," he tells me, and I scream. This time, Austin catches my hands and looks down at me. "You do not understand, and I can't explain it to you. Not here, not while they're watching."

The conversations with the demon man and child come back to my mind. If that's true...then what the hell has my family gotten involved in?

“Trust me,” he gently pleads. “What Mum and Dad did was for the best for both of us. All they’ve ever done is protect us.”

“Trust you?” I ask and laugh a little. I step back a little more. “You want me to understand that lying to me and leaving me on a vampire island is what was best for me?”

He opens his mouth to say something, but I speak first. “Did you know I was on the island with the vampires?”

He nods his head, and my chest hurts. “Did you even care? You know what they’re like!”

“We know who you are destined to be with, and you had to be on that island. It was the only way,” he tells me. “Our lives were written and predicted far before we were born.”

I shake my head. He is insane. “We knew you were never in danger. Mum would never—”

“Do not talk about her,” I quickly say. “I do not want to talk about her. In my mind, she’s completely betrayed me in every sense of the word, and so have you. Family and loyalty is really a joke with witches, isn’t it?”

I take another step back and look over at Maddox, who waits like my shadow, my strength, never wavering.

My eyes flicker back to my brother. “I do not care why you’re here, Austin, but I’m not leaving with you.”

Austin frowns as I step back before I walk up to Maddox and take his hand in mine. He nods once at me, his expression hiding whatever he is thinking.

“My sister is coming with me,” Austin addresses Maddox. “Your claim on her, vampire prince, will not hold in the world of witches. She belongs to her family and will come with me. If you want her safe, it is the only way.”

“I would rather die than come with you, Austin. I’m not your weak sister anymore,” I tell him, wrapping my heart and my emotions in a tight bundle. “So try to take me from Maddox. I dare you.”

Maddox smiles at Austin, but it's a terrifying smile full of wicked and painful promises. "Yes, try."

The doors open, and Reign walks in, looking like Maddox, covered in blood, but his expression is cold. The last time I saw him, I poisoned him and accidentally destroyed his house when I took the orb. Again, a big accident.

I doubt the vampire prince sees it like that. But he smiles tightly at me as he walks over and comes to my other side.

"Sorry about your house," I mutter.

He looks down at me. "Of the many things you've done, the house is the least I worry about."

"Understood," I reply, pulling my bottom lip into my mouth. "But I am sorry."

"Forgiveness can be earned," he replies, which I suspect is his way of telling me he is mad but might get over it soon. Maybe.

Sabina strolls into the room a few moments later and instantly glares at me before she spots Cross.

"The pointless brother with no magic has failed in the face of a weaker race," she says around a frown that makes her look old. "Breeding with humans was a mistake."

"Maybe to you he is pointless, but he isn't," I interrupt. I mean, no clue why I'm defending him in any sense. I just do not like her putting him down. Magic isn't everything, because all I've seen it do is destroy goodness. Witch magic isn't good. They say the vampires are evil in their craving for blood, but they need blood to survive. Witches do not need magic, and they are just lost in that darkness they clearly crave.

"We can agree to disagree," she responds as she walks right over into the middle of the room, past Austin, who takes his eyes off me to look at her for a moment.

Standing between the two vampire princes, who I never thought I'd see get along like this, I have no idea how they came to any kind of agreement to be here right now for me. I'm surprised Reign came at all. Both of them are covered head to toe in blood, making it clear they fought for me.

"We are taking Riona Dark home," Reign speaks, his one sentence a demand that shouldn't be challenged.

"Riona does not belong on a vampire island, even if she loves a vampire," Sabina comments. "She is half witch and belongs to me."

"Technically, my claim is much stronger," Austin speaks. Sabina hisses at him, and he smiles at her. "She cannot leave the island," Sabina says with a confident smile. She looks down at my arm, and everyone follows her gaze to the snake. "I have bound her to The Quartz. If she takes one step off this island, she'll die much quicker than even that curse will kill her."

"Witch," Maddox shouts, the word echoing around the room. Maddox is across the room in seconds, his hand clasped hard around her throat. She tries to whisper a spell, but she can't as he tightens his hand so harshly around her throat that she can't breathe.

I watch, and for the first time, seeing Maddox do something cruel and cold isn't something I disagree with. I want him to kill her. I want him to be the dark prince. I'm done pretending being human and having morals is something I crave anymore.

I scream as the snake tightens around my wrist, and then it feels like my whole body is being crushed. The pain is soul-destroying, and I can't focus as I fall to my knees, and Reign catches me. "Stop!" Austin roars, and I see him running to my side, wrapping his arms around me to help me stand up with Reign. The pain instantly goes away.

Sabina gasps on the floor as Maddox looks down at her like a bug as she crawls to her feet. "You'll die for this," he darkly warns her.

"N-not any time s-soon," she croakily replies, clearing her crackled throat and looking at me with nothing but smugness. I want to wipe it off her face. "I added a bit of a special bonus. If I die, so does Riona."

“Why would you link your life to hers when she is cursed to die soon?” Austin asks, touching my hand softly. I pull away from him as Maddox gets to me and holds me up.

“Because we will find a cure for it,” Sabina tells Austin and then directs her attention to Maddox, “and in return, you give her the last orb.”

“I do not want the orb, and I won’t take it!” I shout at her.

“For your life, you will,” Sabina calmly replies. “Prince Reign, you may leave to get the orb, and Prince Maddox and Austin, you are welcome guests.”

Sabina doesn’t wait for an answer, she knows what it will be, it’s all been planned out so well. We just played chess, and she made a checkmate in one simple move.

Dammit.

“I will hide Riona on the island and—” Austin stops talking, collapsing to the floor. Reign stands behind him and lowers the hilt of the sword in his hand back to his side.

“He talks too much,” Reign comments. “And he doesn’t seem to think Riona can think for herself.”

“I always knew we were more alike than you pretend, brother,” Maddox says around a laugh.

I sigh, looking down at Austin before turning to Maddox. His dark, stormy gaze is fixed on me. There are a million things we need to talk about, and none of them I’m going to say right here. “We need to talk.”

“That’s my cue to go. I will sort out everything, brother.” Reign nods at Maddox and turns to both of us. “Stay alive and safe. Trust none of them.”

“Do not worry, brother.” Maddox grins. “Every day they force Riona and me to stay here on this gloomy island, I’m going to drain a witch until they let us go. No witch is taking what is mine and blackmailing me without paying for it.”

“Maddox,” I whisper, but he is already walking to the doors, pulling me along with him. We have to get off this island soon, or the prince of the vampires will leave nothing but ash behind, and I will walk through it with him. I always will.

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO



The second Maddox and I are alone, everything changes.

Tension builds in the air around us as I step back into the plain bedroom I was in and watch the Mad Prince rest his back on the closed door, his eyes locked onto mine.

“Do not ask me why I left, Maddox. We both know why.”

My statement lingers in the room, filling up every inch of the space with something other than the thing we need to talk about: the curse destroying my body and the very reason for it.

Maddox is across the room and in front of me in the blink of an eye. His hand wraps around my throat, holding me still but not hurting me. I know he won't.

Not an inch of me fears him. “Every moment between us was real, and still I never knew how much I wanted you until I could not have you. But we both know why you left.”

I search his dark eyes. How can he stand here so calmly when I feel like I'm on fire? “I asked you a million times to stop killing humans. To stop treating humans like me as food! From day one, you made it clear you wouldn't change, that being broken was what you wanted to be. You marked me like everyone else and kept stealing my heart every time you stole a kiss. So I left. I left because I feared you'd rip me apart otherwise and change who I am. Can you blame me?”

He smirks, letting me go. “That’s not the reason you wanted to leave. I’m not playing this game with you where you pretend this is all on me.”

I cross my arms, taking a step back. “Really? What do you think it is then?”

“You were falling in love with me, monster and all, and hated what that made you.”

“Fuck you!” I snap, seeing red.

“No, fuck you, Riona,” he growls right back. “Fuck you for making me fall in love with you. For making me never want to wake up without you at my side, for wanting to keep you safe, for wanting to burn the world down so that no one can ever harm you. Riona, you’re the one that fucked me over. It was always you, and you changed me.”

I suck in a deep breath. That’s the most messed up and romantic thing I’ve heard from him.

“I fell for you too. Despite everything, I couldn’t stop myself,” I whisper, all the fight drained out of me. “It was always you for me too, and I know that means accepting every dark part of you as well as the good. And you can be good. Not for me, but for you.”

“Do you really believe that, Riona?” he questions, stepping back into my space, almost making me completely forget my train of thought. He doesn’t touch me, even when my body is begging him too.

I want to reach out, but the inch of space between us feels like a battle to see who will cross it first.

“Yes.” I lift my head high. “Our relationship so far has been a complete mess. I did everything I could to escape the island and you. You killed people, played with my emotions and stole my heart, but throughout it all, I see the real you under it all. I see what we could be. You might have more than a few scars, but they do not define you. They can’t. You’re a million other things under those scars, Maddox. I can’t wait to see more of them.”

“You can’t see the evil right in front of you, can you?”

“You can’t see the good, what does that make you? I think it makes us a disaster,” I counter, narrowing my eyes. Maddox moves at the same time as me, both of us crashing into a kiss, pouring out our frustration and love like a spiralling web. My legs wrap around his waist as he walks us backwards and pushes my back into the wall, his lips tracing down my jaw to my neck. I shiver.

“I thought I’d fucking lost you,” he murmurs against my neck. “Seeing you on that ship, in danger, will always haunt me.”

I cup his cheeks and lift his head until he is looking at me. For the first time, I see Maddox show a little vulnerability, and it breaks my heart. My hand flies to the imagined wound there on my chest. “We can only fix our future and put what happened behind us; otherwise, we will never leave it.”

His eyes flicker to my hand where the white veins are lightly glowing. They glow when I touch him. He picks up my hand, holding it between us. “I will fix this.”

I lift my other hand with the ring. “Will this help us? The witch—”

Maddox places his hand over my mouth before lowering it. “No secrets should be spoken here, but yes. The deal might not be what we want.”

“I will go with her if that’s what she wants,” I carefully reply.

His eyes narrow. “Unless you ask to leave, I will not let you go again. You’re mine, Riona Dark.”

“I like when you call me yours,” I admit, biting on my lip. “I never thought I’d admit that to you.”

He leans into my space. “The next time I call you mine, I’m going to be buried deep inside you.”

I shiver, feeling how hard he is pressed tightly against me.

“Can I ask about the orbs I currently have in my body?” I ask, changing the subject because it’s important and I can’t stop thinking about it. “Sabina says your father gave my mother an orb, and somehow it’s in me.”

Maddox carries me to the bed and lies us both down, facing each other.

“I had heard of your mother but not put the connection together. Reign would remember her. I’m sure she was on the island around the time you were born but I spent most of that time drunk or travelling. I never came home,” he tells me. “If you touch the third orb, you’ll be the rightful queen of The Onyx.”

“I do not want that.”

He reaches out and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “My brother and I fought our entire life over that throne. A fight that ended so many lives and started with our father.”

“It broke you,” I softly say. “It would break me. Apparently, I’m half witch, anyway.”

“Half witches rarely have magic,” Maddox explains to me, and his eyes darken. “It’s why Cross could pretend to be human and trick me.”

“I’m sorry he betrayed you.”

“Not as sorry as he will be.”

I do not comment on that dark statement. Part of me is furious with Cross and doesn’t want to stop Maddox from whatever his plans are. I’m done stopping Maddox and questioning my human morals. I’m not human anymore, and I never was. I’m just as part of this world as he is, and I need to find a way to survive in their rules rather than accepting morals of a world I won’t ever be able to go back to. Without my family there—the image I have of them before I learnt the truth, that is—the human world has nothing for me.

“Arlo is going to be crushed when I tell him about Austin,” I admit my next worry. “Arlo is so broken already... I do not know how to fix him.”

“He isn’t yours to fix, Riona. Trust me,” he says. “Austin should be the one to talk to his close friend.”

“Perhaps. Arlo doesn’t understand us, and I think he is mad at me,” I explain to him. Maddox smirks and pulls my head to his chest. I wrap my arms around him, hearing a bird squawk outside.

Amity. Maddox's eagle can't be far away.

"The only one who needs to understand us is in this room," Maddox responds. "Now rest, I sense you're weak and tired. No one will harm you."

"I know," I whisper, feeling my eyes shut. "At some point, I realised you'd never hurt me and you'd never let anyone else hurt me. I'm always protected when I'm with you."

"Always."

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE



It takes a good hour before someone knocks on the door, and I sit up on the bed as Maddox uses vampire speed to get the door. He roughly pulls it open, and the woman on the other side jumps.

I do not blame her. I doubt Maddox is giving her warm, friendly smiles right about now.

I recognise the woman straight away. Her long brown hair and bright blue eyes aren't hard to miss. This is my cousin, Sabina's daughter. I have to remember she could be just like her mother, even if so far she doesn't seem it. She bows her head respectfully at Maddox, who looks down at her with nothing short of a death glare. But she holds her own, making me smile a little.

Seems like holding our own around vampires is something I got from my mother's side.

"H-hello," she stutters before clearing her throat. "I've come to show you both to better rooms. This is just a temporary guest room."

"You are Sabina's daughter, but you have no markings," I say, drawing her attention.

"Yes," she answers me. "Anyway, we have much nicer guest rooms with bathrooms. I've also come with an invitation from my mother. She is inviting you to a meal tonight."

"We're not hungry," Maddox coldly replies.

My cousin gives me a tense smile. “I do not think it was optional. It’s just a meal, and they won’t poison your food when they need Riona alive. Plus, poison doesn’t work on vampires. There are many things that can make you sleep, but your kind has a remarkable...”

She drifts off when Maddox sighs, leaning against the door. I get the impression rambling on is something she does often.

I stand up off the bed and walk over to her. I get good vibes from this girl. She seems different from the rest of her family, even if that family includes me. “You’re my cousin, and I want to know who you are.”

Her eyes flick between Maddox and me as he reaches out, placing his hand on my back. “Yes, I am, and I’ve heard about you my entire life. The legendary twins are just as famous as your mother, my aunt.”

“Legendary twins?” I ask, arching an eyebrow.

“Oh, because of the...” She pauses and straightens her back. “It’s not important.”

Maddox looks down at me. “I could make her talk.”

“No torture needed today, Maddox. We could just ask her,” I reply to him, and he chuckles.

“Where is the fun in that?”

“You two are very strange to me,” my cousin interrupts with bright red cheeks. I turn my gaze from Maddox and look at her.

“What’s your name?”

“Tove McGowan,” she warmly answers. “Should we get going?”

Maddox shifts his gaze down on her. “If this is a trap, it will be a bloodbath starting with you. I am giving you a fair warning because you are one of the less insane members of Riona’s family.”

Insane is a nice word for the family I’ve found out I have.

“O-oh kay,” she stutters out, turning away as quickly as she can. She makes her way out into the corridor, and we follow her to another pair of

staircases, which leads on to a much longer corridor that stretches all the way down the back of the house. This part of the house looks modern and has crystal lights hanging in a line down the centre. We walk past at least five rooms before we come to one door that's already open, and she walks in first. Maddox goes after her, and I stay at the door as she comes back.

"I'm happy to have met you," Tove states. "I mean, Cross has always been busy or gone, and mother is clan leader. Anyway, it's nice to have a new cousin around to bond with."

I feel bad reminding her I'm only here because her mother is forcing me. I need to ask her questions; she seems like the only one who might actually tell me the truth about my family and everything to do with this place.

Particularly how to get this snake curse thing off my arm so I can leave. I hate to use her, but I have to.

"Are you happy to have Cross back?" I ask.

"Yes, of course. I haven't seen him in many years," she replies, but the slight tension in her eyes says something else. I do not want to believe Cross is beyond saving, but the more I get to know the real him, the more I think I have no idea who he is.

"Interesting. Can I ask something personal?" I question. She nods, her eyes flickering down the corridor for a second. Someone is listening. "Is your father a witch or human like Cross's?"

"I actually have a suspicion of something else. My mother's always been one to mix the bloodlines to see what becomes of it, if great magic can be created. She was very close to an unknown siren male before I was born. Well, according to what I've heard."

"So you're a half siren, half witch?" I ask. I feel Maddox's eyes on me across the room.

"Yes, and it would explain why I love the water and feel safe near the sea," she replies with a smile, then it fades. "But I do not have any connection to the sirens. Their magic begins and ends on their island. I've never left this island, and witch magic is supposed to be off limits to me because of the mixed blood."

“I’m sorry,” I tell her.

“I’m not even sure if I should tell you all this shit. I really shouldn’t.”

“I won’t say anything about your secret.”

“That would be good,” she says with another small smile. “I must go, but there’s a dress on the bed for you. It’s one of mine, but I think it will fit you. If not, I can always do some adjustments. Just knock that door to my room if you need help.” She points at the door opposite. “Some of the witches who live here have filled the bathroom with everything you could need. There’s a hairbrush and straighteners in the drawers of the cabinet.”

“Thank you,” I tell her.

“There’s also a suit for the vampire prince,” she finally says, going a bit pale this time when she looks over my shoulder.

She takes a few steps back.

“Wait, before you go. Is my friend here? The guy, Arlo, and a woman called Ann?”

“Yes, he’s with your brother,” she tells me. “There’s been a lot of arguments coming from that room.”

She points at a room three doors down from here to make her point.

“Yeah, I imagine that conversation was awkward,” I mutter.

“I’m surprised your parents kept this world from you. They know how dangerous it is,” she comments, and her cheeks brighten. “Sorry, that was out of order. I should keep my nose out of it, as mother tells me often.”

“I’m your family, so you have every right to say something,” I reply. “Like, for instance, your mother is a psychopath.”

“Dark magic changes your soul,” she whispers. “The price for magic is high, and few come out of it with their moral compass intact. See you soon, Riona.”

I close the door as she walks away, and I’m left wondering if Sabina was ever good at all or always like she is now. I walk into the spacious room,

which is a lot better than the last one we had.

This blue wallpapered room has a massive king-sized bed with spiralling black pieces of wood in the corners and hanging blue flowers wrapped around them. The sheets themselves are deep purple, picking up hints of purple in the three paintings on the wall behind the bed. The paintings are purple canvases with silver leaves and dark tree branches. The room smells like fresh linen and lavender, and it's slightly warm. On the end of the bed is a beautiful floor-length silver dress made of satin, by the looks of it. Moon symbols are stitched around the bottom of the dress, shimmering in the light of the crystal light hanging from the ceiling.

Maddox picks the dress up and holds it in the air before putting it back down. "I'm not a fan of dressing up for these witches and playing in their games. I prefer violence over peace."

"Neither am I," I tell him truthfully. "But this snake means I can't leave, and you can't kill everyone here. I won't let you do that and have it on your soul and mine. These witches aren't all evil."

"For you, I am not ripping this island apart and setting the remains on fire."

"So romantic," I tease, looking over my shoulder once to meet his dark eyes. I chuckle at his expression before I open the other door in the room to find a massive bathroom. It has a big circular bathtub, big enough to fit ten people in it. The one side is a black tiled wet room with two massive waterfall shower heads. There are two toilets and a sink, and the sink has a bag in it. I open it up to find different types of makeup, toothbrushes and shampoo. I find some towels under the sink and get them out before going to run the bath. I do not even want to know how much I smell. I've lost count of how many days it's been since I had a shower thanks to being kidnapped.

Zero out of ten do I recommend kidnapping to anyone. I pour in the bubble bath that I found and watch the warm water slowly fill the tub. I feel Maddox's eyes on me from the doorway where he watches silently as I glance back. I turn around as I slowly take off my clothes, knowing that I'm probably covered in dust and ash and blood. But with one look at Maddox, I

do not think he sees any of it. My clothes fall around my feet, and I step out of them before walking over to him.

“You’re made to tempt the devil, Riona.”

I smile as I slowly start undoing the buttons on his shirt one by one. He watches me, tension building in the air, and he never moves until I undo all the buttons. I slowly peel off his shirt, taking my time to trace the edges of my fingers across his muscular arms. Every touch of our skin is like fire, burning me to my core. My breaths come out heavy with every passing moment as I pull the shirt down his muscular shoulders, and it drops to the floor.

I step away and turn around, going to the bathtub and climbing in. The hot water soothes every cut as I sink into it, enjoying the warmth.

The sound of Maddox’s belt buckle being undone makes desire pool in my lower stomach, and I turn to watch him as he takes off his trousers and steps out of them. Naked and gorgeous, he walks to the tub and climbs in. The tub is massive, and he doesn’t even need to touch me as he sits on the other side, stretching his hands out on the porcelain.

The tension in the room is so thick that I can’t say a word. No word feels like enough for this, so instead, I sink under the water, letting the grime and blood wash away from me. I come up to the surface with a gasp and swim over to him. His hands slide under the water, grabbing my ass and pulling me onto his lap. His large, hard cock presses against my thigh, and even that small touch makes me want so much more.

“I love you, Riona Dark,” he tells me, and before I can reply, before I can tell him I feel the same way, he kisses me, devouring my lips with his own and taking over my senses. I reach between us and take his cock into my hand, stroking him softly. He lets out an appreciative groan in the back of his throat, and I shiver, loving the sound. His hands glide up my back, making goose bumps spread all over my skin. Maddox cups my breasts, running his thumb over my hard nipples, and I roll my hips, wanting more.

Needing more.

“Maddox,” I whisper his name, pleasure coursing through me.

He chuckles against my lips. “I could never resist you.”

As he grabs my ass once more, I move his cock to my entrance, and he lifts his hips, thrusting into me in one smooth move, filling me to the core.

I moan at the full feeling of him, the perfection of having him inside of me. I open my eyes as he leans closer and pulls my bottom lip into his mouth, gently biting me. The mixture of pain and pleasure is addictive as I roll my hips, needing to move. My orgasm builds like a wave as I continue to ride him, every inch of him feeding my craving, and I never want this to stop.

“Maddox, I’m going t-to...,” I say around a moan, throwing my head back. His hands dig into my hips, guiding me, and I feel him thickening. The world blurs away until it’s just us, both of us moving to our rhythm, our bodies made for each other. I feel nothing but Maddox, his dark and sexy scent calling to me and devouring me. My senses are overwhelmed by him, and from the look he gives me as he thrusts in and out of me, I know he feels the same.

Our souls desire each other like the sun and the moon. And every moment we get is a disaster and perfection mixed into one.

“Show me. Let me feel you,” Maddox commands, and I do. Like I can finally breathe, I exhale as intense pleasure slams into me, and I tighten around Maddox’s cock. He groans and kisses me, holding my hips as he thrusts into me until I feel him finish.

Breathless and twitching, I lie on Maddox’s chest and flatten my hand out in front of me, hearing his heart beating fast.

“I love you,” I tell him for the first time. “More than anything. Loving you is the most intense feeling I’ve had in my life, and I’d die for you. Death couldn’t part us, Maddox. I feel that in my soul.”

“Death would have to fight me for you, Riona. You’re mine, no matter where we are in the universe,” he whispers, kissing the top of my head.

I couldn’t agree more.

CHAPTER
FORTY-FOUR



The door is knocked three times just as I finish straightening my silky soft hair. The shampoo and conditioners I found in the bathroom were incredible, and Maddox claimed they had hints of magic in them. I can see the proof with how perfect my hair currently looks. My blonde hair falls around my shoulders, and the light bit of makeup I have on makes me look more confident than I actually am. Especially about tonight.

A Mad Prince and a room full of witches keeping the woman he loves hostage doesn't sound like the best mix.

Maddox pulls the door open to find my brother on the other side. Austin gives Maddox a once over before looking past him to me. "Sis, I thought we could walk down to dinner together."

Maddox steps to the side, blocking Austin's view of me. "Careful. You might be Riona's twin, but you're tempting my resistance to pull your head off."

"How the fuck my sister loves you is madder than you are rumoured to be," Austin growls right back. "Now get out of the way."

"Make me. See what happens," he warns, and there is nothing playful about it.

"Shut up," Arlo growls, pushing into the room and past both Austin and Maddox. "Both of you are not helping anyone with this. We are being held hostage by witches who want to use Riona for their own gain. Surely all of

us can be united in our choice to defend her until we are off this damn island.”

“I do not like you,” Maddox tells Arlo, but he backs down and walks to stand behind my chair. I turn to my right and watch the three men in the room. All of them are dressed in black suits, but they couldn’t look any further apart. There are a lot of secrets, hate and everything in between among these three men. I feel like I’m stuck right in the middle of all of it and the cause of a good chunk of the problems.

I meet my brother’s stare from across the room. “Are you going to tell me why you’re really here yet?”

“To save you. I thought that was clear?” he questions.

“I do not believe that is it,” I answer.

“Neither do I. You’re far from the fucking best friend I had growing up. You’re a stranger,” Arlo accuses.

“We have all gone through things to get here. It isn’t just you who suffered, Arlo!”

“Well, fucking tell me the truth then!” he shouts right back.

Austin looks away, a tic in his jaw pulsing. “I can’t.”

“Then whatever friendship we had is fucking over. You’re a stranger to me now,” Arlo growls out. He walks past Austin and comes over to where Maddox and I are.

Maddox smiles at him. A creepy and dangerous smile. “Riona is mine.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Arlo replies with a glare. At least he isn’t terrified of vampires anymore. I haven’t told Maddox about Arlo trying to kiss me, and I do not think it would do anything but get him killed. Part of me thinks Maddox knows, or at least suspects, Arlo’s feelings for me. He knows I have a soft spot for Arlo, but it will never be more than that between us.

“I think we all need to put our arguments behind us for the time being. At least until we can get off this island. We all surely agree that is the only thing that matters right now,” I suggest.

Austin nods.

Maddox gives one creepy but weirdly sexy smile.

Arlo looks at me for a moment before nodding once. "Fine."

Ann fills the doorway, catching all of our attention. She is wearing a red dress, which makes her look pale, or it might be how stressed she is. The same as we all are. "Let's get this over with."

"You look nice," I say as I stand up and walk past the men to her.

She rolls her eyes at me. "I'm going to burn this dress to ash when I get a chance. Along with the memory of ever wearing it."

"I'm sorry you've been dragged into this," I tell her once more.

"So am I."

Ann stays at my side as we head down the corridor to the stairs. Maddox's hand finds the middle of my back as we head down the stairs, and Ann goes in front. The girl is brave or crazy. I'm not sure which. We head back to the dining room, and no one stops us on the way. Several witches in red cloaks are lined up by the dining room, though.

I've been to quite a few supernatural meals now, but this one is not anything like I expected it to be. The room is elegantly decorated with black and gold lace, with several servers in red cloaks waiting by the fireplace. The witches all have formal evening gowns on, a vivid selection of colours, and they are deep in conversation, occasionally laughing. It's relaxed and open, the very opposite of what I expected. Sabina is not alone in the room, but she still sucks all the life out of it. All the council who I met before, including my grandmother, are here sitting down.

We are late, by the looks of it and the dirty looks some of the women shoot my way. Without their cloaks, I get a real look at them. They are all older than I expected, with grey hair and wrinkled faces. Sabina and Cross stand out in the room. Cross tries to catch my gaze, but I refuse to give him it. Where is Tove?

We all head over to the table, and Maddox pulls a chair out for me. I flash him a grateful smile as I sit down with him taking the other seat at my side. Arlo and Ann sit in the seats next to Maddox, and then there is nothing but silence.

I straighten my back in the chair, placing my hands in my lap as I look up.

“Why do you want us here?” I ask Sabina outright.

“To build relations between our races. It is important for what is to come,” she replies. “We may want The Onyx to fall into our hands, and it will do because you will be their queen, but we understand you have relationships with the vampires, and therefore we do not want to alienate the one vampire you may be able to keep.”

“I find it almost funny how you think you have any control over Riona.” Maddox chuckles low and leans back in his seat, placing his hands on the table. He picks up the knife with his left hand and starts spinning the tip on his outstretched middle finger.

“Riona will do what is needed. I do not need to control her to make that happen. The Onyx will be ours,” Sabina says a bit too calmly.

“You have an interesting way of building alliances. You’re trying to take over my island, no doubt enslaving my people, and you want to take her from me,” Maddox says, tension building in the room as his blood drips off his finger onto the golden satin table cover. He never stops looking at Sabina, and his stare makes me shiver. “You wish to turn Riona into some queen of yours, which will never work, because I am here to stop you. She isn’t your pawn.”

“And you aren’t the king,” Sabina confidently replies with a smirk. “You’re a mere prince, and trust me, you won’t be the one in control here either.”

Maddox lets the knife fall before catching it and pointing the tip at her. “This only ends with your death and this island on fire. The Onyx and Riona will never belong to you.”

“They will,” she replies. I do not know where she gets that confidence from, but I do not like it. She knows something I do not. I do not want to be this queen she wants me to be. I’m not a vampire or a leader.

“I will never touch the third orb and become a queen. My future cannot be predicted by you,” I state. “Witches can’t see the future, as far as I know.”

“Sirens can,” she replies with a knowing smile. The siren’s vision comes back to haunt my mind, and I should have told Maddox about them. I’d rather break the orb than give it to her, and what the siren showed me only ends badly. I end up dead, so I doubt she knows this.

“The power my father had was uncontrollable, and it destroyed his mind inch by inch. No one should have that power, let alone a half human, half witch,” Maddox tells her.

“Who said Riona is half human?” Sabina’s eyes look slightly amused.

“Then what am I?”

“Enough,” Austin interrupts.

“No, it’s not!” I shout at Austin, who glares at me.

Sabina laughs. “Hell on earth. Interesting.”

“What are you talking about?” I nearly shout.

“Your father is from hell. Literally,” she says, pursing her lips.

“What?” I whisper in shock.

Austin stands up. “Let me talk—”

He pauses, and I soon realise he is frozen. I glance down to see Glenda’s hand on his arm, and her eyes are glowing white.

“Austin is lying to you,” Sabina comments. “And you may think I’m the bad person here, but I am not. Your mother is trapped, and she has been sending messages for help for a long time.”

“Where are the messages?” I demand.

“The children. The demonic children are the messages she is sending to you, Riona. I believe the first children were simply escapees. Maybe their mothers tried to get them out, but the recent ones that appeared here had messages, and one of them told me all this,” Sabina tells me. “I know it’s

true. This is her way of freeing them from the life they had. She always had a soft touch for children, and she was trying to get to you however she could.”

I glance at Maddox, but he looks torn. “If you were actually good in any way, you’d remove the snake and let Riona leave.”

“You can’t keep her safe,” Sabina replies. “I know you think you can, but you cannot, and she is all of our futures. Our only future.”

“I won’t help you if you force me to stay here,” I firmly tell her. “And I do not believe my dad is evil. He isn’t. I grew up with him and—”

“The man in your house was never your real father,” she interrupts. “He was human and likely knew nothing about your so-called dad and who you are. Your real father is in hell and was banished from earth for a thousand years. He is named as the hellcaster king.”

I stand up, pushing my chair back. “I do not believe you!”

“It’s true,” Cross interrupts, and I glare at him.

“I’m not going to believe you, am I?” I snap and turn to Glenda. “Let my brother go.”

She inclines her head, and he finishes off his sentence like no time has passed. “—to you alone, sis. It’s complicated.”

“Was Dad not our real father?” I ask him. His eyes widen a little, and he lowers his head.

“No, but he is alive and safe. Mum made sure he was gone before our father got to her. He came for me next, on that beach, where the vampires had left me. I got knocked under two guys they had killed, and my head hit a rock. I guess they thought I was dead,” he tells me. “I woke up the next morning, and he appeared on the beach.”

“What’s his name?”

“Bane,” he answers, looking a little pale. “He is a creature made of fire, but he has a form that makes him look like a man. I went to his home

underground. It's a big place full of creatures like him, and they call themselves hellcasters."

"I've heard of this race," Maddox interrupts. "They are extinct. My grandfather and the sirens killed the last one over a thousand years ago."

"That was a lie," Sabina states. "In fact, they banished the race to the land they came from for a thousand years and planned for a child who could one day hold the magic of all three orbs inside of her. A living weapon against the greatest monsters ever to live."

"Me?"

"Yes, but you were not planned to be a hellcaster's child. That alone has made our future unknown," Sabina answers.

"How did Bane get her mother pregnant if he is trapped underground?" Maddox asks.

"They call the place The Moral Fall City, and I do not know how she got there," Austin claims. Sabina doesn't comment on it, but something makes me suspect she knows when she seems to be avoiding eye contact.

I look down at the table for a long pause before lifting my hand out in front of me. I'm not only part witch, but the rest of me is a hellcaster, and I have two magical orbs inside of me. These orbs made the last vampire king incredibly powerful. Why can't I use that magic?

I'm tired of being controlled. I'm not weak. Not like they want me to believe. Something inside of me is shifting from being that scared human I once was to who I am becoming. I am a witch and a hellcaster with some of the most powerful magic in the world inside me. I have to break free.

"Riona!" I hear Sabina scream as I grab hold of the snake on my arm as a rush of strength and something else I've never felt blasts through my body, feeling like it's lighting up every part of me. It feels like a cold wash of water, but instead of calming me, it lights me up. Something clicks and I breathe out as the ground shakes under my feet. Sabina and Maddox try to grab me, but something magical pushes them away like wind, sending them flying across the room with the table and chairs and everyone else.

My hand glows a bright white light as I pick up the snake and pull it off my wrist almost effortlessly before wondering what to do with it.

All I can think of is fire. The second I think it, the snake sets on fire and burns into ash that I let drip through my fingers as my feet leave the ground.

“Riona!” Austin shouts, grabbing hold of my wrist. I look down at my brother, whose eyes are literally fire. Red veins mark his face, like his veins are on fire, and I almost feel how powerful he is. “You’ve made your point, but Mum needs us. He will kill her, and he only wants you. You have to come with me.”

“That’s why you’re here? To give me to a monster for Mum?”

He shakes his head. “I’m here to protect you until you’re strong and trained, and then we go and fucking kill our father to save Mum. What do you say?”

I smile and my feet land on the floor, the power leaving me as I wrap my arms around Austin’s shoulders. “Yes. We are saving her.”

“I think it’s a good time for me to come and save the day,” Reign says, stepping into the room. I turn around as Maddox appears in front of me and cups my face, kissing me lightly.

“That was fucking sexy, Ria,” he whispers, kissing me one more time, and I chuckle.

“The house is falling apart,” I mention as a bit of rock falls next to us.

“The world could fall apart, but I wouldn’t care as long as you’re safe,” he replies.

“I really do not like you,” Austin tells Maddox in disgust. “But we need to get the fuck out of here. Now.”

Arlo limps across the room, carrying Ann, who is passed out in his arms. Reign walks up and holds his hands out, and Arlo nods before passing her to him. Maddox and Austin stay by my side as we head out into the corridor right as Tove runs in. Her eyes go wide before she takes a step back.

“Come with us,” I softly tell her.

“No, I can’t,” she replies, taking another step back. Maddox sighs, and in the blink of an eye, he knocks her over the head and she collapses onto the floor.

“Maddox!” I shout his name, and he gives me a confused look.

“I thought you wanted her to come with us,” he asks, waving a hand at her.

“I do,” I sigh. He shrugs and throws her over his shoulder, heading outside.

“He is crazy,” Austin mutters, heading outside after him into the hundred or so vampires outside waiting. Witches are running away, but a few have stayed to fight, and there are a few bodies of both witches and vampires around. I try not to look at them.

“How are we getting out of here?” I question right before four massive helicopters fly over us, shaking the trees.

“Time to go home, Riona. Try not to run away again,” Reign suggests.

I look at Maddox, who turns back to me, our eyes locking as the wind blows around us. “I’m never leaving my home again.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE



It's funny how a place I tried so hard to escape is now home and somewhere I want to be. I always used to think home was with my twin and parents, back at our little house. I remember a million different things about my past, the comforting way my mum would hug me each morning, and Dad would make a joke about the football with Austin. Austin would steal my cereal and drink all the milk, and then claim it was my fault. That was my old home, and I miss parts of it, but nothing like I missed even a day away from Maddox. He is my soul now. I've given it to him, and I don't care how damned that might make me and him. The idea of a home is far stretched from my mind, and I know it simply means one thing now.

Maddox.

Loving him has changed my soul, my home, and every part of me down to the core of where I want to be. I never knew love could do that to someone or what it is like to truly find the other half of your soul. I've found mine in Maddox. This place is where we fell in love, all the heartache and pain of it, and I know there is no happy ending in sight for us yet. Maddox is complicated, and I need to talk to him about his slightly mad side.

I knew it from the second we met. His tortured, broken and unloved soul called to mine.

"Nice place," Austin dryly comments as the helicopter takes off into the skies above the mountain. He kicks some red snow at his feet and looks at

me like I'm the insane one once again. It's hard to see him as my fun, loving brother I was once desperate to get back to. I know he didn't lie to me or hide anything, but it doesn't mean he hasn't changed. We both have. "We can still leave."

"Get over it," I reply, watching some of Maddox's vampires carry Tove into the castle, passing a familiar face as she storms out, swords clipped to her back and a badass leather outfit on.

Katy looks nothing short of pissed off as she storms down the steps and stops a few feet away from us. She looks between Arlo and me, her arms crossed tightly. "If either of you fuckers poison me again, I'm cutting off some fingers. Got it?"

"I'm sorry," I tell her before Maddox can say a word. I step forward and meet her eyes. "It was a stupid and fleeting mistake. I shouldn't have done it."

"No, you shouldn't have," she replies. "But you were kidnapped and falling in love with the Mad Prince. You weren't thinking right. I get it. Love makes you do stupid shit. It can be more frightening than any other fear."

For a second, her eyes flicker to her left, where Reign is with Arlo, but she hides it. Was she thinking of one of them?

"As we have no home currently"—Reign gives me a scolding look—"I'm going to stay here. Shame Hector's not about, he was a good cook."

"He was planning with the witches. Mostly Cross," I explain. "I'm thinking he ran."

"My home is open to you, brother," Maddox comments, stepping to my side and linking our fingers. He holds out his other hand, and Amity flies down out of the clouds, landing perfectly on his arm. The hawk is intimidating, to say the least.

I look away as Reign laughs. "If you're talking about half the castle, it's all yours. I'm taking back my old rooms."

He flicks his head to the side, and Katy walks with him to the steps.

“I might have filled them with father’s junk. Good luck cleaning!” Maddox calls after him, and Reign flashes him his middle finger.

“I am proposing I train you in your hellcaster powers,” Austin says as Paul comes running down the steps, slipping a few times, leaving the poor guy red faced as he comes to a halt and bows to Maddox. Austin keeps talking like he isn’t here. “Our father taught me quite a lot in the months I was with him. I will teach you everything I know.”

“Is it dangerous?” Maddox questions.

“Not to us. No one should be near us as we train,” Austin replies.

Maddox locks eyes with him, a clear warning in his eyes. “Hurt her, and I break you. Got it?”

Austin looks down at me. “Really, this guy?”

“Shut it,” I tell him.

“Take these three to the guest rooms and prepare them. Also find a new cook from the island,” Maddox instructs and wraps his hands around my waist as Amity flies off, straight through the open doors to the castle. That is one well-trained bird with deadly claws. I gasp as Maddox jumps us up into the air and lands on top of the castle, in Maddox’s favourite place. My cheeks blush when I remember what we did here last time.

Maddox slowly lowers me down his body, on purpose, before threading his hands through my hair. “Finally, we are alone.”

“I imagine that sentence would have scared me not too long ago, but not anymore,” I say, linking my hands behind his neck. I run my finger down the one side of his neck, feeling his slow pulse under my fingertips. “Now I want the same thing. Us. Alone. Forever.”

“But?” he questions.

“How did you know there would be a *but*?”

“Vampire senses,” he jokes, and I smile.

“But morally we need to be on the same page. I know you’re a vampire, you need blood, and I think part of you likes to kill, but no hurting anyone unless they threaten us or our family. I need to know that you will do this for me,” I say, nerves making me shake. “And if you need to feed on someone, feed on me. Just me.”

I feel his heartbeat pick up, and I meet his eyes, the swirling red and blackness that I once thought was empty of life and humanity. But I know his soul isn’t, he isn’t. “I thought I needed violence and madness to breathe, Riona, but then I met you. I needed you, your acceptance of me, your love and purity. I can’t say I’m going to be perfect, but fuck am I going to try for you.”

“I do not want perfect. I want us, imperfectly messed up as we are. Just us.”

His lips descend onto mine, pouring our passion, desire and love into a toxic mix I can’t resist. Eventually I pull away and turn back, looking over The Onyx.

“I didn’t want to say anything on The Quartz, but I have to tell you now,” I start off. “Natalia came to see me on my own and showed me three visions of the future she had seen.”

His eyes narrow. “Sirens only twist and turn the future they want to see, and I may like Natalia, but she is smart and always will look after her people first. She only lives to make sure they survive.”

“She showed me The Onyx on fire, us on a ship on fire, and...”

“Does it get worse?” he questions.

“Yes. I was stabbed with five glowing daggers, and I was dying. I felt myself dying, Maddox,” I admit to him. “And it scares me. It’s part of the reason I wanted to escape here. I thought I could outrun what she showed me.”

He wraps his large hands around my waist, pulling my back to his front and holding me closely. “The future is a million different waves on one shore. No one knows which wave will be the largest and destroy all the others. That’s what the future is like, and sirens see glimpses. They do not see the wave behind.”

“So we should take her visions with a grain of salt?”

“For now, but I will send word to Natalia and demand her presence,” he states. “Did she say anything else?”

I want to tell him about her offer but decide against it. Natalia wasn't forcing me to do anything and her offer is something I would never take. I would never want to forget all my feelings.

“No,” I gently tell him. We stay this way for a long time, comfortably staring at the city with nothing other than the cold breeze blowing around us. Then I feel it.

I turn my head to the side, looking down at the turrets on top of the castle entrance, and feel something pulling me. Calling to me.

“The other orb knows I'm here,” I whisper, feeling myself go pale. “It wants me.”

“I will move it,” he whispers into my ear. “We need to discuss the future. The Onyx needs a ruler.”

“It should be Reign.”

“But it won't be,” he replies, but then he is gone, leaving me on the tower to watch the city alone and ignore the way my body begs me to find the orb. I grip the stone wall tightly, holding on for dear life until I feel the orb getting further away from me. A pain stabs me in the chest, and I gasp, sinking onto the floor and breathing through the pain until it's gone.

I'm never touching that third orb. Never.

CHAPTER
FORTY-SIX



“How come you’re in here and not in our bed?” Maddox questions, and I spin around, nearly dropping the clay pot in my hands. He leans against the door frame, the very picture of sin and darkness wrapped in one body. With nothing other than a black shirt, dark trousers and shiny black shoes on, he looks more human than I’ve ever seen him. Usually he dresses like an evil version of Jack Sparrow.

Not that I minded. His thick brown hair looks darker than usual, almost completely black, and it suits his eyes as they trail up and down my body. The braids in his hair reflect the light pouring through the glazed windows, and my hands itch to reach out, to touch them.

“I haven’t left your rooms for three days. You can’t miss me already,” I tease as I place the pot down and rub my dirty hands on my jeans. Honestly, I didn’t want to leave, but I needed to stretch my legs and come to see this place. I have a sneaking feeling someone has been watering and tending to the plants since I was gone, as nothing has died. The garden is still half done, but I’m getting there. “You could help if you want. I was working out how to turn on the fountain now all these pots are out of it and I’ve cleaned the leaves.”

“I am much more interested in getting you back to our bed,” he comments as he comes over, his fingers brushing against my back.

Damn, this man is tempting. Too tempting. I’m one inch away from taking him up on his offer.

Maddox walks around the fountain and pushes wayward branches out of the way until he finds a wall through it all. On the wall is a row of old switches, and he flicks them on one by one. First of all, warm light pours into the room, and I look up to see wired-in lights hidden in the tree branches that stretch across the ceiling. The lights aren't all working, some of them have blown out the glass, but it still makes the space look so much brighter.

A banging noise vibrates under the floor, and then water bursts out of the top of the fountain, pouring down and over the edges into the base and filling it up quickly. The water is dirty brown and smells stale as Maddox comes over.

“I want to do something, come with me,” he instructs, and I shake my head.

“But the garden—”

“Can wait. The water needs to run for a while, and I promise you can come back. I want to show you something.”

“I bet you do,” I reply with a grin.

He laughs and I think I will never get used to the laid-back side of Maddox I'm seeing. I link my hand with his, and we walk out of the greenhouse and through the castle. When we are passing the stairs, Reign comes jogging down them with Katy following him. Both of them are dressed in dark colours, almost matching, and when they stop next to each other on the stairs, I realise how close they stand. Am I missing something?

“Hey, lovebirds. Finally surfaced from your rooms then?” Katy teases and winks at me.

“Unfortunately,” Maddox replies, casting me a playful grin before looking towards Reign. “Morning, brother.”

Reign looks cautious as he inclines his head. “Morning. We are heading into the villages for a meeting with Merethe. She and many of our people are displeased with the ban on human hunting and leaving the island.”

“Who banned the hunting?” I question.

“I did,” Maddox replies. “I’m trying this morality type of mind you have been talking about. I took a wild guess that human hunting isn’t a morally good thing.”

“It’s not,” I agree, and I can’t help but smile.

“While I agree the human hunting should be stopped, the vampires will need appeasing,” Reign warns.

“Tell them to fuck themselves and come to see me if they have an issue with our rules,” Maddox snaps, clearly done with the idea of sorting out the vampires’ opinions.

“This is why I’m talking to them and not you, brother,” Reign sighs and glances at me for a second. “There are also rumours of Riona having an orb. They do not know she has two, but if that knowledge were to get out...”

“It could be a mess,” Katy fills in. “A human from the hunted being the new queen of The Onyx? They would kill her.”

“I’m finding it rather insulting that anyone thinks they could kill her when I’m right here,” Maddox cuts in.

Reign and Katy look at each other and then to Maddox and me. Reign shuffles his feet a little, not a nervous way but more awkward. “If they find out... Perhaps if they knew of your relationship, they might accept that. They might accept that she could become a vampire.”

“I’m a half witch, half hellcaster. I doubt becoming a vampire is an option for me.”

“Magic can change anything,” Reign replies, looking between us. “Plus, no one knows what you are, but they would believe Maddox intends to change you. That would keep them quiet for a while.”

“Most people want a ruler because they could have children. The orbs allow magic on the island and allow children to be conceived. I doubt *all* of the island will be upset... They might be happy,” Katy adds in. “We will find out more at this meeting.”

“Good luck,” Maddox says and pulls me with him. I shout goodbye to them just before Maddox tugs me through into his study and presses me against the door. His lips descend on mine, just briefly, but it’s enough to burn a fire throughout my body.

Maddox rests his forehead against mine. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” I question, taking his arm and hooking my elbow with his, resting my hand on his upper arm.

“Do you want to run, my violent little human?” he questions, leading me through the study and out into the corridor behind it. We head past his room, where I assumed we were heading, and down to his painting room. He holds the door open for me, and I grin at him, heading inside and running up the stairs. Maddox jumps the entire stairs, landing at the top and arching an eyebrow.

“Cheat,” I grumble.

“You are more than welcome to tell me off, Riona,” he murmurs as I get to the top step. I pause in front of him and lean my body closer to his, my chest just brushing his own, and lean my head close to his neck. I trace my lips across his pulse point, and I see his hands tighten on the bars of the stairs.

“Perhaps...but I suspect you’d like that,” I whisper against his neck. I gently kiss his neck before ducking under his arm and into the studio, hearing his laugh behind me as I walk through the paintings, wondering which one he wants to show me. There are so many paintings of me up here now, many of me naked in Maddox’s bed or in the bath, or on his desk in the study. Just looking at them makes me think of each moment, even though my cheeks go a little red.

I pause when I see the painting in front of the window. This one is amazing, showing the pure skill of Maddox’s hand, and I can’t look away. This painting is simple, my head looking away in the distance, but my neck is turned so Maddox’s mark is on show. I cover the mark with my hand on instinct as Maddox comes behind me.

“Every time I see that mark,” Maddox murmurs, “my body aches with the need to bite you, claim your soul, and bond us forever.”

“W-why—” I clear my throat. “Why haven’t you?”

“When I take your blood, you will ask, and we will say vows to each other. Vows that will keep us together, forever, and bond us,” he whispers to me, tempting me. “Until that moment, when you are sure you can handle the darkness of my soul, I will wait.”

“What makes you think I can’t handle your soul?” I ask as he steps around me. Maddox doesn’t answer for a while as he pulls a blank canvas onto an easel and turns it to the side.

“Strip for me, Riona. I want to paint you. Just as you are,” he asks, looking into my eyes.

There is something sinfully raw about his demand, and it sends shivers through me as the mixture of the need to comply. He isn’t using magic on me, it would be easier if he were, but this is just me. It’s my reaction to him, and sometimes it frightens me as much as it thrills me.

Maddox pushes me to my limit, testing every boundary I’ve had in my life and knocking it down.

And I let him.

If anything, I beg him.

I tilt my head to the side before pulling my clothes off one by one. He messes with his paints and brushes as I take all my clothes off, the coldness of the room not affecting me. The sun beams through the window, and I move to stand in front of it, letting the sun beams warm me.

“Stay there,” Maddox commands right before I hear his brush gliding over the canvas. Even that sound and the feel of his eyes on me, taking in every inch of my body, turns me on. I wrap my hands around the metal bars in front of the window and stay as still as I can, trying to focus on the red snow outside.

“Why is the snow red, Maddox?”

My voice seems too loud and certainly too breathless for him to have not noticed. God, I need him. I already feel like I'm ready to orgasm from his stare alone. What is going to happen when he speaks?

His sinfully deep voice drifts over the space between us. "When The Onyx island was created, it was written that a dragon lived in the depths of the mountain, to watch over the island. The first vampires felt threatened by the dragon and decided to get rid of it. They killed the dragon, and overnight, the mountain bled with its blood and never stopped."

"Dragons?" I whisper. "I wonder if the dragon looked like the winged creatures I've seen in movies."

"Reign used to tell me stories of the great dragon when I was young, and there were no wings, I'm afraid," Maddox answers, and my breath halts. Maddox never speaks about Reign, let alone about memories of them as children. "I used to struggle to sleep, and father wasn't interested in comforting me...so Reign did. He told me hundreds of stories he had read in the library."

"He loves you," I whisper.

There is a silence that seems longer than it is before he clears his throat. "Reign will always hate me for what I did."

"Tell me what happened," I ask. I can't help him if I don't have a clue what actually happened back then. I know Reign was in love with a woman, a human, and Maddox killed her, but I doubt it is that simple.

"Reign met a human in the village, a human born here called Holly," Maddox starts, the brush still moving in his hand and the sounds filling the room along with his voice. I can smell nothing but paint as I stare at the red snow, wishing I could see Maddox in the reflection of the glass. "Holly never spoke to me, and I didn't notice her, if I'm being honest. It was a rough time for Reign and me, and we argued all the time. Over everything."

"Sounds like normal siblings," I murmur.

"Until one drunken night where I challenged Reign to a sword fight, and I threw my sword, missing Reign and killing Holly in one blow."

I don't know what to say, letting more silence fill the room. "Reign tried to turn her into a d'vampire with his blood, but when she died, she never came back. When humans are turned into d'vampires, they have to choose to live, or that's what we know. Holly died and left Reign."

"Then she never loved him," I quickly say, the words blurring out. I slowly turn around, meeting his dark eyes. "I could never leave you."

Maddox moves in front of me, boxing me into the bar and pressing my ass into it. He lifts the paint brush and places the tip, the red paint, on my chest. Slowly he moves it down my chest to my left breast and brushes it against my hard nipple, making me gasp. Maddox's eyes stay on the brush as he marks me with paint, making me desperate for his touch. He moves the paintbrush down my lower stomach before dropping it. He falls to his knees and instantly dives between my legs, his hot tongue searing as he sucks on my clit.

I moan loud, unable to hold back. His tongue explores my core, teasing and nibbling as he goes, and then he slides two fingers into me.

"Always so tight for me," Maddox says, his deep voice vibrating against my clit. Gods.

"For you," I say around a moan as I feel myself getting close as he pumps his fingers in and out of me. My orgasm is instant, like a crash, and I barely notice anything but the pleasure as Maddox picks me up. At some point, he undid his trousers as his hot cock is at my entrance, and he slams into me as the ends of my orgasm pulse through me.

Maddox uses the bar to balance us as he thrusts in and out of me, every sense of mine overwhelmed by him.

"Maddox. Oh my god," I moan against his shoulder. He grips my hair, pulling my head back so that he is looking down at me. His red and black eyes remind me of two seas battling against each other, neither one ever winning, but they can't be one. That's how I see the two sides of Maddox. The troubled, lost and cruel vampire I met and the man he is trying to be now. Still bathed in darkness but with enough light to resist the evil.

“Say my name again,” he demands, and a wave of excitement and pleasure vibrates through me.

I stare into his eyes, feeling him speeding up. He likes when I meet his gaze and I don't back down. He might own my body and soul, but I am his equal in everything.

“Maddox, fuck me.”

He slams his mouth on mine, his tongue diving into my mouth, and I feel another orgasm building as he hits the right spot inside me again and again.

It hurts how good he feels. How good he makes me feel.

I cry out as I crash into my orgasm, and he groans into my mouth as he finishes inside me, his hot come filling my core.

“Fuck, I love you,” he breathes into my neck. I stroke his dark hair, playing with the red crystal for a while as he just holds onto me.

“You're my home, Maddox,” I tell him. “And there is no one I could ever love more.”



“SO WHAT IS BANE LIKE?” I ask the question that's been burning on my mind as soon as we are away from the castle. I wasn't surprised to find Austin waiting for me outside Maddox's room when I came back from getting changed. I was planning on gardening for the rest of the day, but between Maddox's distractions and my brother's insistence on training, my plans have gone out of the window. In some ways, it's a good thing, because I would have to spend the entire day overthinking all the recent and shocking news about my family while ripping out the weeds that have grown themselves back in my absence. It's almost funny how secrets are like weeds. They just keep growing out of the ground when you do not want them, choking out the life you do want. Finding out I have a father who I've not known about for my entire life is overwhelming, let alone adding in the magical side of me I know little about. It was...enjoyable to use magic to release the snake magic off my arm, but the magic felt tempting.

Like sinking in quicksand.

My family history is more messed up than The Onyx's royal family, but our pasts are all linked. We are meant to be here, together, figuring out everything. I just do not have all the answers yet.

But Austin has some of them. The trouble is, I was always the honest one out of the two of us. He got us in trouble, blamed me and I let him. But not this time.

Austin looks lost in thought, his face strained as he looks at the red snow around our feet, and it reminds me of when we were both ten years old, figuring out if we could sneak into our next-door neighbour's garden to use his pool without him seeing us.

"Bane is interesting," he finally tells me. "And very cruel. His temper is quick, sharp and unexpected. Neither of us are like him."

I look up at the swirling fog around the top of the mountain. "Part of me hoped you would tell me he is a sweetheart deep down."

He chuckles, but the humour is lost quickly. "On the first day that he took us, he showed me around like a prince, treating me with gifts and food. Showing me a world of magic and desire."

"Sounds like you enjoyed that time with him," I comment.

"I did," he replies, a bitter tone. "But it was a lie. The hellcasters worship him like a king, and to him, everybody else is a slave. His people are nothing to him, and he kills them for sport. Some of the things I saw..."

"The supernatural world is hard," I agree, but I suspect even though I have seen horrors, it doesn't compare to what he saw. I can hear it in his voice. "So if he's a king, is Mum his queen? Or just a one-night stand? Or someone that got away?"

"He would never give anyone a title that could rival his," he answers, his tone biting with anger as he stops walking. For a second, I think I can feel his power bouncing around his skin and filling the space between us.

“What’s he done to her?” I question, touching his arm. He doesn’t let me touch him for more than a second before pulling away, and it hurts somewhat. He used to be so friendly towards me all the time, but now it’s like he just can’t let himself get too close, which makes me more cautious of him.

“Bane is angry with Mum as much as he is obsessed with her,” he says with a sigh, rubbing his face. “I do not want to tell you anything more because you do not need to hear it.”

“But I do,” I say. “I need to understand everything you went through from start to finish, because that’s the only way I’m going to be able to trust you. You’ve been keeping secrets, lying and changing your answers.”

“I’m trying to protect you,” he shouts at me.

“I do not need your protection, Austin!” I snap right back. “I just do not know how to trust you right now!”

“I’m not the only one keeping secrets and dangers they should leave in the past,” he dryly comments. “And you’ve got paint on your chin, Riona.”

I rub the paint off as he walks away, finding the path around the mountain. Austin could be far more dangerous than Maddox, that I’m sure of because he is a hellcaster. He could burn this island down and kill vampires for sport if he wanted. But he is my twin, and I would do pretty much anything to keep him alive, and he knows everything about me. I have to trust he hasn’t given up on me completely.

I watch after him until he comes to a stop in a clearing down by the path not far away from where I spoke to Natalia, the siren, once. Wrapping my arms around myself, I walk after him and stop at his side, looking at the forest below the mountain on this side.

“I’m here to train you and to keep you safe. That’s it. I’d rather we didn’t talk about what happened with Bane and Mum going forward,” he suggests so reasonably it pisses me off.

“So you’re just going to keep avoiding telling me about Mum? Our mum. If you have forgotten, she is mine too,” I demand, turning on him, but he avoids my gaze.

“Yes, because the past isn’t changing, and we have to focus on the future,” he comments. “I believe we need to have a long discussion about what’s happening here.”

“I know you’re changing the subject, and I’m not dropping this. I want to know.”

“I am here to train you so you do not immediately die when Bane comes,” he comments. “It took everything left in Mum to get me here, and I am not letting her down because you have to know exactly what happened, Riona. Grow up.”

“Rich coming from you,” I counter, but a jolt of pain hits me in my heart when I hear the fear in his voice for Mum. He is right in one way, I need to train. I need to learn how to be a hellcaster if I have any chance of getting Mum back and keeping myself alive. “How do I access these powers?”

“Well, for one, that white magic thing that you did was not how hellcasters do magic, so that must be coming from the orbs,” he starts off. “I’m unsure what effect it will have on you and your magic. I was only trained in how to be a hellcaster, and that kind of magic is powerful on its own. With all your magic, you should be unstoppable.”

“The magic in the orbs is powerful, but I can’t control them,” I tell him. “Not unless I touch that final third orb, and that then comes with a title and an island of vampires. So no, let’s just ignore the orbs for now.”

“Ignoring orbs that are thousands of years old, made with incredible and dangerous magic that hundreds of powerful people have died to try and possess. Interesting approach, Riona,” he comments, winding me up a little bit, and I glare at him.

“Well, like you said, the past isn’t changing, and we have to focus on the future.”

He shakes his head and then looks down at his hands and holds them out flat. Slowly, burnt orange embers of fire start flickering around the tips of his fingers before spreading around his hand, swirling round like there is wind blowing them.

“This is hellfire,” he explains to me. “It’s not like just any fire, and it can’t be put out by any water or dirt. Hellfire eternally burns until another hellcaster stops it or the maker makes it stop.”

“It’s beautiful,” I comment, mesmerized by the flames.

“You need to touch the fire,” he tells me.

I chuckle until I see he isn’t joking. “And get burnt? No, thank you.”

“Just do it,” he says, and I sigh.

“Fine.”

I reach out slowly, choosing to trust him on this at least, and run my fingers through some embers, but they do not burn me at all. Some of them even bounce around my arms before disappearing, and I sharply move my hand back. “That’s weird. It’s like I can’t feel them.”

“Put your hands out like me,” he instructs. The embers on his arms disappear instantly when he lowers them. “Close your eyes,” he tells me next. “To call upon these powers that are deep in you, you have to want them and imagine them. Imagine your connection to the magic you’ve always had.”

“How come I have not been able to do this until now?”

He crosses his arms. “No hellcaster can access their powers until they’ve been close to another. I imagine you got close when you were around the demon children, but you never actually touched an ember, did you?”

“The children do not have any powers,” I counter.

“They do. They just choose not to use them, and they’re scared. Any child would be after being thrown into a world they do not understand.”

“So you think they’re scared?” I softly ask.

“Very scared,” he answers just as softly. “They need to find homes with parents who can love them and teach them there isn’t anything to fear.”

“Don’t they have parents where they are from?”

“Most likely dead. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of abandoned children down there,” he replies. “They’re better off here than they are down there.”

“Did you help them escape?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, that was nothing to do with me. They’d be escaping for a long time. No one really knows why.”

So he doesn’t know Mum was behind it. Or I suspect she was. I need to speak to the children and ask them if she sent them here, and tell them they do not need to be scared. They seem to trust me, if only a little, and I have a feeling it’s because of Mum.

Or I might be hoping.

Austin clears his throat. “Close your eyes and imagine that there’s an ember inside you, inside your chest, near your heart,” he tells me. “I want you to focus on it and imagine it getting larger and larger with my voice. Imagine the ember twisting and swirling, flickering as flames do until it takes over all of your body and you can feel it coming out of your fingertips.”

I keep my eyes closed and try to imagine the embers like he suggested, to imagine a magic I can create, which I never thought was even possible. A few moments pass by before I open my eyes and nothing happens.

Austin shakes his head. “Again.”

For what seems like half an hour, Austin tries to instruct me on how to call hellfire, with no luck, and nothing I do seems to work.

“You’re not imagining it enough or believing in yourself,” he frustratedly tells me.

“Yes, well, it’s hard to imagine that I can have powers like that when I was nothing short of human not long ago!”

“You need to learn this, because he is coming for you! It’s all about you and that damn orb!” he shouts out, and I pause, letting him rant. “I wasn’t enough, and I do not know what is worse, that you are or that I can’t protect

you from him. You need to learn to fight so he doesn't get you and what he wants. What he has always wanted."

The obvious answer hits me like a brick. Mum was pregnant with twins. One of them took the orb's magic, and the other didn't. Bane wouldn't have known who it was. It was never my brother who was the strong one or the one he wanted. He took the wrong twin. "I'm sorry."

I shake my head and start to walk away, feeling like we both need a break.

"We are not leaving now," he demands as I start walking away. I do not answer him, and I carry on walking until he runs and catches up with me and grabs my arm. Suddenly we're completely on fire. Hellfire. All of our bodies are covered in flames that do not actually touch our bodies or clothes. The flames just exist, and they do not hurt or burn. They feel normal.

"Wow," I whisper as the snow around our feet melts into pools of water on rock.

"The embers are part of you, and they always have been," he tells me. "And for the record, do not be sorry. You're so much stronger than me, always have been, and when you realise it, I want to be there. I want to see you take down Bane and burn the worlds down to save them."

The flames disappear, and I watch my brother walk away, and this time I do not follow him.

CHAPTER
FORTY-SEVEN



“Are you sure you want to see these psychopaths?”

I turn my head and look up at Maddox. He is staring out of the window with a cool confidence as he lounges in his seat.

“Yes,” I respond with a small smile. This man has killed for sport, yet demonic kids freak him out. Not that he will admit it. The carriage bumps and shakes as we head through the forest. “They’re apparently like me, Maddox. Does that make me a psychopath as well?”

“No,” he replies with a dark chuckle. “I believe I own the mad title for this world. You are forever my violent little human.”

“But I’m not human,” I remind him.

His dark eyes fall on me. “No matter what your blood says you are, your soul is the only voice you can control. Be who you want, Riona.”

“I just want to be with you,” I admit, letting out a long breath. “I hardly remember my life before I met you.”

“I desire the same,” he tells me, linking our fingers together slowly. “For you, I would fight the world and change any part of my soul. It’s yours, Riona Dark.”

“I do not need you to change,” I gently tell him. “I mean...you haven’t killed anyone to feed recently, right?”

I would be shocked if he said yes to this, mostly because he is with me most of the time.

He smiles. “Surprisingly, donated blood bags are fine. The urge to hunt isn’t what it was when you weren’t here. The only person I want to bite is in this carriage.”

I shiver and clear my throat, avoiding his eyes and the amusement shining in them. “Have you had any updates about the hellcaster children?”

“They sit there quietly. They do not move. They do not talk, they barely eat, and they pick up food like it’s strange, but they eat it like starving wolves,” he tells me. “God knows what they ate before.”

“I think I know why they are like that,” I say. “I will find out soon if I’m right.”

“I do not like them,” he says in a gruff voice.

“Do you not like children at all, or is it just the hellcaster children?”

“Just them,” he replies, his eyes flickering over me for a second. “But I am not accustomed to children since there are none on the island, and I only grew up with Reign.”

“I understand,” I reply. “If I’m right about my theory, I think we should re-home the children with vampires and d’vampires who want them. They need homes and parents.”

“I know nothing of children, but I know much about growing up alone and without love. You are correct,” he responds. “But only if they are not a risk.”

My thumb rolls the blue crystal ring around, and I glance down, seeing the white veins are now on both of my hands. The curse is so beautifully painful and so heartbreakingly cruel. My heart hurts as I stare at the white shining veins, and I pull my eyes to the ring. The only bit of hope we’ve got left.

“I’ve sent word to the witch. She’ll come soon,” Maddox’s deep voice fills the carriage, and he tilts my chin to face him before cupping my cheek.

Leaning in, he brushes his lips across mine.

Every little touch feels like I'm on fire. Like he is burning my soul, shaping and crafting it into being owned by him.

"I will not let you die, Riona. Never."

His promise is strong, binding, begging me to believe him, but I can feel the curse and the deadline it is giving me. Loving Prince Maddox Borealis has always been a death sentence. But I wouldn't change a moment of our time together.

"I love you," I gently reply, wishing I could promise him my life, my long lifetime. Promise him I wouldn't leave him alone.

But I can't. I won't. I can't fix this.

"She will always come for that ring."

"Do you know why she wants it?"

"It used to belong to her. God knows how my family got it, but she's quite fixated on it," he responds.

"Talking of witches, why do you think Sabina hasn't been attacking to get me and Tove back?" I ask.

His eyes darken. "She won't come here because she knows I will kill her daughter."

"You wouldn't."

"I would," he coldly tells me. "This is a supernatural war, and heirs are the best protection you can get. Tove is a chess piece, and I will kill her if her mother tries to come for you again."

"Maddox... I get it," I finally breathe out, and his dark eyebrows rise. "I will do whatever we have to. I'm not losing you."

Maddox flashes me a dangerous and sexy grin. "Have I told you how much I love you recently?"

"A few times."

His hand falls on my thigh, and he slowly drifts his long fingers up my inner thigh, sending shivers through me. “Maybe I should—”

The carriage comes to a jolt of a stop, and Maddox sighs. He leans over and kisses my cheek. “Later.”

I like that promise. A lot.

We both climb out of the carriage doors and head down the dirt path towards the storm drain, hidden in the dark shadows of the forest. This place is creepy, and if I were a scared kid, it wouldn't make it better for me to be locked up in a place like this. Maddox's hand rests on my back until we get to the doors, and he unlocks them, pulling them open.

“Who brings them food? Who do they see?”

“Katy and a few other women who aren't scared of them,” he explains. “Which isn't many.”

“Got it,” I comment as the lights flicker on as we walk down the steps and into the hangar. At the back of the giant room are the children, and they are spread around on sofas or beds. The toys in the baskets have dust on them, and the beds are unmade, but some blankets are littered across the floor. Some of them stand still, quiet, and at the same time, they all look at me.

Sense me.

Like I can sense them. I know what it is now and why I can feel them. They are my kind, and it's about time I actually help them. I focus on the little girl who is nearest, standing still in the middle of the sofas in a cute white dress and pink sandals. Her blonde hair is messy and falls around her face, and her eyes look like fire-filled embers as she looks up at me.

“Hello, what's your name?”

Of course, she doesn't answer me. Maddox stays at my side, and she looks at him for a brief second, a little fear flickering in her eyes.

“He won't hurt you. I promise,” I tell her, and I sit down on the floor. The cold from the cement sinks into my jeans as I cross my legs and look up at her. “There is nothing to be frightened of here, and I know you're scared. I

do not blame you. This is an island full of creatures that aren't like us, and they have locked you up. Pretty scary, huh?"

"They did kill people," Maddox dryly adds.

"But it was because you were scared, right?" I question. "You only know how to defend yourself, and you are used to being treated badly in the hellcasters' city."

"You know of the city?" she shyly asks.

"Yes, because my twin brother told me about it. We are hellcasters, well, I'm a half hellcaster, and my mother is a witch," I explain. "But you already know that, don't you? Because my mum sent you here."

"The golden-haired lady said to trust you. She showed us a picture of you," she finally says. The other children are all listening, inching closer with every word she says. I meet her eyes, holding them as she slowly sits down on the floor in front of me, only a breath away. "She saved us from being killed and sent us here with magic to look for you. You have another name in the city, and everyone is looking for you."

"What's your name?" I ask her.

"Ember," she softly tells me. "I chose it myself."

"I'm sorry it took me so long, but I am here to help you," I tell her gently and lean over, picking up her small hand. She doesn't pull away from me. "Did my mum ask you to tell me anything? Any one of you?"

"We talk when no one is looking," Ember explains. "I speak the best out of us. Some of them cannot say words, but we can talk in our minds. I can show you."

"Okay," I say. Maddox steps closer as Ember reaches up and places her hands on my forehead. Something snaps and I gasp as I'm flooded with emotions and voices and then images trace across my mind. A city in eternal blue flames, massive rock towers and busy streets of hellcasters, and then a woman walks towards me. A woman in a red cloak, lined with gold trims and pretty gold shoes. Her blonde hair flows around her shoulders, escaping the hood, and when she leans down, she pushes her hood back.

Mum.

The image is gone quickly, like a photo I can't catch, and I open my eyes to see Ember smiling at me. I smile back, even as I feel her fear, her uncertainty and how puzzled she is. How confused they all are.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, leaning closer and wrapping my arms around her small shoulders. "We are leaving this place today and never coming back. You are no prisoners."

"Riona," Maddox hums my name. I wipe my tears away and stand up, Ember following me.

I turn to her. "Give me a second outside. I will come back."

"I know. We can feel your emotions and thoughts too," she replies with a sweet smile. "You are like your mum. Kind."

I pat her shoulder, still feeling their emotions bouncing around in my head and heart like I am one of them. A lost, scared and confused child thrown into a world they do not understand. Maddox leads me outside before placing his hands on my shoulders and looking into my eyes. "What the fuck was that?"

"Something Austin failed to mention about hellcasters," I say, feeling pissed. If Austin knows about this and didn't tell me, then it means he doesn't want me in his head. Feeling what he does. Finding out if I can trust him. "I felt their emotions and felt their thoughts. They do not want to harm anyone. They are just scared."

Maddox kisses my forehead, pulling me into his arms. "You felt all of them? All that pain?"

"And I saw my mum. I saw my mum finding Ember and helping her in the city," I explain, taking comfort in his arms. "At least I know Austin wasn't lying about the city being real or Mum being there."

"We will find a way to save her," he promises me.

"What if the cost is too high?" I question. "What happens when Bane comes for me?"

“I have a suspicion he won’t until you have the third orb.”

“Makes sense. He wants power, and currently I’m missing the third piece.”

Maddox tips my chin up and brushes his lips with mine. “I won’t force you to take the throne, but I am telling you now, I believe you are meant to be on it. With me.”

“I thought you didn’t want to be king.”

His eyes swirl with that familiar darkness. A darkness I want to jump into and never leave. “If you’re my queen, then my place as king is one I’d take. The throne has never truly interested me until I lost you. It was always a game to piss off my brother but now I want it. I want the throne with you.”

“Being leaders means putting the people first, not just us. That’s why I think Reign is best for the throne. He loves no one but his people,” I gently remind him.

“But the orbs didn’t choose him. The magic wants you,” he reminds me right back. “And our opinion on who should lead means nothing in the face of ancient magic, which has the right to choose.”

“We should meet with Reign and make a plan about the children,” I say, changing the subject. I do not want to argue about this anymore. We just go round and round, never getting anywhere other than the fact we both think Reign would be the better king and he actually wants the throne.

Yet the magic wants me. A once-human who knows nothing about the island, ruling, and most importantly, is not a vampire. I can’t rule, and I do not think Maddox has the temper to be a good king.

Reason isn’t his strong point.

“Hey, traitor,” Katy’s voice almost makes me jump as she appears next to us, brushing her short braid over her shoulder. “Your witch hostage somehow escaped the room you left her in and got into a fight with Reign, who caught her. Reign thought you’d like to know.”

“She is okay, right?” I ask.

“Yup. We have a human healer on the way to the castle to check on her as Reign had to knock her out.”

“I didn’t know she could do magic,” I mutter.

“Tove knocked down two rooms and put up a hell of a fight with Reign. I would almost say he is impressed,” Katy laughs. “And he hates witches.”

“She is her mother’s daughter. Do not be fooled,” Maddox reminds me and nods at Katy. “Tell Reign we—”

He pauses mid-sentence, slowly lifting his eyes up in the air. I follow his line of sight to see a cloud of red moving over the trees in the distance. The cloud moves like a wave, and as it gets closer, casting a dark shadow over us, I notice the cloud is actually ravens. Blood red ravens. They fly so close together, blocking out the sky above.

“What the fuck?” Katy asks, stepping to my side while Maddox takes the other. One of the ravens in the front swoops down, heading right for me, and I hold my hands up, but Maddox’s hand snaps out, catching the raven. In two moves, he snaps its neck and lets it drop. Suddenly the ravens above us make an awful screeching noise that echoes around the trees, and they start to fly towards us. Hundreds of them.

“Run!” Maddox shouts, but it’s too late. Seconds before the ravens hit us, a wave of hellfire spreads above our heads and creates a bubble around us. I look over to see Ember and three other children holding their hands out, creating the bubble around us that stretches all over them and the bunker too. Their eyes glow red, like fire, and energy bounces around them, almost making them seem like they are glowing yellow. It’s incredible.

The ravens burn into ash as soon as they hit the fire, and soon they are all gone, light returning to the forest as Ember and the others let down the barrier.

Ash falls around us as we stare in shock. Ember walks over to us and looks up at me. “Fire ravens are messengers from the hellcaster king. He will come soon.”

“Thank you,” I tell her and glance to Maddox.

He leans down onto one knee, so he is eye level with Ember. “No more killing people on the island, got it?”

“When we were sent through the portal, many of us were terrified and didn’t want to be touched. Hellfire is hard to control,” she explains. “But I have taught them. They won’t hurt anyone unless they hurt us first.”

“Welcome to The Onyx, Ember. You are safe here, and I will protect you as one of my people. Will you introduce me to everyone here?”

She smiles at him and holds out her small hand. I do not know what I expected, but watching Maddox take the little girl’s hand and let her lead him to the others by the door, wasn’t it.

“What the fuck did you do to the Mad Prince?” Katy asks me from my side. “And the demonic children?”

“They are called hellcasters, and they are not demons,” I correct her. “And as for Maddox...I didn’t change him. This is always who he was under the pain and fear. I just hope when I’m gone, he doesn’t lose himself again.”

“You aren’t going anywhere, Riona.”

I do not reply to her because the curse may be easily forgotten by everyone else, but it will never be far from my mind.

CHAPTER
FORTY-EIGHT



“I want to see her, Reign. She is my cousin.”

Reign lounges against the door to Tove’s prison room where he doesn’t really leave. He has taken it as a personal mission to make sure Tove doesn’t escape, and I think it’s something to do with the traces of a cut on his cheek that is still healing. Maybe magical cuts do not heal that quickly. Either way, I can see it’s personal, and he is pissed.

“And dangerous. Where is Maddox?”

I smirk. “Helping one of the children settle into their new home with Katy. Basically, you have no backup. Let me in.”

In the last four days, we have found homes for six of the children, and there have been hundreds of applications. The vampires are desperate for children, and once Maddox and Reign sent out royal letters to the leaders of the villages, explaining they didn’t mean to harm anyone and they can control their powers, they have clearly trusted the royals. So far, so good. We are keeping a close eye on them and have only chosen the best homes. If they can survive Katy’s questioning and Maddox’s death stare, they must be good people.

“You’re a dangerous woman, just like her,” he grumbles.

“All women are dangerous, Reign,” I warn him as he clicks open the door. “Magical ones are just more.”

He chuckles and says something under his breath that I do not quite catch. I walk in and find Tove is sitting on the bed with red glowing handcuffs that are wrapped around her wrists. Her brown hair is a mess, and she's in a brown dress with a blanket around her lap. Her red cloak she came in is in pieces by the wall.

“What happened to your cloak?” I ask.

Tove glares at me as I take a seat in the spare chair nearby. That's all there is in the room. A chair and bed, and a door to a bathroom, I'm guessing. “It wasn't my choice to take you with us, but they won't harm you...as long as you do not escape.”

“Kidnapping me means war. I am the heir to the coven,” she snaps. “I might not look like it, but the magic of my ancestors breathes through me, and I will use it if you do not let me go.”

“I'm your family,” I start with, gently.

“And you're in bed with a vampire who kills for fun,” she sneers. “Do not play the family card with me. It won't work.”

“Fine then,” I huff, feeling a bit insulted. “Your mother is a psychopath who kills humans for sport. In fact, the first time we met, she reduced human servants to nothing more than blood and bone. The only reason you're here is because of her.”

Tove sharply looks away. “Not all of us enjoy the dark side of our magic like mother, but she has done what she needed to survive. Without you and your power, we will all die.”

“I'm well aware of what the future might bring,” I say, remembering the vision. The burning city and my death. “Honestly, I can barely remember a time when I didn't worry about Bane, or Maddox, or my brother. My life. I used to care about what my hair looked like, playing violin, painting, and if the latest party had the wine I like. That was my life, and now it's a game to survive, but I am not the bad guy in this. We should work together, Tove.”

“As long as you side with them”—she pauses, meeting my gaze—“we will never be on the same side. Vampires and witches together is wrong.”

“Maybe you need to widen your outlook on what is right and wrong,” I suggest. “Because this narrow-minded outlook you have won’t get you anything you want. You say you’re going to be the next ruler of the coven... maybe you should learn to listen.”

I stand up and walk to the door, pausing with my hand on the handle. “Reign isn’t a bad person. He hurts no one unless they cause it, and he will be a wonderful king. If you want to be a ruler, try learning from a vampire who could be one of the best.”

“Leave,” she snaps, and I do, finding Reign waiting outside. I nod at him and head away, hearing the door click shut behind me. Glancing back, I see the corridor is empty, and I can hear them arguing even before I get out of the servants’ corridor and into the upper stairs. I sigh and head down the stairs, finding Ann and Arlo laughing with each other by the front door. They both freeze when they see me, and Ann tensely smiles at me before walking past, going up the stairs.

“She still hates me, right?” I ask Arlo.

He shrugs. “More frightened. This world isn’t for her...”

“Is it for you?” I ask.

Arlo looks up at the sky. “I do not know how I could go back home anymore. The university, the partying...it all seems so long ago. I’m a different person, and part of me has always wanted to make sure you and Austin are safe. You’re my family.”

“Same,” I tell him, my heart warming. “We make our own home, don’t we?”

“I could never have a home away from the ocean,” Natalia says. I turn to see her walking into the castle, water dripping off her tight blue floor-length dress. Her long hair dries before my eyes, along with her dress, until she is in front of me. “Dear Riona, I have missed your presence.”

“It’s good to see you,” I softly say, placing my hand on her arm.

Natalia turns to Arlo, who looks shell-shocked. Kinda how I felt when I first saw Natalia. She is enchantingly perfect, so much it’s hard to look at.

Her black hair is curled in perfect waves, and her blue eyes remind me of the ocean. She reminds me of the sea in more ways than one.

Beautiful. Enchanting but cold and dangerous.

“This is my friend Arlo, and, Arlo, this is Natalia. She is a siren and their leader,” I introduce them. Arlo still looks shell-shocked before he snaps out of it and offers her his hand to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

“We have met before,” she randomly replies. “Haven’t we?”

Arlo steps closer, dropping his hand. “At the university...you were in a mermaid costume and—”

“We had an interesting night,” she finishes his sentence. I clear my throat, looking between them.

“You two met before?” I ask.

“Seems fate has been drawing us together for a long time, my dear friend,” Natalia comments and takes a step away from Arlo. “I am here to speak to the princes and you alone. It is about the witches.”

“Reign is busy, and Maddox isn’t here. You can tell me, and I will repeat everything, or you could wait,” I suggest.

“Let’s talk. I do not have much time,” she says, walking to the study. Arlo nods at me, his eyes staying on Natalia like a wolf watching a sheep through a fence. Leaving Arlo, I catch up with Natalia as she closes the study door behind me. I take a seat on the sofa, waiting as Natalia comes and sits next to me, her knee pressing into mine.

“I know you are not aware of my culture, but I need to explain some of it for you to understand our issue,” she starts. “My allegiance is with the vampires, and it has been since I took my place as the leader of the sirens. My mother was a close friend of the vampire king, and the vampire king saved our race from extinction.”

“I’ve heard he was cruel, but then he seemed to do some good in his lifetime.”

“He was cruel to be kind...but perhaps he took it too far. Sirens need both air and water as well as heat to survive long in the ocean. As the humans expanded their reach across the world, keeping our race a secret became impossible,” she tells me, her French accent playing with her pronunciations. “Our people were dying from the unsuitable environment, from a lack of a *home*. So the vampire king found us a home in the ocean, a protected undersea city that was made once by humans but the sea took it back. The top part is explored by humans, but unknown to them, there is a massive city right under their noses.” She smiles tensely at me. “To produce heirs, we have always needed witch magic, much like vampires.”

“Okay...,” I say. “Does that mean you want to trade with the witches while they are in open war with us?”

“I adore how you say *us* when you are not a vampire,” she breathes. “Some might wonder if you owe any loyalty to your own kind.”

“The witches betrayed me, and as for the hellcasters...well, I’m loyal to the children here. That’s it,” I say. “Talking of which, did any hellcaster children come to you?”

“Yes, and they are now sirens. We changed them, and the sea accepted the change,” she tells me.

“Hellcasters can become sirens?”

“The sea accepts anyone it chooses,” she replies. “And the children were in pain...their souls calling out for safety and a home. The sea has given them one in exchange for their powers.”

“Always a catch.”

“The power is better off in the sea than in the hands of children who do not understand it and can’t control it.”

“I think we have gone off the point.”

“Yes, I am sorry,” she corrects and straightens her back. “Two of my people have become pregnant. Naturally, with no help from witches. I personally know the women, they are close friends, and they would never betray me for witch help. I am here to see if the same is happening on *The Onyx*.”

“I will ask,” I say, frowning. “I mean, how is that possible?”

“The vampire king could control his people with the orbs...and perhaps you are even stronger than him. You are controlling the lives of more than just vampires,” she gently says.

“That’s crazy. Why would I have anything to do with this?”

Natalia stands up. “Because the two siren women who are pregnant are my guards, and they were in the room, hidden, when we met. They are the only ones pregnant. I believe simply being around you...undoes the magic. You are the key.”

“That isn’t proof,” I say. “It could have been Sabina, she was also in the room.”

“Yes, Sabina is the type to cast a powerful magic spell to undo infertility,” she sarcastically replies and takes another step closer. “I would be careful with your prince. If magic is free around you...vampires are no longer infertile.”

I feel the colour draining from my cheeks, and she chuckles. “I can sense you are not pregnant. The curse is most likely blocking your magic on yourself. Witch magic has a strange effect, and I’d love to discuss this more, but I must be on my way.”

“Natalia...do you know how to break the curse?”

“My dear friend...I wish I did,” she whispers. “But I can take away your emotions, your powers, and give you nothing but calmness until the end. I will always do that for you. Just call for me.”

Water swirls around her until there is nothing but a puddle of water in the middle of the floor, and I can see my reflection in it. My pale blonde hair is wavy, my eyes are too bright, but I’m pale.

And tired.

The curse is already draining me of my life... How long do I have left?

“You’re lying!” I hear Arlo shout from the other room, his voice full of pain and denial. “I do not believe you!”

I rush out into the corridor where Arlo is standing a good distance away from a woman with long, white blonde hair in a yellow dress. She is cradling her stomach...her slight bump of a stomach. It's obvious what I'm seeing before I've even admitted it to myself. And what it means.

"Are you pregnant?" I ask her, and she turns to me, her eyes widening. She lowers her head, and I remember who she is.

The vampire who bought Arlo and used him for months. Arlo is backing away to the door, shaking his head repeatedly.

The vampire finally speaks. "My name is Ciara Fiaich, and I am three months pregnant. I thought it was impossible, but it is true. I have had a healer check. Arlo is the father, and my baby is half human."

Natalia's warnings come back to me like a brick hitting a wall. I was around Ciara, and she got pregnant. Natalia might be right. It's me. It's the magic of the orbs doing something.

"Arlo..." I whisper, but he is already walking out of the castle. I can't blame him.

"Can you go in there and not leave?" I ask Ciara. Pregnant or not, she is still a monster who compelled my friend into having sex with her and feeding from him. Her bright grey eyes meet mine.

"You do not have to like me, but I want what is best for the first baby to be born on The Onyx in a long time," she replies, holding her head up high. It's clear she is proud of being pregnant, no matter how she got there.

"I hate you," I correct her. "What you did to Arlo is unforgivable, and you won't find a friend in me. I'm asking you to stay because that baby is half Arlo and half good. That's the only reason."

"Will you tell him I am sorry?" she asks, lowering her head. "I am twenty years old, and I lost what little humanity I had with my addiction to blood. Having this baby inside me...I've remembered. I am sorry."

"It isn't me you need to apologise to," I say as I walk past, my eyes flickering to her bump. How the hell do I explain this one to Maddox and Reign?

CHAPTER
FORTY-NINE



I sit down next to Arlo in the red snow outside, ignoring how my jeans instantly get soaked and the cold air blows around us, like its personal mission is to freeze us to the spot. Arlo doesn't seem to notice as he looks ahead, his eyes dark and his body tense. I just want to hug him, tell him it will be okay, but the words get stuck in my throat, and my arms stay crossed against my chest. The cloak Maddox bought me whips around behind me, the noise mixing in with the wind. I stare out at the city ahead of us, the beautiful city of The Onyx. Despite everything I know about vampires, the brutality I've seen, and how they can act...their city is something else. It's magnificent.

To love something cruel is a poisonous bite indeed.

"It still looks so surreal to me. Just imagine if humans knew this place existed," I comment as I take a deep breath that comes out as smoke. "Humans write books, make movies and dream of supernatural creatures and never have a clue how the shadows of this world make the light hard to appear."

"That's a poetic way of saying the supernaturals are fucked up, Riona," he comments, his voice bitter. "Humans romanticise everything, like they always do, and ignore the bad."

I watch him closely, wondering if he is losing the plot as he suddenly laughs. A bitter and empty laugh. I wouldn't be surprised with the news he just got that he might take a ride on the crazy train. The laugh eventually

drifts away, leaving no sound other than the wind whipping around us. “What do I do about this Riona?”

I consider telling him not to worry about it because human and vampire babies never live more than a year, but how do I know that hasn't changed as well? Whatever the orbs have done to undo the magic holding pregnancy back, maybe it will allow Arlo's baby to survive. I wish I had a better answer. “I do not know.”

“You love one of them. A vampire. I mean you really love him,” Arlo states, and it's the first time he has really talked about Maddox and me since he found out. “I thought it was an obsession or lust, but then I realised it is neither. You really love him. You come to life when he is at your side, and he looks only at you.”

“Vampires are complicated, but they are still people. They still make their own choices and control their actions. They have pain, love and fear. A mix of those can make anyone look like a monster when really they are just suffering. I never thought I'd fall for him at the beginning. It was a slow burning love that neither of us could deny,” I tell him. “I wish Austin could understand.”

“Austin is lying about something big,” Arlo tells me. “He has changed. I do not recognise him anymore.”

“Neither do I,” I admit. “And he is my twin. I feel like he is a million miles away from me. I know it's something to do with Bane, our father, but avoiding the subject isn't going to work with me. If you do not want to talk about it, we can just sit here. But if you do...well, I'm here too.”

“I'm going to have a baby with a vampire who forced me to sleep with her,” he says into the silence.

I place my hand on his shoulder. “It's not the baby's fault who her or his parents are. You do not have to forgive her to love your child. I am sorry for how this has happened. I have no idea what you must be feeling.”

“Lost. Insane. Worried,” he murmurs. “My parents are a waste of space who put work and their lives above me. I wanted to be better if I had a child. This situation can't be made normal for the baby.”

“That baby is half you, and you’re pretty normal, Arlo.”

He chuckles. “Normal. I’d love to be normal again. In fact, being normal is something I do not remember ever being.”

“I do not think I would,” I admit, my eyes tracing back to the city. Every book, every movie I read before this world crashed into mine seemed to be getting me ready for this. I was brought up with the supernatural world, and I never knew it. Now I wonder if my mum secretly said anything to me, whispered things in the lullabies she used to sing to me, or if any of the stories she made up about witches and magic are actually true. The scarier part is that I have no clue if I will ever be able to ask her or if my time with my mum is gone. It’s just the past now. “My life was all planned out, and this world crashed into me. But it’s better. Even with the dark parts I have learnt to accept.”

“Hopefully that describes my baby too,” he says and sighs as he stands up. “I’m going to find Katy and train until I pass out. I might not be a vampire, but I have a child on the way to protect from the world and its mother, if I have to. I won’t give up on her or him, and I won’t ever let my baby think the way he or she was brought into the world controls her or his future.”

I flash him a grin. “You’ll never have to protect your child from its mother. If she steps one foot out of line, I will end her myself.”

Arlo smiles, his eyes searching mine. “You’re more like the Mad Prince than I thought. He said you’re violent, like him.”

I stand up myself, brushing off the snow. “Turns out he isn’t all bad. We all have dark sides, and Maddox had to survive so much. His past shaped both the good and the bad. I love all of him.”

“Do not let him destroy you for love. Everyone has a dark side, but it’s up to us if we embrace all of it,” he gently tells me. “See you later, Riona. Thank you for being my friend.”

I watch Arlo walk away back to the castle, wrapping my arms around myself for a long time until he is inside, and I turn to the city. Carefully, I hold my hand out in front of me and feel my magic with my emotions

instead of thinking about it. My hand glows red with fire, and it bounces around my palm like it's dancing.

“My father used to do that.” Reign’s voice makes me jump, and the magic snaps away. I glance over as he walks to my side and looks out at the city. “I do not know why he chose me to reign over The Onyx and then gave one of the keys to the kingdom to a witch. You asked me about your mother, and I remember very little except for one vivid memory.”

I look up at him as his eyes turn on me. “She was arguing with my father in my father’s rooms, now Maddox’s room. They shouted so loud, and when I walked in, they weren’t alone. On the bed was a man covered in blood. It was clear she was protecting the man. A man covered in flames, and the fire wasn’t like anything I had seen before. Until I knew who your mother was, I never saw it. But I do now. You have the same eyes as the man on the bed.”

“My father. Bane,” I mutter. “What on earth was he doing there? How did he escape?”

“I was foolish and scared of my father’s temper, so I left. Every other memory of your mother is in passing, and the only other vampire who would know left with Cross.”

“Hector,” I mutter. Where is the French chef when you need him?

“Yes. We are searching for him as our spies report he jumped off the ship in the sea and left before it got to the witches,” he tells me. We both descend into silence. “I am proud of how you handled Natalia and Ciara.”

“You heard my conversations with them?” I question. “Why didn’t you come in?”

He lets out a long exhale. “Because I am near certain the throne is yours, Riona, and my brother will be at your side. You control his darkness and embrace it in the same breath. I have no doubt you will do the same for The Onyx. The orbs have chosen you.”

“Reign, you are meant to be king. You’ve been trained—”

“I’ve been trained to guide the next queen or king,” he cuts me off. “I never realised why until I woke up, found my orb gone and my brother pleading for my help. In that second, I knew the throne belonged in your hands, and it always will, whether you want it or not.”

“I’m not a vampire.”

“Neither was my mother, and yet, she was queen,” he replies. “A loved queen who changed this island for the better until the curse.”

“The curse,” I whisper, my eyes flickering to my hand.

“My father loved my mother...” He pauses and breathes in the cold air. “But not in the same way Maddox loves you. I can see the difference. My father treated my mother like an object he had won and treasured her like she could break at any moment...but he never truly fell in love with her. Maddox loves every part of you and treats you as an equal.”

“Thank you for noticing,” I reply, watching him closely. The silent prince. The one meant to rule and he doesn’t know it.

“What do you think about the pregnancy?” I question.

Reign crosses his arms. “That soon the entire Onyx and the sirens will protect and worship you. You just became their leader, and you did nothing.”

Reign doesn’t say anything else, and I do not either as I watch the city in front of me, feeling like I’m being backed into a corner that I do not want. I can’t be the queen they want me to be because I will always choose Maddox over anything and anyone else.

And The Onyx doesn’t need a selfish queen, or it will fall to ruins.

CHAPTER
FIFTY



“**W**here did you learn to braid like this?” I ask, touching the braided crown wrapped around the top of my head, shaped into what almost looks like roses at the side and back. The rest of my hair is wavy, coming down around my arms and shoulders. Ann has spent a long time weaving in little red crystal gemstones that are extremely beautiful and achingly familiar. They are from Maddox. The deep red stones are a deep contrast to my blonde hair, like blood pouring onto snow. My long princess cut dress swishes around my ankles when I stand up, and a wave of dizziness reminds me how I’m extremely nervous about tonight. Nervous would be an enormous understatement. If things don’t go well with the witch Gillian Brack of the Crow clan of witches, then I don’t know what we’re going to do.

Or what Maddox will do to save me. We know turning me into a d’vampire wouldn’t work; it didn’t on his mother, and with my blood being a mixture of two other races in the first place, I don’t think it’s a good idea.

This is our final hope, and I know the vampires in my life are anything but happy to trust a witch. I glance at the crystal ring on my hand, and I pray that it’s enough. It’s enough to save me, at least, because there isn’t much of an option for anything else.

My red dress is skin tight around my ribs and waist before flowing down into a princess gown at the bottom, several layers of silk and lace moving around my legs. At the top is delicate lace that dips to my lower chest,

exposing my boobs, which are held up by the dress alone, and my back is completely open. I've kept my favourite boots on underneath my dress, despite Ann's reluctance and annoyance.

Screw it, I'm wearing them.

With Ann silent, I turn and look at myself in the mirror, my bright blue eyes beaming like the sea is in them, shining from the heavy sun. I barely look like myself anymore, and I think I've not looked like myself for a long time. I briefly wonder what Mum or Dad would think if they saw me now. I suppose Austin could see me in this dress, with vampire crystals in my hair and on the way to make a trade with a witch. Part of me suspects he will be disappointed...mostly because he doesn't like Maddox. I can't even blame him. Maddox hasn't done anything to sway my brother's opinion of him, but he hasn't done anything bad. Which I count as progress.

The Maddox I knew when we first met would have tried to kill Austin at least ten times before dinner on the first night.

I smile for a second until I remember my brother and I aren't even talking. I know I need to fix things with him and bring up the way I could trust him. To see into his mind like Ember did for me. If he can do that, then I can finally trust him. Austin's been keeping himself quiet, for my brother. I only hear from Paul that he's okay, but something needs to change, because we have to stick together and actually be on talking terms. I've got a bit of time now, because I just keep putting it off, and Ann doesn't seem chatty anymore. I've grown to really like Ann and how sweet she is, but anytime I ask about her past, she clams up. It's not my business, but part of me wants to just know her better.

I pat her arm gently as I walk her to the door.

"My mother taught me. She was a hairdresser and stylist," Ann finally says. "She died a few years back from cancer, but she used to practice with me before her clients. I loved it and felt like a princess, which is kinda what you are. So that's why I chose it."

"Thank you for sharing this with me," I tell her, and she inclines her head. "Do you miss the rest of your family?"

“Yes, I do, but things have changed so much since I was at university, with barely any food and a crappy job. My mum wanted me to make a difference in this world, but I see that this world here needs a lot of help.”

“You can stay here if you want,” I tell her. “I mean, you have a friend, and I will protect you as much as I can. I will ask Maddox to do the same.”

“I was angry that I was brought here and fed from, but now that I’ve lived here for a while, I’ve grown to love this place. Even with the witch detour,” she says, her smile so big it lights up the room. “And I feel like serving this world and particularly you, the soon to be queen of The Onyx, is my calling.”

“Where did you hear that?” I ask.

Her cheeks slowly go red. “Paul told me everyone is saying it. The Onyx is worshipping you, thanks to the pregnancy and the suggestion of more to come if you are queen.”

“Oh,” I whisper. I shake my head, pushing the million worrying thoughts that come with that news to the back of my mind. “Honestly, I can’t even with that. I need to focus on tonight.”

“You do!” she agrees. “Good luck, my friend.”

I watch her walk out and look back, giving me one small smile before leaving. I need to see my brother, even if it’s just to talk to him.

What we are doing tonight is dangerous, and I want him to know we are okay and that there is a way for us to trust each other. I head out of my room, my red dress brushing against the dark wood floor, and in the corridor, the smell of lemons and chicken fills my senses, making my stomach grumble.

I pass Katy on the stairs, and I almost don’t recognise her. I jerk back a little before pausing. “You’re wearing a dress.”

And looks like a freaking princess.

She arches a detailed eyebrow. Her black hair is almost dead straight and matches with her long black starry dress, which is beautiful. There is a long

slit all the way up her thigh, revealing her leather boots on underneath with lace wrapped around them. She has a long silver necklace on that drops right down to the middle of her stomach, sparkling in the light.

Stunning.

“I was forced into this,” she says with a huff. “Disgusting honestly.”

“You look amazing,” I tell her.

She wrinkles her nose and passes me. I get a few steps farther before turning back. “Where did you hide the weapons?”

Her chuckle echoes. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” I laugh to myself as I continue up the steps and make my way towards Austin’s room.

I go down the corridor until I find his room and knock on the door three times before pushing open the silent door. I know I should have waited to hear him shout out that it was okay for me to come in, but I am still stunned by the sight in front of me.

Arlo and Austin are passionately kissing, tearing at each other’s clothes as they move back towards the bed, and they are completely lost in the moment, oblivious to me standing there.

This is probably the last thing I expected. I don’t know what to say as I watch them for a few seconds before trying to shut the door as it feels awkward, but instead the door creaks, alerting them I’m here. Both of them sharply turn towards me, their eyes matching when they go wide.

I pause, but soon the silence becomes too much. “I just came to talk to you, Austin. I’m sorry, I should have knocked harder.”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Austin says, clearing his throat. He stays close to Arlo, who is silent.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” I say, backing away a little in the doorway. I never would have expected this, and I hope Austin isn’t just messing around, because the loss of their friendship would be terrible. We have all known each other for so many years, and I think I’ve missed the entire plot of their story. If it’s real, I would be happy for them. They’ve always been

close, almost like brothers, but maybe I was always missing something more. “I should go.”

“No,” Austin says, stepping forward. “You can talk to me now?”

“Alright,” I say. “Basically, Ember, one of the hellcaster children, taught me how to look into someone’s mind. It doesn’t hurt, and it means I can see in yours and—”

“We aren’t doing that,” he warns. “I’m sorry, but no.”

Arlo and I stare at him as he holds his head high. I just want to hit him a bunch of common sense.

“Why?” I ask, crossing my arms. “You’ve avoided every real question about the hellcaster city and Bane. I need to know you’re telling me the truth.”

“I think you should leave,” Austin suggests.

Arlo starts to try to intervene. “Aus—”

“No, Arlo. My brother has made it quite clear how he wants to keep his secrets from me more than actually having a friendship with his twin. I’m done,” I say, and I turn around. I grab the door handle. “But I’m happy for you both for finding each other. Arlo, you deserve some happiness.”

“Thank you, Ria-banana-llama,” he replies with a grin.

I can’t help but laugh, even if I feel a little sad and angry about Austin’s silence and refusal to fix any of the problems between us. I shut the door behind me, breathing in deeply and leaving them to it. Maybe Arlo can talk some sense into Austin.

Still a bit shocked and annoyed, I head down the stairs and outside into the blistering and blowing snow in the front of the castle. The high pillars of the castle tower over me, creaking in the wind. The stone itself sounds like it’s alive in the harsh wind, even though that seems impossible.

Maddox and Reign are stood together, an unusual sight on its own, but this time, they have matching tuxedos, and they really look like close brothers. They always seem so far apart, so distant, so much that I can almost never

believe they are actually related other than the occasional way they almost look like each other. But now, as they stand next to each other, looking regal, I can't help but smile. Especially when Maddox turns towards me, and my heart pounds in my chest, reacting to his gaze alone. I look across the red snow. It seems fitting, matching the red rose clipped to his suit and slight bits of red in the bow tie by his neck. We match, and I'm sure he planned this when he bought this dress for me.

He might be the predator in this game between us, but I walk to him, the willing prey. His arm wraps around my waist, and he pulls me straight to him. Our bodies crash together, and he leans down, gently pressing a kiss on my lips.

"I see you got my crystals," he comments, his deep and gravelly voice making me shiver. He reaches out and touches several of them in my hair.

"I love them," I reply.

"They're from my hair," he explains, and Reign glances over at this, a deep frown making his head crease before he looks away, but I still see it.

"Before my brother tells you, which I'm sure he is bursting to do," he says, making my lips twitch when Reign rolls his eyes, "these crystals belonged to our ancestors."

"They were locked away for safekeeping for thousands of years until Maddox decided to take them," Reign says a little bitterly.

"I left the green ones for you, brother," Maddox replies. "Envy is often green, no?"

Reign grumbles, "Bastard."

I chuckle as Maddox grins at me. "Why did you give some to me then?"

"I will tell you later," he whispers to me after leaning forward.

Katy comes over and ruins the moment by clapping her hands abruptly. "Time to go, vamps and whatever the hell you are, Ria."

"We really should come up with a name for a half witch and hellcaster," I reply.

“Witcaster?” she replies, arching an eyebrow, and I laugh.

“Sounds like an old British lord of a dusty mansion,” I mutter.

“I will come up with a name,” she says, stopping next to Reign. His eyes flicker down her dress, and he gulps. It’s the first time I’ve seen him affected by any female other than his anger towards my cousin. “Everyone ready for the portal?”

“Of course,” Reign answers, clearing his throat and messing with his bow tie.

Katy throws something at the ground. It almost looks like a glass bottle, and before the bottle even smashes on the snow, a massive smoke doorway appears. The green smoke disappears to reveal an old wooden door in the middle.

Reign confidently walks forward and pulls the door open before holding his elbow out to Katy. She links her arm through his before stepping through together. I can’t see what’s on the other side of the door—it’s nothing more than green smoke—but I can hear noise from the other side. It sounds like the circus that came to my town every year where my parents would take us to see the shows and animals they kept.

I always loved the circus, but I imagine a witch circus is going to be something else. Maddox leans down and kisses my cheek. “You look irresistible, darling.”

“Thank you,” I manage to say as Maddox leads me towards the door and steps forward first, and I follow after him, closing my eyes. The smoke surrounds me for just a second before the warm air of the other side blows against my face, and I open my eyes. Under my feet, the snow is gone, and instead the short, soft grass is there, and the breeze that floats around us smells like sand and sea, with a thick salty twang to it.

It’s night here, meaning we’re not that far from The Onyx, and if I had to guess, I’d say Greece. The whole sky is lit up with dozens of stars, no city in sight to make them darker. It’s too bright here, and I love it. Right in front of me is a literal circus. The circus is huge, stretching across at least eight tents that are deep purple in colour with lights flickering all around the

edge. Some of the lights actually float above the tent in the air, which I'm sure humans think is a trick with string instead of the real magic I can sense it is. Light beams around each of the different sections all around us, some with food trucks and others with animals. There are other stalls with Fortune-teller written above them or House of Mirrors on another, and more I can't read from here. The cages of animals are making most of the noise as they move around, and I can't help that my eyes drift over to some of the tigers, elephants and even a hippo in one of the cages.

As my eyes take in everything, Maddox guides me down a thick red carpeted path that leads straight to the purple tents at the end. Reign and Katy are just behind us, and I glance back to see Reign talking quietly to Katy, both of them very close.

Maybe I missed something there too.

"Is this place to lure humans?" I quietly ask Maddox.

His swirling red and black eyes look down at me. "There is always a dark side to beautiful magic, Riona."

I try not to flinch, thinking about how many humans would have been lured into this place to only die. It must be an easy way for them to get their prey. I know that Gillian likes to trade humans, young female virgin humans, if I remember right.

And we are here to trade with her.

I swallow the sickness rising in the back of my throat. A few witches are walking around, and every time they see us, they each pause and lower their heads in respect.

We head past them, straight towards the main tent. In the door of the main tent is a woman I met before and never liked her then; I certainly don't now because of the two humans on their knees at her side, chains wrapped around their neck, which are attached to her hands. The women look young, with bright red hair and slivers of silky clothing wrapped around them. Their pale skin is flawless except for the many cuts on their arms. I gulp, trying to push down the urge to demand Gillian let them go.

This is wrong.

Maddox looks down at me and ever so slightly shakes his head, warning me not to say anything, because we need this witch's help. If I agree, even when it leaves a sickening taste in my mouth, I can't say anything. I hate that I bite my tongue as we stop in front of her, in the line with Katy on my other side. Gillian comes nearer, stopping ever so close to me, the chains rattling behind her. Her red hair is up in a complicated weave with wavy strands in her face. The dress she has on is bright yellow, a disgusting yellow colour, and it's almost shiny, reflecting the lights. It's a beautiful dress in some sense, in the style flowing down to her knees with a gown, but the colour is too much.

"I have missed you, Riona Dark. It has been so long since I saw you," Gillian comments. Ah, she means the time she tried to trade for me like I am nothing more than a piece of gold.

"Hello, Gillian," I respond.

Her eyes flicker with amusement. "Human at heart, though not in blood. Do my slaves cause you offence?"

"Would it cause you offence to see witches from your coven on their knees in chains?" I ask.

She sighs. "Indeed, but you are not human. I will get rid of them."

With the flick of her hand, the humans stand and walk away, the chains disappearing from Gillian's hands. "A gesture of goodwill between us, Riona."

"And Riona is thankful for it," Reign interrupts before I can say anything. I don't blame him; nothing I was going to say would have been nice.

"Prince Reign. How troubling it must be to see your brother in love and that love bound to die as your mother did."

"And they say I'm the cruel one, Gillian. Your strikes are brutal, indeed," Maddox cuts in. "We've come to make a deal, like we discussed."

"Of course," she replies with a bloodthirsty grin. "But I wanted the Mad Prince and the promised girl. I am unaware of why Prince Reign and his... What are you?"

“Protection,” Katy states.

Gillian wiggles her nose. “Interesting.”

“We’re a family. We stick together,” Reign says. “Plus, I’ve always wanted to see the famous witches’ circus. My mother wrote so many stories about this place. My father often brought her here to see the shows, and she wrote how much she loved it.”

“I know,” Gillian replies, a secretive tone to her voice.

“You know, until one of you poisoned her and set up the curse,” Reign finishes.

“And my clan has been hunted ever since. The choice of one made up the fate of many,” Gillian tightly replies. Reign hit a sore spot, that’s for sure. “Do you have my ring?”

“Yes,” I say, and I lift my hand up to show her the ring. She reaches out for it, and before she can touch, I lower my hand and step back into Maddox’s waiting arm.

She smiles tightly at me. “You’ve changed since we last met on The Onyx.”

“Being kidnapped by witches does have that effect,” I reply.

“Indeed, it does,” she counters with a smile. “Trauma shapes our souls in many ways. Not all bad, but sometimes a little good shines through the cracks. If you can look for it, that is.”

“Sometimes trauma wakes you up to the actual world, Gillian. I’m sure many of the humans in your enslavement could vouch for that.”

If she notices my dig, she doesn’t react to it. “Come on in to my home, welcome guests.”

Gillian turns around, her long dress swirling in a dramatic way that suits her personality. “I have the most amazing meal planned for us girls and only the best virgin blood for the vampires.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Reign says while I feel like being sick as we follow her inside.

We walk into the largest tent, which is massive with dozens of bleacher seats all around a circled area that is covered in sand with a large purple mat in the centre. We head down the marked path to a glass table that has been set up with six silver seats. There are glasses of blood and piles of food set out, none of which looks appetizing or like anything I've seen before. We all sit down at the table, and Gillian decides to sit opposite me. But her eyes flick between the curse on my hand and the ring on my other as I lay them flat on the cold glass, the coldness waking me up just a little.

"Shall we get to the point," Maddox says, leaning back in his seat and placing his hand on my knee.

"Not so mad anymore, are we?"

"As long as Riona is safe, no," he replies and tilts his head to the side. "But if anyone touches her...well, I can't be held accountable for my...actions."

"Young love. Sickening, isn't it?" she says to Reign, who doesn't reply.

"I want to know how to stop the curse, Gillian," I say.

She sighs and twirls the one strand of hair by her pale cheek. "Business it is then. Vampires are never fun," she pouts. "The curse is not easy to break. You need the blood of the original caster, which unfortunately, she disappeared not long after performing the curse."

"Of course you would need that," Maddox mutters.

"She was killed, and I have no more of her blood in my clan," she says, and my stomach drops.

"My father killed her, and I doubt there is anything left," Reign replies.

"I'm aware," Gillian says, distaste leaking through her words. "Luckily for you, she had a blood sister."

"Where is she?" I ask, leaning forward.

"Oh, dead," Gillian says, waving her hand. "But before she was killed, she had a daughter who's still alive. Unfortunately for you, she's not with our clan, and she left a long time ago as a young child."

“How did she leave as a child?”

“We aren’t the best at watching our children, let alone the ones with mummy issues,” Gillian says. “She had issues.”

“Where is she?” Maddox asks, and I can hear him getting frustrated.

“I’m not entirely sure where she is, but we’ll need to find her and get her blood. I am certain she is alive. Once we get her blood, I can cast an extremely powerful spell. It will take a lot from me and others.”

“No price is too high,” Maddox replies.

“This spell means it will take every ounce of magic that I have. Unlike anything else. I will need sacrifices. I mean, we will need a hell of a lot of sacrifices.”

“Human? Vampire? Animal?” Katy asks.

“Humans preferred,” she replies with a grin.

“No one’s being sacrificed for me,” I interrupt and look at Maddox. “I mean it.”

“Fine,” Gillian grumbles. “Once the curse is gone, your life will be unbalanced. That is the whole point of the curse. It made it impossible to live with because it’s a dark magic that takes and leaves a void. The magic of this curse is so rare, and I can only guess the outcome of removing it. It was cast on the vampire queen, dear mother, and it bounced so that her child she was carrying would also carry the mark of this curse. That is powerful, dark and evil magic.”

“How long do we have to find this girl?” Maddox asks. “And do you know approximately where she went? Can you find out exactly? We’ll have everyone from our island looking.”

“I will send you all the information I have in exchange for the ring and several spells to search for her,” Gillian responds, and Maddox nods.

“Can I ask why you want the ring?” I ask, taking it off my hand slowly and holding it up in front of me. “You never said.”

“Aren’t you the nosy little one?” she replies. “But I like you, so I will tell my truth in exchange for a promise.”

“What promise?”

“I want a new alliance and a promise my people will not be hunted by vampires for the death of the old queen any longer.”

“Agreed,” Maddox quickly answers. “As long as no more curses are cast and you help us correct the curse made, which was your fault.”

“Perfect. I’ll explain that to you from the beginning,” she starts. “Every witch clan has a magical object, something their ancestors were given at the very start of our creation. For most people, it’s something little, something precious, and it doesn’t do much. It’s not got an ounce of magic. It doesn’t do anything for me except for the sentimental value because it is an heirloom of ours. My oldest ancestor wore it, and for us, it means everything.”

“How did my father get such an important ring?” Maddox asks.

“My mother, Melanie, had a relationship with your father. The same witch who set the curse, and that was why she did it.”

“Bullshit,” Reign shouts.

“I’m sure he did not tell you the truth, but it is the truth, and that witch was my mother. I knew, I saw them together several times.”

“You’re lying,” Reign interrupts, slamming his hand on the table.

Maddox is silent. Too silent. In the blink of an eye, he is behind Gillian on the table, a knife to her throat.

“Maddox!” I shout, lurching across the table. “I can see into her mind and know if she is telling the truth. Let me find out.”

Maddox slowly moves his eyes to me. “Let Riona in your mind, or you die, witch.”

“And we were all just making friends,” Gillian bites out as I get up and go around the table. Maddox moves to the side a little, and I place my hands on

Gillian's head and relax my mind, searching hers instead. I see a flash of images of a man, the very image of Reign and Maddox combined, kissing a red-haired witch before I'm pushed out. I stumble back a little and open my eyes, seeing Maddox first.

"She is telling the truth," I say. This is going to hurt them. They have to accept their father had far more to do with their mother's death than we knew. Maddox lowers his knife and comes to me.

"He loved our mother," Reign growls.

"Not that much," Gillian says, clearing her throat. "He was in a relationship with my mother, and it was a toxic one. It ruined my entire family."

"Why?" I ask.

"Before she set the curse. When he met your mother, he completely left my mother like dried meat. He left many of his mistresses for her. He never cheated on the queen as far as I know, I will say that. But he was definitely not as virtuous as what he might claim. And he never did the right thing."

The room falls silent.

"My mother, you know, she was upset, to say the least. Mostly because she had his child, and the child died young. Unfortunately, being a witch and vampire, they never survive."

"We had a sibling that died?" Maddox asks. "Why wouldn't he tell us?"

"Because he never claimed the child. Never came to see her or help at all," Gillian replies. "So when the child died, the little girl, everything in hell broke loose. I knew she was going to do something because she was studying all of the time, and I warned her not to, but I did not think she would cast that curse. I didn't know she could do that kind of dark magic. Everything went wrong."

"For every race, it seems," Reign comments, but I can tell he is shocked to his core.

"Why doesn't your blood work then? Surely if we need the blood of the witch who cast the curse, then yours would do," I ask.

“I’m adopted, unfortunately. Therefore, I share no blood tie,” she replies, “or I would help.”

“We’ll find this cousin of yours,” Maddox says, carefully taking the ring off me, and holds it out in the flat of his palm. Gillian stands up off the chair and lifts her hand. The ring floats out of his hand as she uses her magic to float it onto her middle finger. We’re all silent as she stares at the ring, and I feel the love and connection she has for it.

We may never get along due to her treating humans like slaves and that big barrier between us, but I can at least have an acceptable conversation with her and hope in the future we can change her attitude towards humans.

Possibly.

“Will you stay for dinner and a party?” she asks, smiling as Reign and Katy stand.

“No. Send us all the information, and we will leave,” Reign says.

“You dressed up so lovely, at least for the circus. It starts soon, and you must stay. It’s a magical night,” Gillian replies.

“It won’t be the magic that my Riona will enjoy, I’m sure,” Maddox says, and Gillian inclines her head.

“We will stay,” Reign surprises me by saying. “Katy and I.”

“We will?” Katy asks, and Reign looks down at her, nodding once.

“There is a portal outside for whoever needs to leave. Have a lovely night,” Gillian says, looking directly at me as Maddox starts guiding me out of the tent and towards the entrance. We head outside, and right in front of us is a door, which opens for us to walk through. I go through first and come out on the snow outside the castle, the cold air welcoming. Maddox takes my hand and lifts it, kissing my knuckles before leading me into our home. We go through the corridor and to the study, and Maddox closes the door behind us.

“Marry me, Riona.”

His statement, less of a question, jolts me.

I turn around to see him on his knees in front of me, and my heart pounds so quickly I think it might burst. “The crystals are my ring, and my heart is yours. I want you as my mate, as my partner in anything that comes for us. I want to spend my forever with you, Riona.”

I take a step forward and cup his face. “You have always been my beginning, my end and my future wrapped in one. The answer is yes.”

Maddox grins as I lean down and kiss him, and he picks me up, spinning me around in his arms, and I laugh.

“You somehow got me to wear our engagement crystals without even asking me.”

“I’m cocky, what can I say,” he replies.

“I love you,” I tell him as he carries me across the room, hopefully to our bedroom.

“And, my mate, I love you more,” he tells me and kisses me deeply, passionately. I know I will love him forever. No matter what comes for us.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-ONE



“Dig them in there, if you do not mind,” I instruct Ann as she lifts the roses we had delivered this morning from the city. The roses are beautiful shades of vivid red and crystal white. For the last two weeks, Ann has been a really wonderful help down here in the greenhouse. She doesn’t talk to me much, mostly brief conversations here and there about food or normal things. But one thing we agree on is that people shouldn’t be forced to be food.

One of the many reasons the vampires would not like me as their queen. I’d change the world under their feet.

As I dig in the white roses in front of me, my mind drifts to the piles of gifts, flowers and three horses I have been sent from the people of The Onyx. Reign and Maddox claim they are calling me the saviour of The Onyx. The human queen.

I’ve saved no one.

“I wondered if these flowers are native to The Onyx. I’ve not seen them before,” Ann says, touching the blue glowing petals of flowers that were already here.

“The Quartz has black trees, and I do not think I’ve seen those before either. The plants here must react to the magic,” I suggest, watching her closely. Ann is broken and lost. I do not know how to fix it other than to sit and do gardening with her. She certainly has a knack for it. We finish up the seven planters that are all around the windows with climbers and roses, making it

all look beautiful and bright. Like a painting of red and white. Vivid and enchanting at the same time. It fits the mood of this island.

There isn't much left to do in here, I notice as I look around. Now there's just one corner that needs digging out and replanting, plus a few bags of rubbish to be taken out. Overall, I think it's getting back to what it used to be for the old queen. I often wonder if she would have liked how we have made it in here. Ann sits down on the fountain's edge, wiping soil from her hands, and looks up at me.

"Can I go now?" she quietly asks.

"You do not have to come here," I reply to her.

"I wanted to help, do not get me wrong. I enjoy coming here," she replies. "But I'm just a bit bored. Maybe I could do, like, cleaning or something? There's only one guy here helping out, and he looks so tired. I feel bad and bored sitting in my room all day after this."

"If you'd like that, then sure," I say. I will double check with Maddox later, but we have talked about the lack of people in the castle to help out. After Cross betrayed him, he hasn't hired anyone, and I do not blame him. Maddox had trust issues before Cross, and now he straight up doesn't trust many people.

She stands up straight, smiling. "Yes, I would. I'll go find Paul and get a chart of things to do."

"Alright," I smile at her. She runs out of the room, looking happier than I've seen her in weeks. Maybe she just needs something to do. I remember how bored I was in this castle until I found the greenhouse and Maddox showed me his painting room. I go back down on my knees and start pulling out the weeds in the one section I've got left to do.

I've pulled out about five of the large weeds when I hear a noise outside. A magical noise that sounds like fire and water swirling around. I get up to go look out the window to see if I can identify the source. It's loud, penetrating through the walls and the mountain itself. The castle suddenly shakes while the floor beneath me throws me off balance, and I land harshly on my side. I crawl back onto my feet as the shaking stops before instantly running

straight towards the front of the castle, shouting for Maddox as I go. Reign bumps into me at the bottom of the staircase, and we run out together to find dozens of women in the snow. Most of them are naked, some of them have dresses on. I recognise the one right at the front, Natalia, as she lifts her eyes and looks at me.

Something is seriously wrong.

All the sirens are injured, covered in blood, dust and ash while soaking wet. There must be at least a hundred sirens here.

I walk straight up to Natalia and pick her up with my arm under hers. She stands shakily, so I stay close to her side, blood freely running down the side of her face, and her big blue eyes seem pained.

“I’ve got you, lean on me,” I softly tell her. “What on earth happened?”

“My clans were attacked. I went to save them...what was left,” she starts, her voice clogged with pain. I thought sirens couldn’t feel? Maybe they can mourn the loss of family in a way I can’t understand.

“Just the smaller clans, not your city?” Reign asks.

“Yes. We have fourteen smaller clans, and they were all attacked at the same time. I protected my city with our magic, making it impossible for anyone to get in. I can sense my city now, it is being attacked, but nothing is getting through the barriers. It won’t. They are evacuating to our hideout just in case,” she quickly explains. “I had to come here. I couldn’t get back to the city with so many of them around.”

“I’m so sorry,” I tell her, my voice clogged with emotion. “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling.”

“Lost and angry,” she tightly answers. “I had to come here. Will you help us?”

I look up at Reign just as Maddox appears at his side. Maddox’s shoulder-length hair is clipped back, and the red crystals bring out the red in his eyes as he looks around at everything. Dressed in a black silk shirt, black trousers, heavy boots, he looks too perfect for the surrounding disaster. I

have to drag my eyes from Maddox and the desire swirling in my lower stomach for him.

“Seems like I’m late to the party,” Maddox comments. “Natalia, you are welcome here.”

“Of course we’ll help you,” I say, agreeing with Maddox. “Let’s just get you inside and the—”

“Wait,” Maddox interrupts. “What and who attacked you? Witches?”

“Demons on fire,” a siren with light blonde hair speaks as she limps over to us. She stands up straight, completely naked, and Reign offers her his cloak to cover her shoulders and pretty much everything else. She doesn’t seem bothered by it but takes the cloak. I keep my face on hers, watching her grey eyes.

“Demons?” I ask, a sinking feeling brewing in my gut.

“Our island was half underwater and a beautiful island on top. We are sirens of peace and silence,” she whispers. Natalia reaches over and places her hand on her cheek for a moment. They stare at each other before Natalia lowers her hand. “They burnt our island from the top so we couldn’t return upwards. But then they dived underwater, and they were still on fire, under the water. They killed so many of us.”

I look around the crowd at the sirens. What’s left of their clan isn’t many, and all of them are in a terrible state. Most of the sirens are young, but a few have grey hair and look destroyed. They are mourning, and they are angry. I can feel it radiating off them. There’s one little child, who I think is a hellcaster, but she feels different. Strange. I walk straight up to her and kneel.

“Was it our kind that came?” I ask her, noticing her bright orange hair and round face. I think she is about ten, and her small white dress is covered in her blood and ash. The worst part is, I can see nothing but terror in her eyes. Not for me...but for what she has seen.

She nods once, her eyes wide and frightened, before she curls into the siren that’s next to her. I go back to Natalia, and I wrap my arm under her

shoulders, helping her limp into the house. Blood drops on the steps behind us as she passes them, and she grunts in pain as we go up the steps.

“We will heal soon. We need about half an hour for our strong ones. Our weak need longer,” she explains. “When the demons have gone, I can get them back to the sea, and I can find my people.”

“You’re safe here for as long as you need it.”

“For now, we just need protection,” she replies. “I love the new confidence you hold. It is refreshing.”

“I think we should focus on you right now,” I suggest with a smile as we finally get up the steps.

“My siren detests being weak, but I had to fight so many of them. I’m too weak.”

“I understand,” I softly tell her. “I promise you’ll be safe here.”

“You shouldn’t promise a woman of the sea anything, Riona Dark,” she murmurs to me. “Dangerous.”

“Noted,” I reply.

Maddox catches my eye as I look back, and I feel everything he isn’t saying: Be careful. I’m here.

I carry on walking with Natalia through the doors and into the castle. I shout through the house as I get through the door.

“Ann? Anyone?” I yell. Ann and Paul are stood at the top with Austin and Arlo nearby. Austin is busy shoving a shirt back on. “Can you get some blankets and clothes? Anything for the sirens outside? Austin and Arlo, can you carry some of them in? A lot of them are injured.”

“On it,” Ann shouts back. Arlo and Austin move quickly down the stairs and hurry past me as I head to the study with Natalia. I set her down on the sofa by the roaring fireplace. She lies down, her face scrunched up in pain. I tuck some of the hair behind her ear so she can see, glancing at the terrible cut on the side of her face. It’s slowly healing, closing up, but is probably going to take a while.

“What did you say to the child?”

I’m careful with my answer. “I asked her if she thought the demons were like her. Hellcasters.”

“Like you,” she replies. “Yes, the demons are, and you can’t stop them. You can’t stop your father.”

“I’m going to try,” I admit. “For Maddox and my family. For the vampires.”

“You sound like a queen.”

“I would put Maddox before anything and anyone else. I can’t be a queen. I won’t ever stop loving him enough to devote my life to it.”

“That’s the thing about being a leader, Riona,” she whispers, picking up my hand. “You become two people. The one the public see and worship, who does anything needed to keep their lives safe and content. Then there is the other one, and she can be whoever you want. That one is for you.”

“I’ve never thought about it like that,” I say, letting her hand go. “Do you think the witches have been attacked, or is it just the sirens?”

“If I planned to take over the world, I’d make sure all three of the most powerful creatures on it were gone at the same time,” she suggests. “I must close my eyes and rest. I am in extreme pain.”

“Rest,” I say. “Thank you for your warning.”

I turn away from her and watch for a second as Maddox carries a siren wrapped in a red blanket and gently places her on the chair.

“We need to get Ember,” I tell Maddox as he walks to me, frowning. “She can sense if the hellcasters are coming. Austin and I can’t do that; I think it’s a special gift of hers alone. She knows far in advance, and we could use that in case the hellcasters plan to come here next.”

“Agreed,” he tensely replies before he walks over to the wall where there is a plain bookcase. Maddox pulls out a book, and the bookcase slides apart with a snap, and a wall comes forward in a hurry that is littered with weapons and two books that are in white glowing chains, held to the wall. The books wiggle and move on their own. Creepy. I’m quite surprised to

see anything like modern technology here, considering he likes the older things in life. Though I know he has cars hidden in bunkers around the island and apparently a helicopter. Maddox picks up two glowing gold swords off the wall and clips them onto a halter that goes on his back to hold them there. For a few moments, he equips himself with two guns and a row of small, sharp stars. Finally finished, now he looks sexier than ever. He picks up another dagger that glows blue and brings it over to me with a belt for it and a holder. He wraps the belt around me and pulls it tight, plastering my body to his in the same moment, and I gasp.

“Anyone you do not know touches you, stab them. I want to see my violent little human do what she does best. Got it?”

“I will do anything I need to,” I confirm for him, knowing he needs to hear it, or he will lock me up somewhere safe, where the world can’t touch me. His urge to protect me, to possess my soul as his and never let me get hurt, is hard for him to ignore. I know because I feel it too. I wish I could protect Maddox from the world around us, but our love isn’t easy.

His eyes search mine, an understanding building between us before he flashes me one of his dangerously sexy smiles that are terrifying to anyone but me. “Let’s go.”

“We should take a car,” I suggest.

“There wasn’t time to get mine out, and fuck knows where Reign is for his keys,” Maddox says, taking my hand as we wind past Austin and Arlo as they carry in more of the sirens in blankets. “We’re going to run.”

“You are joking, right?” I ask as we get outside, the cold air blowing around me, and I notice this time that my thin black T-shirt and navy skinny jeans aren’t doing much to stop the cold affecting me. Reign is tying a thin piece of fabric around a siren’s arm, stopping it from bleeding as we walk to him.

“What is it?” Reign asks, finishing the knot.

Maddox quickly explains what I learnt from Natalia and how we think there is a threat of the hellcasters coming to us next. Reign crosses his arms as he faces us.

“Then you two need to do everything you can to protect the island,” he suggests. “Go to Ember, you are right, she knows how to sense them.”

“We need to bring her back here so she can warn us, and I think we should bring the other hellcaster children here, too,” I suggest. “They’re not safe out there on their own.”

“Go,” Reign says. “I can deal with everything here and protect the sirens.”

Maddox takes my hand as we walk away from the sirens, and Reign shouts, “Brother, for god’s sake, take my car.”

I turn to see Reign throw the keys across the space between us. Maddox effortlessly catches the keys in the air. “Thank you, brother.”

They look at each other for a moment, and I feel like the past between them is healing. Just a little at a time. Family is strange like that. You can always build on a relationship with your family if both of you are willing to fight for it. Blood comes first. Always. Even when the witches have betrayed me, a part of me wants to make amends with them somehow and get to know my cousin, Tove. I glance at the castle where my brother currently is. We haven’t said more than a few words to each other for weeks, and I want to fix us, I just do not know how. I can’t trust him.

“Do not scratch my car,” Reign warns with a small smile.

Maddox smirks. “I would never do such a thing.”

I lean in. “Lies.”

Maddox laughs, wrapping his hand around my waist and pulling me in to kiss my cheek. I love his laugh; it radiates through me like a wave.

Maddox unlocks the Jeep, and I climb into the passenger’s side as he gets into the driver’s side, and I do up my seat belt.

A thought makes me pause as he puts the key in. “Maddox, do you know how to drive?”

“I haven’t driven in about ten years, but I’m sure it’s just like riding a bike. You do not forget,” he calmly replies.

I can see why Reign was worried.

“I do not think—”

Maddox speeds off down the road like an absolute lunatic, turning around the corner about halfway down the road without slowing.

My heart pounds in my chest as I close my eyes. This reminds me of Reign and how fast he used to drive down this mountain. “Do remember, I’m human.”

He laughs like a lunatic. “You’re not human, darling.”

We go speeding down the roads of the forest once we leave the mountain, and I think we take about half an hour before we get to where the bunker is. Ember is stood outside with the other five children. They all have brown coats and white hats on, and I can tell something is wrong right away as Ember runs over to the car.

“They are coming.”

CHAPTER
FIFTY-TWO



“Who is coming?” I demand, letting Ember run to me, and she hugs me first. As much as I want to tell her everything will be okay and just hold her, I can’t. I need to know what is coming for us.

“I w-wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t find you!” she says, her voice a small outburst. “I didn’t want to go far from the bunker. I was hoping you’d come to me.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” I gently remind her. “Who is coming?”

“The hellcaster army. Thousands of them,” she admits, her eyes wide and frightened. “They kill people.”

“You have nothing to worry about. We are here to take you to the castle, and I have friends there who will keep you safe. I promise,” I say. “But I need you to get in the back of the car with your friends.”

“I’m scared. I can sense them,” she whispers. “They want death.”

“Thank you, Ember. But we’ve got this,” I softly tell her.

“This is our island, and you are one of my people. No hellcaster army is going to hurt you,” Maddox leans over the seat and firmly tells her. She lifts her head a little higher and nods, almost bowing at Maddox before running back to her friends. I open the back doors for them as they come over a few seconds later. As I climb back into my seat, all the girls get into the back,

strapping themselves into the seat belts. Three of them get in the back seat, and the other two sit on the seats in the boot.

“Hold on,” Maddox instructs them as the final door slams shut.

“When we get back to the castle—” I start to tell Maddox when flames start appearing in front of the car, slowly making the shape of a person. I’ve seen this before.

“Hellcasters are here,” Ember whispers, her voice fearful. I wish I could make it better for her, but one thing is certain. Whoever this is, is not touching her.

The flames split and make the shape of three men. Then the flames fade around their bodies until there are actually men, covered in leather and flames, their eyes like black pits, which match the colour of their short hair. On their forehead is a strange black mark that looks like a snake wrapped around ivy and roses.

I have no doubt it’s my father’s mark. The mark of a hellcaster.

“Stay in the car, darling. I have things to kill,” Maddox says. There’s absolutely no way I’m going to stay in the car. These are my people, and the hellfire can’t actually hurt me. They don’t seem to have any weapons on them, and I might not be able to fight, but I’m not powerless. I pull out the dagger, which seems to feel like it lights up my entire arm as Maddox opens the door.

“These weapons were created from the orb. The only three in existence,” Maddox tells me, and he climbs out. Even though part of me is scared, I open the door and get out. Maddox is not walking into this on his own, and I think he always knew it. That’s why he gave me the dagger. I walk over to Maddox’s side when he stops not far from them.

I stand a few feet back as Maddox makes that final walk over and pulls two of the swords out as he goes. My mind slows the whole thing down until all I can see is Maddox, with his swords, fighting for the good side for once.

My vampire.

The man I’m in love with.

My broken but pure prince. Even if he was carved from the darkness, doesn't mean his soul can't be good. Can't be healed.

Maddox lets the sword tips just gently skirt against the dry leaves on the floor as he walks over step by step. The wind howls, the thick pine smell of the forest mixes with the smoke coming from the hellcasters, and I barely feel the cold as I hold my breath, needing to see Maddox win. The hellcasters look at Maddox like he isn't a threat. Foolish hellcasters. They smile at him just before they decide to attack. I flinch as two of them quickly circle Maddox, but he's even quicker, using his sword to swing a hit right through the shoulder of one of the hellcasters. The man roars, falling backwards. Maddox elbows him hard in the face, and I hear the bones crunch before he jumps over his back, spinning round to hit the other one in the chest.

Everything happens in seconds. A blink of an eye. Maddox is a machine.

The hellcaster grabs at Maddox, who effortlessly moves out of the way and returns with a punch. He smacks the hellcaster hard in the face, knocking him to the ground. The minute he lands, Maddox swings one of his swords and chops his head. I look away, feeling hot blood splatter against my legs.

The last hellcaster looks at his fallen friends and takes a step back. Maddox chuckles, swinging his sword around in his hand in a fancy way while covered in blood and a maniacal smirk on his face. Why is he always covered in blood and smiling? "Don't run, I wanted us to be friends!"

The man stops, still like a statue, and I glance at Maddox. He sighs and starts slowly walking towards the hellcaster. Suddenly he turns around and blasts out a wall of hellfire towards Maddox. Before I know what I'm doing, I hold my hands up and pull the fire towards me. The hellfire changes direction, slamming into my body like a vacuum. I suck all the hellfire out of the area, straight into my body, stopping it from ever touching Maddox.

The man stares at me in shock and anger, all of it burning in his eyes. "You will—"

He is cut off as Maddox's sword slams into his neck. The hellcaster collapses onto the floor, and I look over as two of the hellcasters' bodies

change into red piles of ash before my eyes.

I breathe in a shaky breath now the threat is gone, feeling the hellfire coursing through my body.

Maddox grabs his sword from the hellcaster, which is disappearing into red dust, and slides them back into his holder on his way back to me.

Instantly I see the burns on his arm, the missing bits of black shirt and cloak, which are burnt in places. “It hurts you.”

“But not you,” he gently replies, cupping my face. “That was dangerous and reckless. It could have hurt you.”

“You have a weird way of saying thank you,” I reply, arching an eyebrow. He chuckles and kisses me softly.

“Thank you, Riona Dark. My violent little human.”

“We should get out of here,” I say with a sigh when he kisses me one more time, well aware five pairs of little eyes are on us, and I doubt they aren’t scared at this point, watching us fight.

We both climb back into the car a few moments later, and I turn back, looking at the children. Two boys are huddled together, silent with wide eyes, and the three girls are close, with Ember in the middle. Ember’s head is held high, and she doesn’t look frightened at all. I’m oddly proud of her. Maddox turns the engine on and starts driving straight back up the island mountain and to our home.

The first sign something is wrong comes when we get halfway up the mountain, and I look out to see nothing but thick black clouds of smoke over the city. The further we climb, the more I see and realise the city is on fire in so many places. Fearfully, I roll the window open, and the sounds of echoing screams fill the air.

“Fuck,” Maddox growls, slamming his hands on the wheel.

I place my hand on his tensed arm as he steers, my heart dropping in my chest. It sounds like the entire city is dying. The Onyx is falling. I’ve seen

this before, and the next time, I'm in the city, and it burns all around me. That's what I saw.

Then I die.

"There're loads of them here. Hundreds of thousands," Ember fearfully tells me. "People are going to get hurt."

Maddox and I look at each other, a silent understanding brewing between us. We have to try and save whoever we can. Bane is coming for me and the power of the orbs.

Just as we come into view of the castle, something slams hard into the Jeep. I scream with the children as the Jeep rolls a few times and stops upside down right on the edge of the mountain. My hair hangs down around my face, and I look down at the huge drop right in front of me, only blocked by the window.

Maddox rips my seat belt off, pulling me into his arms. He breaks the window next to him with his elbow, and I climb out, standing up just as Maddox climbs out next. A sphere of fire flies past my head, narrowly missing me and hitting the car. A scream dies in my throat as the car explodes in flames, and I go flying backwards, sliding across the snow until I stop.

"Ember!" I scream, climbing on my feet. The flame-covered door to the car swings open, and one of the children climbs out, unharmed from the fire. All five of them get out, and I breathe a sigh of relief when only their clothes are burning. I rush over and hold my hand out, easily pulling the little amount of hellfire to me. I look back to see Maddox is ripping out the heart of the hellcaster who hit us, and I stand in the way so the children can't see. In front of the castle are at least a hundred hellcasters, and fighting them is everything in the castle, even Tove. Ann and Paul are by the door, handing out weapons. Reign and Austin are working together, ripping apart the hellcasters with magic and sheer force. Katy is jumping from one hellcaster to the next, a line of dead hearts in the snow to show her path, and Tove is holding them still for Katy with her magic. Arlo comes running out of the castle, seeing us, and he nods my way.

“All of you have been so brave, and I need you to be for a little longer. I need you to go into the castle and find somewhere to hide. Anywhere,” I softly tell the kids.

“I’ve got them,” Arlo shouts over, coming closer. He has a blood-covered sword in his hand. “I’m shit with a sword, but it’s the best I got.”

“Take them to the back of the castle and hide,” I tell him, and before he goes, I grab his arm. “I was surprised when I saw you and Austin, but it doesn’t mean I’m not happy for you both. If we all survive this, I want to know every detail.”

Arlo smiles at me. “I always thought Austin was my best friend, but maybe I had two.”

“You did. You do,” I tell him, wiping stray tears away and clearing my throat. Ember looks up at me. “I will see you soon.”

Ember runs to me and hugs me tightly. “Don’t die, because you’re my friend.”

I can’t promise her anything, but thankfully she lets me go and runs with Arlo and the others up to the castle. Maddox drags a hellcaster across the ground to me and lets go, only to place the tip of his sword under his chin. “Where is Bane?”

The hellcaster just starts laughing. “Coming for the power to free us all.”

“When?” I demand.

He turns his eyes to me before looking over at the city, directly in the middle of it. “He is here.”

The second he says it, I feel something I never have before. Like a giant pit of nothingness has opened up in my stomach and it’s growing. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I turn and look across the battlefield to see my brother staring at me, the same doomed look in his eyes.

“My father is on The Onyx. It’s too late.”

CHAPTER
FIFTY-THREE



“We need to go to him.”

Maddox pulls his gaze from the city on fire and looks at me like I’ve gone completely insane. Every instinct of mine is telling me to run, and I get why that would be his first thought instead of going right into the fight.

His eyes darken. “No.”

I breathe in a long, shaky breath as I meet his serious gaze. “We are all they have. You know what it’s like to fight a battle you can’t win. You fought it every day inside your own mind. This fight is real, and we can’t leave them. I can’t and I know you won’t either. We all make choices in our lives, and most choices are easy or hard, and affect very little. This choice we make, right here, as The Onyx burns, will define us forever, Maddox.”

I glance over at the fighting going on around us, the absolute chaos that the hellcasters are causing. My family, friends and everyone I love is here, fighting for The Onyx and their lives. They have made their choice, and I know that the only person who can stop this is my father. He’s the only one who will stop the army if he gets what he wants.

Me.

I walk a few steps towards Maddox, and I place my hands on his chest as I look up at him.

My dark prince.

Maddox looks down at me like he'd fight the entire world if I asked it of him. I'd fight it too.

"When you walked into my life, I was pure chaos wrapped in a world of pain," he tells me, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. "I couldn't see past it to even care about the world, and then you appeared. The first moment I saw you in that prison cell, I wanted to claim you and possess your soul. I was addicted from one glance, and I knew you'd change me. I wanted you to. I never expected to fall in love as you saved me."

He pauses and runs his finger down my cheek. "We will save them. Together we can do anything. You saved me, after all."

"Maddox." Maddox firmly lays his hands around the back of my neck, and he pulls our faces together, our foreheads touching, our breaths mixing as one. Everything seems to drift away, like nothing else is happening in the world around us. It's just me and him stood here in the middle of this battlefield.

Falling deeper in love. Making a connection we have stronger than ever in just a few seconds.

Sometimes it just feels like it's me and him, like we were just made to face the entire world together, because it always seems to come down to us. I know it's because of who I am and because of who he is, we can't be normal. We can't stand on a beach somewhere, pretending that we're normal people mixing in with the crowd of humans. We were both born for something far more than I think we've ever realised.

He's the darkness to my soul, and I'm the light to his.

We will do anything to save The Onyx and all the people there on it, because I might not choose to be a ruler or want to be the queen, but I cannot have people die when I can help. There is a difference between embracing the darkness and becoming lost in it. When I came to this island at first, I hated all the misery I saw. The Onyx came with pain, so much death and untold destruction. I saw so many things that just tore my heart into pieces, and I've realised that, yes, this world is more brutal but not

completely lost. It doesn't mean it can't be good, because it can be. I'm not going to let my father just destroy it.

"We should go," Maddox eventually says, forcing me to leave this moment when I'd happily stay like this until I die.

"Hold on, I'm coming with you," Austin shouts over, a trail of flames following him. "The final hellcasters here are running, and Katy is dealing with them. Our father needs to be stopped."

"Glad to have you," I tightly say.

Austin waves his hand, and hellfire appears in a circle before it spins around. It keeps spinning and spinning until it makes an archway that touches the ground and melts the snow. It looks almost like there's nothing in there for a few seconds before someone else's house appears in the light.

I grab Austin's arm to stop him from walking through the portal, and he turns to look at me as I let go.

"Will he hurt you for not bringing me to him?" I question. I need to know what we are walking into and if Austin should go at all.

"We're family, and no matter if he shares our blood, he won't get between us or ever get me to hurt you," Austin says. "I'm always on your side."

"You won't let me read you," I remind him.

"I won't let you look into my head because you see enough horrors on this island, and what I saw haunts me. Trust me, sis. I'm protecting you."

"I trust you, but if you betray me, Austin, we won't come back from it," I warn him. "I'm not who I was before."

"I can see that," he replies, looking between Maddox and me. "You were always strong, sis, but with him at your side, you're unstoppable."

Austin turns and walks into the portal, and I grip Maddox's hand tightly as he leads me after Austin. We come out into a small house in the middle of the city, and right away I find out the never-ending, pain-filled screams are so much worse here. Blasts make my ears ring as they go off in the

distance, and not long after, I hear the sound of brick falling, more screams, and the roar of fire.

The smoke makes it impossible not to cough on it as it strangles me in its fog. The minute that we step through the portal and it snaps shut behind me, the smoke and ash burns my eyes. We head towards the broken stairs and go straight down into a much smaller room where the door has been knocked open. The couch is on fire, and two beautiful wooden dressers are lit up too, ruining what would have been a lovely home. I can only look at the paintings of three women and one man on the mantelpiece for a second before it burns into nothing but dust. Outside the house, flames are destroying the bushes and trees that once made the city so beautiful and turning everything into ash.

We head outside, my hand tightly clasped in Maddox's, and find there's just nothing but chaos with injured vampires and humans running around hiding from the hellcasters chasing them. Two hellcasters run after a woman who heads our way. Maddox and Austin step aside and plaster my body to the door, letting her into the house. She doesn't even look our way. The hellcasters run right to us. Maddox moves fast into their path and slams his hands through their chests at the same time. Their eyes go wide as Maddox pulls out their hearts and drops them to the ground just before their bodies collapse in a heap, and Maddox nods his head to the side where there is a long alleyway.

"He is close," I say, knowing it's true. My father almost feels like an empty pit of nothingness, spreading across the city. Every instinct in me wants to go to him and destroy him in the same beat.

Shooting pain stretches up my arm, and I gasp, leaning against the wall as I grab my arm. I push up my sleeve as Maddox moves in front of me, picking up my arm. The white veins are crawling up my skin, way past my elbow, and everything spins as I get my breath back.

"It's getting worse," Maddox grits out. "That fucking witch needs to hurry up."

"I'm okay," I reassure him. "We have roughly eight months left."

My reassurance seems to fall on deaf ears as he turns away from me and punches the wall, knocking several bricks out. I watch his tense back, feeling his anger and pain mirroring my own.

Austin's eyes meet mine as I straighten up and stand tall. His eyes flicker to the veins on my arm. "Bane might know how to stop it."

"I will never trade answers with him," I say, meaning it. "You don't make a deal with the literal devil and not get burned. I'm not burning myself to live longer when the price will be too high."

"Nothing is too high," Maddox cuts in. "Where is this bastard?"

We go to the other side of the alleyway, and Austin peeks around before turning back to me. "He's here."

Nervous is an understatement as I peek around the corner. There's a man stood in the middle of dozens of dead bodies, both vampires and d'vampires who are littered around him almost in a circle shape. Their blood lines the cobbled streets, slipping between the stones like water. He wears a dark gold cloak that falls from his shoulders, off black clips, all the way down to his feet. Underneath that, he wears heavy black leather boots, dark trousers and a darker shirt.

He has a long, neatly trimmed beard that is the same colour as his light brown hair that looks like it is blond tipped. His eyes are black, just completely black as he searches around him, looking for something.

He turns our way, clearly sensing us, and I step out into full view, knowing there's no point hiding. I walk straight out into the opening, hearing Maddox swear under his breath before following us.

"Whoa, look who it is," my father exclaims loudly and deeply, holding his hands out with a smirk of a smile, flashing two silver sharpened teeth. Three thin gold cuffs line his arm, each of them glowing, and they're covered in the symbols I've seen on the hellcasters' heads. I feel the power radiating from them.

"You're not welcome here," I say, stepping over the ash piled near my feet. "It's about time you leave."

“That isn’t the acceptable way that a wayward daughter, who I’ve never met, should greet me.”

“I have a dad, and he isn’t you.”

He takes one step closer. “I am your father; blood links us, child.”

“I prefer water.”

His eyes narrow as he steps over the bodies like they are nothing, even kicking a vampire to the side, and the body rolls down the street. I try to ignore it and try not to react, but I’m sure he sees the disgust in my eyes. “You look just like your mother.”

“What do you want?”

“Oh, don’t play stupid,” he counters and looks at Austin. “Unless she is actually stupid?”

“Bane—”

Austin is cut off when Bane growls low, the sound vibrating the ash and snow on the ground between us.

“You call me father, or I will make you once more,” Bane instructs.

The tension is building until Maddox starts laughing. A deep, humourless laugh that draws all our attention.

“The Mad Prince. You keep interesting company, daughter.”

“I would claim I’m the best company you can buy, but alas, I can’t be bought,” Maddox replies and reaches above him, pulling out his swords. “And you’re on the wrong fucking island.”

“Technically, I’m not,” Bane replies, humour lacing his voice. “The orbs are here, and they belong to me. They were created for me.”

“They were created to keep you locked up,” I counter.

“Witches do love their tales, don’t they?” Bane sighs. “They were created in my city, and they were made as gifts for me by a god. They are my powers, and they were made to allow me and my people to leave permanently rather

than random days when the gods' magic can be felt. Earth is our destination. We could all be friends."

"I highly doubt that," I say. "And I don't believe you."

Everything in me is telling me he is lying. His story makes no sense. If the orbs were made for him to escape, how on earth did he lose them?

"That's how he met Mum," Austin adds in. "And why she kept us on the move."

"Where is our mum?" I demand, sharply looking at Bane. His eyes slowly fade from the blackness into a bright blue colour.

The same colour as my eyes. "If you've hurt her—"

"I would never hurt her," he replies, but I don't believe him. "She is my mate. Why would I do such a thing?"

"Because she took your children, married someone else, and hid them for years," Maddox dryly adds. "And you don't seem like the king of rainbows and sunshine."

"And you are the prince of innocence?" he counters. "I've heard of you all the way down in my city. The Mad Prince who puts the death count of his father to shame."

"At least I'm not here pretending to be someone I'm not," Maddox replies. "Lying to your family will get you nothing."

I take a step forward, gaining all of their attention. "It was pointless for you to come here. I don't have the third orb and never will."

"Interesting that you could resist it so long, daughter. Even I sense the power, and it must strangle you," Bane replies.

"This will destroy any chance of getting the orbs. You'll never win," I claim, holding my arm up so he can see my wrist and the white veins crawling up it.

Maddox spreads his arms wide, his swords taking up the space. "I'm done talking, but I do feel like ripping you apart."

Maddox's smile is nothing but dangerous and threatening.

The city screams and burns as we come to a standoff, and Bane's eyes turn back to black.

"Your mother always went for the dangerous lovers...well, except for your father. He was really quite boring when I killed him," Bane claims. "Didn't even scream or beg."

"No!" I scream, my heart banging in my chest. "No!"

"You didn't," Austin whispers, his voice cracking.

"You—you didn't kill my dad!" I say, shaking my head. The world feels like it's spinning as a dozen memories of my dad flash across my mind. The time he taught me to ride a bike, the many nights he re-read me the same story until I fell asleep, and the water gun fights we had in the gardens. My dad is a kind soul, pure and lovely...and he can't just be gone.

"He got to raise my children, but there can only be one of us," Bane coldly replies. "He was lucky."

"What have you done?!" Austin roars, running at Bane, hellfire covering his body.

"I've had quite enough of you, son. I will come and deal with you soon," Bane states, and with the click of his fingers, a moving hellfire portal appears right behind Austin. He is sucked into it with a pained shout before I can even blink.

"Austin!" I shout as the portal snaps away. "Where did you send him?" I demand of Bane.

"Home, and soon you will be there too. Get the orb, or you will die, daughter."

The world seems to pause just for a few seconds, even as his words, the warning he whispered, finally click in my head. I just see my father's black eyes, the triumphant look in them as I feel five sharp points sticking into my back, deep enough to make me think they are daggers.

One by one, slowly, they tear my back to pieces. I almost don't feel the pain right away. It's kind of like a jolting sensation, but the shock of it makes my knees collapse underneath me.

As the world comes rushing back in so fast with the searing pain, Maddox catches me, pulling me into his arms with a roar that shakes everything around us. Even as everything blurs, I focus on his face, feeling him jumping up into the air with vampire speed. The wind whips past me for seconds until suddenly we stop and I'm looking up at nothing but Maddox.

My dark prince with the night stars around him.

"I-I love y-you. E-even when the s-tars fade, I will wa-it for you i-n the s-ky."

I taste the blood in my mouth and hear my heart beating slowly with every breath.

"Don't say goodbye," Maddox demands. "Don't you fucking dare say that to me."

"Ma-dd-ox," I whisper.

Maddox gently puts me down on my side and goes to look at my back. He comes back, and he digs his teeth into his wrist and puts it to my mouth. "Drink for me, darling."

I manage to drink the thick blood for a few moments, his voice coaxing me to stay awake before he pulls his wrist away. He looks at my back again and lifts my head onto his lap.

"V-vampire blood isn't h-healing me?" I question. The pain is fading, which seems impossible, but a nagging thought enters my mind.

You never feel a mortal injury. Your mind protects you before death.

I'm dying.

"No, you're not!" he says, and I realise I must have said that out loud. My hand feels warm, and I realise it's my blood pooling around us.

"I can't lose you. I'm sorry."

I feel Maddox leaving me even when I struggle to open my eyes, and another hand takes mine, holding it tightly. I can smell nothing but smoke and taste nothing but the metallic sting of my blood as I try to wake myself up.

“You’re the best thing that has happened to The Onyx in so long. Don’t die. Not yet. Maddox isn’t the only one who needs you here,” Reign whispers to me. At least I think I hear him.

I’m sure I hear the voices of people, but I might be completely losing it in the last few moments of my life. Time feels endless as I stare at the stars and the burning city in front of me until I feel something coming close.

Something drawing me awake, refusing to let me leave.

My eyes shoot open to see the final orb above me, the blue light of it glowing over Maddox as he holds it over me in his hands.

Maddox’s eyes are nothing but a mixture of apologetic and no regrets, because this most likely could save me.

“I’m not sorry for saving you. I promised you forever.”

Maddox slams the orb into my chest, and the power collapses into me in a wave. The magic is instant, and it hurts. It hurts like nothing else. I feel like my entire body is rewritten in a few seconds, parts of my soul being ripped open and put back together to do nothing but scream. I scream until my throat is raw and the magic takes over. The daggers fall out of my back, the metal clattering on the ground until everything pauses.

I can suddenly feel the island, I can feel my people suffering and begging for help. I feel the weight of the orb’s magic and the dark promise that comes with it.

“You were chosen for the throne, Riona Dark. Now take it.”

CHAPTER
FIFTY-FOUR



I see myself standing on top of a building, a building in a city which I've never been to in my life. I've only seen it from someone else's mind. This tower is in the middle of the city, shaped like a semicircle with three half-moons on top of it and the symbol that I recognise from my father's army.

The symbol itself is gold and shining.

I look over myself standing on the balcony at the top of the tower. I'm wearing a dress I've never seen before, made of silver silk, and it is ripped in several places. There are dozens of deep cuts all over my arms and chest, blood dripping down my body. My skin is pale, almost blue, like I've been cold for too long. I see that my eyes are closed, and blood is heavily dripping from the corner of my lip. My blonde hair is longer, almost down to the middle of my waist, and it's just flowing around in the wind. But what's most concerning is the thing on top of my head. There is a crown. A beautiful and enchanting crown. The crown is made of black crystals that have been shaped to look almost like hearts. But instead of just hearts, they are all attached to make a triangle shape at the top before splintering out in swirls that end in circles. It's really striking and captivating, and it glows through its own magic. It's what I imagine the crown of the hellcasters would look like.

But why would I be wearing it?

I don't know who I am up there. I'm aware it's probably a dream or vision or something as I watch myself, unable to move or look away.

"This is a warning, not a vision or dream," a voice whispers into my ear. My body harshly turns to the side, and I see we are in a crowd, but everyone is blurred out except the woman who talked to me. The woman has long red

hair that hits the floor, and her dress is made of silver lace, wrapped around all of her luxurious and curvy body.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“I am the maker of the orbs and the first ruler of the hellcasters. You are my direct descendant and the one I have chosen to rule.” As she speaks, her voice angelic, she walks to me. “The Onyx was made for my people and the vampires to live as one, but my son stole the orbs and tried to take the power for himself. I had no choice but to fight my son and take the orbs away. I died on The Onyx before I could ever tell anyone what had happened. With the very last of my life, I linked my soul to the orbs so I could meet the true ruler: the next king or queen with good intentions and a strong, pure soul.”

She stops in front of me, and I’m speechless as she tilts her head to the side. Her eyes are like green emeralds. “Fight for the throne and never give up, Riona, or your fate is to stand up there, a puppet to your father and empty of soul.”

“I’d never lose myself,” I reply, and she sadly smiles at me and lifts her hand. She touches her finger to my chest, right above my heart. Warmth spreads over me from her touch.

“With the last of my soul and magic, I bless you, Riona Dark. May my blessing remind you of your true path with the pain to come. Goodbye.” The world is just suddenly sucked away from me, and I feel myself spinning into a pit of darkness.

I can manage to pull my eyes open, hearing a familiar, broken and loving voice calling for me.

“Wake up, Riona! Please! Please wake up!” Maddox shouts, cupping my face as I open my eyes. We stare at each other as he breathes out a sigh of relief and pulls me to his chest. He is shaking all over as I wrap my arms around him, the woman’s warning and blessing on my mind. I can still feel everything on this island, absolutely everything, and it’s burning. The Onyx is dying, and that can’t happen.

This is my island.

It belongs to me.

“Let me go,” I gently tell Maddox. He leans back, confused as he lowers his hands, and I stand up. I walk a few steps back, seeing Reign and Katy watching me from the corner of the rooftop.

“You might want to duck,” I warn them before slamming my arms out at my side, letting the magic take over.

I feel the waves of power wash out of me, putting out every fire, blasting every unwanted hellcaster from the island, making sure none of them stay. A flood of power and energy leaves my body in green and blue waves as I float into the air. The power feels incredible.

I can’t be stopped. Not even by Bane.

Opening my eyes, I see that the whole city has paused, and it’s not on fire anymore. I can’t feel any hellcasters on the island, and even though many thousands are hurt, they are alive and not burning anymore.

There is only one hellcaster I need to deal with. I see my father in the distance, standing between two houses, looking up at me. His smile suggests that he’s won something, but he has not. My body radiates with the power of the orbs. The crown of The Onyx. The magic chose me.

My father waves his hand, making a portal and another one appears in the air in front of me.

“Riona...,” Maddox warns me, and I glance down at him for a second. His eyes widen when he sees my face.

“What’s up with her—” I don’t get to hear everything Katy says as Bane steps out of the portal, and I focus on him.

“Finally your time to shine, daughter,” he starts. “But I’m here to rain on your parade. I want that power. Now.”

“Never,” I respond. I hear Maddox and Reign call for me underneath my feet, but I can’t focus on anything but Bane. My father throws a tornado of hellfire at me, but it just brushes off my skin like nothing. “Doesn’t work on me, Bane. Got anything else, or should I try?”

I don't wait for his answer before I hold both my hands out and blast magic at him. He shields himself with hellfire, but it goes through it, slamming hard into his chest and throwing him down onto the roof in a puff of dust.

That felt good.

I lower myself to the roof and walk over as he crawls to his feet.

"You're going to die, and then I'm going to free my mum," I tell him, but he just laughs.

"Being cocky is a bad idea, daughter. Did you really think I wouldn't have a backup plan? See, you have a weakness that I do not."

"What is that then?" I ask, stepping forward and building up power in my hand.

"There's only one person who you would die for and give up that power. Shame he won't be around for you to save."

I fearfully turn to Maddox, but it's too late. My father sends a wave of hellfire at him, and I reach out my hand to take the power, but Bane crashes into me, knocking me over on the roof. I lean up and scream as the fire surrounds Maddox, and he roars in pain. The fire burns him into nothing, and his swords fall to the ground in a pile of ash.

I scream and scream, knocking the very building out from under my feet in my heartbreaking, pure pain. Everything breaks inside of me, even as my magic protects me in a bubble of power in a pit of rubble.

Maddox is gone.

I don't feel anything but the pain in my chest, in my heart that blinds me. The love of my life is just gone. I can't feel him anymore. Maddox, my dark prince, my soulmate is dead, and I couldn't save him. What is the point of this power? The throne? All of it without him?

I just want the pain to stop. I want Maddox back.

"Call for me," I hear Natalia whispering into my ear, like she is right here. "I can take the pain away, the emotions, and keep you safe. Just say my name."

With one final scream, I make my decision. Without Maddox, I don't want to feel. I don't want to be alive. The sea can take me. Before I've even uttered her name, water washes around me.

“Natalia.”

EPILOGUE

AUBERY DARK



Bane carelessly drags a man across the burning floor by his ankle and drops him into one of the empty metal cages shaped like bird cages with long, unbreakable chains hanging them from the ceiling of the throne room. The cage seals with magic, melting the door away and making it impossible for any creature to escape it.

Bane's dark and empty eyes latch onto me across the room, and this time he is angry. I'm not his equal, and he will never see me as one. I spent over twenty years running from this man, safe from him, and now I know safe is something I will never get. Riona must have escaped, or he would be celebrating. She is safe.

I can't hide the relief I feel at that knowledge.

I haven't moved in hours, not since he slammed me into this chair by his throne, but I know Austin is here. One of the servants told me. I wish Austin was anywhere else.

I wish I could defend him.

Bane walks over to me and sits in his throne, stretching his long legs out in front of him, his legs coated in ash and blood.

"Make sure our new prisoner stays alive. If he dies, *she* won't come for him when she realises he is alive."

"Who?" I whisper, looking at the dark-haired man in the cage.

“Our daughter will come for her mate, and when she does, I will finally get the orbs’ power that you once promised me. All debts must be paid, and the Mad Prince is my bait.”

Tears fill my eyes, and I look up at the cracked ceiling where bits of light peek through, shining down on my swollen cheek.

Do not come here, Riona. Please. Run as far as you can go, because if the Mad Prince truly loves you, he will say the same.

This place is hell.

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DESCRIPTION



There is no place for immortal love in the world of the damned.

Vampires. Witches. Sirens and hellcasters.
Can one queen rule them all?
Who will survive when the final war is over?

Riona Dark survived being sold at the auction, living with two vampire princes, and taking the magic of the island as her own. But losing Maddox, the Mad Prince and the vampire who owns her heart, is too much. The sirens offer Riona a way to erase her emotions, to escape the empty pit inside her chest and the island full of vampires looking to her as their queen.

But what if it's not the end for Maddox?
Can they save each other before it's too late?

Warning: This book is a dark romance, and it contains themes not for the faint of heart.

PROLOGUE

REIGN



“Staring at the rubble of this building isn’t going to bring Maddox back to life or save Riona from the sirens,” Katy’s cold, piercing voice echoes around me like a fog. I barely breathe as she stops at my side, close enough for her scent to overwhelm me. Ice and berries, that’s what she scents like and always has done. But even she, my most trusted guard and a woman I have never wanted far from me, can’t dull the sting of this place. The place I watched, powerless to do anything, as hellfire burnt my brother into nothing. Everything after his death is a blur of red and black, including the smashing of the building in Riona’s outburst. I woke up under a bunch of brick, the weight of it keeping me buried. But part of me wanted to stay under those rocks forever and never face what happened.

My brother is dead.

My heart cracks in my chest, splintering into pieces. My brother is dead. My little brother, who I was meant to protect. Our mother must be horrified, looking down at just me now. At least he is with her.

Part of me always thought Maddox, the Mad Prince, would live forever and outshine us all one day. When he got his head out of his ass and stopped using his past to define his future. Turned out it took a certain witch/hellcaster to do just that. Riona Dark. For years, Maddox and I argued over everything small and everything big, like the throne. He was never a king until he met her, and for the first time, I realised that maybe he was meant to be the king, with Riona at his side. The pair of them are the perfect mix of light and darkness, and together they shape a future where

everything could be free. The vampires love them, the power chose them, and I would bow to them both. But even she couldn't save him from her father.

"She has run away to be with the sirens. That's her choice," I snap back, turning from the rubble of the building my brother died on and back onto the messy street. People are out, cleaning and picking up what is left of the burnt houses in this row. I watch a young vampire woman sweeping ash into a pile, the brush of her straw broom etching on my nerves with each swipe. My fangs ache, reminding me I haven't fed since my brother's death.

It's been two weeks. Fourteen days. Three hundred and thirty-six hours.

It still doesn't feel real. He. Is. Gone.

"Reign," Katy softly murmurs, stepping in front of me this time, capturing my attention as she always has done and never once realised it. Her black hair is cascading down her back, braided away from her perfect and beautiful face. For a second, I remember her in a dress, dancing in my arms with witches all around us on a night not so long ago. It feels a long time ago.

I've never felt much for females other than a burst of desire, easily sated with one long night. I have a feeling one touch, one kiss, from Katy and I'd fall to my knees to beg for a lifetime with her. Something changed between us that night, or at least I had hoped it had, and now there is a coldness between us created by me in my grief. I've pushed her away, and I don't have a single clue how to make a relationship work between us. Part of me wants to run away from her, fight what I'm feeling, but another part of me needs to figure this out because she isn't running away, leaving me to wallow and scream in my pain. I don't deserve her; I don't deserve to be falling in love with her, and I'm powerless to even stop myself thinking of what it would be like to kiss her right at this moment.

I hate that I'm even thinking of her when my brother is a pile of ashes under the rubble of the house behind me.

Katy comes closer and places her hand on my arm, her touch warm. "He would want you to save her."

Fuck, she is right. Maddox would haunt my arse forever if I let the sirens take Riona and warp her soul into something new and heartless. I meet Katy's eyes, not bothering to hide the pain in my own, and she flinches. "I have nothing to show her, nothing to give her. I could save her from the sirens, and then what?"

"I have something."

Katy and I turn to see two of the hellcaster children standing on a flat stone. The girl I recognise from seeing her at Riona's side sometimes, her blonde hair and ember eyes are unforgettable, as she doesn't look like a normal child. A haunted one, perhaps. The other child is a boy, around the same age as the girl.

"Ember, right?" Katy questions. "This isn't a good time, kids."

Ember holds her ground, and not many would have the strength to do that when Katy told them to go. "I am Queen Riona's friend, and I like Prince Maddox, so I asked my friends for help."

She blows out a long breath of air, the only sign she is nervous. "Hellfire can be a portal as much as it can destroy. Prince Maddox is not dead, and we can prove it. If you will let us, your majesty."

I shake my head, a low growl escaping my throat. "This isn't a funny game to play, kids."

Katy places her hand out in front of me and steps forward, watching them. I don't know why she is entertaining this madness. I've never understood children, and now isn't the time to be playing their games. "Prove it then."

Ember turns to the boy and sharply nods. "Show them, Dust."

Who names their kid Dust?

Katy lowers her voice just for me, like she can read my thoughts. "They named themselves. But still."

I turn back as the kids hold hands, making a circle with their arms, and one bright flame flickers to life in the middle of their arms. Slowly, the flame

spreads in a circle, washing through the air and creating a flat surface of flame.

Ember turns to me, sweat lining her forehead and her eyes glowing like the fire she has made with Dust. “Quick, come and see him.”

Katy moves first, and her gasp when she looks down into the flame makes me move, my feet out of my control, brutal hope wrapping around my heart in a vise. I walk up to the children and look down into the flat flame that shows a world far from here.

What I see changes *everything*.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-FIVE



*My dreams are haunting me.
Punishing me.
Destroying me.*

*W*hat is left of my soul, my heart, my core, cracks as I look at a man on his knees, in chains, blood pouring down the muscles in his chest and down his flat stomach before disappearing into the black trousers, mixing with the fabric. His raven black hair is a mess of locks around his head, covering his forehead and touching his eyes. The only colour is the red crystals woven into his hair strands, glittering from the flames outside the cage he is in. The flames almost make the black steel bars of the cage seem red, clashing with the blood covering him.

His eyes have never looked as dark as they do right in this moment. In this dream.

His eyes, that focus on me, like we are really together, are pits of blackness. Pure black, and there isn't any light there like I used to be able to find in the redness.

Red and black, pitted against each other, luring me into their depths.

Now there is only darkness, and it hurts my chest, like someone is physically stabbing me there.

Because this is a dream, and he isn't alive.

Maddox Borealis is dead, and this dream...it's another dagger to my chest.

It's another death for me.

Because I have to wake up.

I gasp as I wake up, clutching the sea blue silk sheets crumpled by my waist and legs, feeling like they are pushing me down. I push them away and crawl off the large bed, stepping onto the cold tiles and letting them shock me back into the real world.

The world without Maddox.

Hot tears fall down my cheeks, following a path marked by so many of them that have fallen before, until they touch my lips. The salty taste only makes me feel numb, like everything does at the moment. I touch my lips for a second, remembering every kiss, every stroke from Maddox like he was just here. I lower my hand, catching a glimpse of the white veins crawling over my fingertips, across my palm. The curse is going to take me to him, eventually. Maybe. Who knows how witch magic works?

I miss him. I need him. I want him back.

But he isn't coming back, and every single time I think about him, I could break apart with how much it hurts. It hurts in my chest, in my soul, and I can't breathe. I gasp for air, choking on sobs as I fall to my knees, wails escaping my lips that echo around the beautiful bedroom. The glass door slides open behind me, and seconds later, cold arms wrap around me and hold me tightly. I push her away and stand up, holding my hand up.

"Th-thank you, but I want to be alone," I remind her. Natalia pauses, rising from the floor, a white dress pooling around her, hanging off her slender shoulders.

Her blue eyes, the very colour of the surrounding ocean, lock onto mine. "They have waited fourteen days to see you, but they will not wait any longer. I tried to give you time, but they wish to meet you and meet the fate all sirens share. There is magic in the sea, and some of our people call her a goddess. She will take all the pain away, transform you and share your

power with all our people. We all will be safe, and you will feel free. Finally. Don't you want that?"

"I'm not ready," I say, shaking my head.

She softly smiles at me, walking closer, and I watch her warily. "You called for me. You asked me to take it all away, and I promise it won't hurt in here." She places her hand over my heart. "When you become one of us, you won't feel anything."

Her promise is so alluring, and a massive part of me doesn't even hesitate to want to accept it, to go with her, to have all my emotions taken away and become something new. Something cold and empty.

Natalia isn't those things, not really, but perhaps she could be if she wished, and I need to be like that. The pain from losing Maddox needs to stop. I can't live through this pain.

"Will it stop me seeing him all the time? Seeing his death," I question, my voice cracking and making the whole question seem like a plea. It is, in a way. Being here, on the sirens' island, in their home, is a plea.

For it all to stop. The pain to go away. I need it to go away, into a void, and not to come back.

"Yes," she tells me, her eyes understanding what is so broken inside of me without him here. The only reason I don't tell her yes and leave this room with her, is my brother. My mother.

They are both down in the hellcaster city, with him, and I might be able to save them. I just can't save them when I'm like this, so broken, so crushed.

I look down at my hands and feel the power of the orbs spreading through me, pulling me back to The Onyx.

My home. My city. My world.

But it's all nothing without him.

If I get rid of my emotions, of the pain of losing him, then I can be a better queen. I can be what the people need me to be, and I might be able to go and get my family back. Kill my father.

I meet Natalia's eyes. "Let's go then."

She smiles widely and walks across the windowless room. The only light coming in is from a strange magical light hanging above the bed, glowing colours of blue and green. There is a small wardrobe and a bathroom attached to the room, but I don't know what is outside the glass door. I haven't even looked. I didn't want to leave this room since...well, since I asked Natalia to bring me here to escape everything. I might have killed Reign and Katy in the blast I caused. I likely did, and I can't face that.

I can't face anything, and I'm an utter coward. A coward for a queen. The vampires sure lucked out.

"First, you must change," Natalia says, chatting away like I'm more than a broken doll of a girl. That's all I feel like I am at this point. A doll she can dress if she wishes, because it really doesn't matter.

Nothing does. "This dress will suit your colouring." She looks back at me. "Maybe a quick wash too."

Natalia clicks her fingers, and a whirlwind of water surrounds me, washing me in a warm caress. I close my eyes, feeling my clothes washed away from my body and a dress slid over my shoulders, curling around my neck and tightening around my ribs. The water disappears, leaving me dry as a bone and my hair softly flowing down my shoulders. The dress is a wash of blue layers of satin with a tight corset.

"Perfect, dear friend," she says, hooking her arm in mine and coaxing me to the door. The glass door opens without a touch when we are close to it, and we walk out into a large room with several other doors. I look up at the glass ceilings and realise we are underwater, far under it. The sirens' home is made of glass rooms and tunnels, and outside, there is nothing but crystal-clear sea for as far as I can see.

"Welcome to Lazuli Island," Natalia tells me. "Years ago, before my time, there used to be simply caves, and that is the base of the island, but we have expanded, and now there is all this. The island is nearly as large as The Onyx, and it goes all the way to the surface in parts. This is the main citadel."

“It’s beautiful,” I tell her, because it is. Through my pain, I can’t help admiring the silver and glass structures, the flowers and water fountains filling the edges of the room. It smells like salt with a floral undertone, and it’s soothing for a second. Until the numbness settles back into my chest, into my heart, turning the world cold once more.

Natalia, if she notices any change in me, doesn’t comment on it. She rambles on about the various structures, statues, and flowers as we walk through a tunnel and through two other rooms, all of them empty, and it makes me wonder where all her people are. We come to a stop in a room with glass walls, glass ceilings and gold-plated tiled floors that make a circle pattern on the floor. I trace the patterns, noticing they are waves in the sea, as three women walk into the room. They are each as stunning as Natalia, graceful with each step like the sea, and slightly taller than me. Two of them have white hair, eternally beautiful faces, and dark skin covered in white dresses similar to Natalia’s.

Ceremony dresses, I realise.

This has all been planned. It was never a question of if I was leaving the room, but a carefully asked demand on Natalia’s part.

The clear leader of the sirens has hair the colour of the sea, dark and mysterious, and so much of it that it follows her like a veil across the floor. Her dress is black, but white stones are held in metal around her waist. Like armour. I wonder if she thinks it will protect her from me and the power of the orbs.

“Queen of The Onyx, it is an honour to have you here with us. I sense your power is great,” she starts off, no introduction, no asking for my name. Just talk of my power.

I don’t need to ask why they want me here then. “My name is Riona, and I haven’t been officially crowned queen of anything.”

“Yet,” she replies with a cool glance at Natalia. “Does she know who I am?”

“No, Andraste,” Natalia replies. I hate when people talk over me. My hands glow with power, and everyone steps back from me, even Natalia.

I cool myself down and meet Andraste's cold, empty gaze. She doesn't show a single emotion on her face, because she feels nothing. "Why did you choose to become a siren?"

My question doesn't seem to take her off guard. "Back in my time, a single woman would be stolen from a village and taken on the ship as a good luck charm. And a present to the men, to be shared and used."

Disgust fills my throat, but she doesn't show a single emotion about this, like it's nothing. "I was on the ship for two months before I met Lincoln, a young man who spent time with me and didn't hurt me. He knitted blankets for me, gave me candles and special food to make me pass out while the other men visited. I fell in love with him quickly, but before I could tell him, the captain, a cruel man, noticed. He hung him up like a doll and raped me under his hanging body before throwing me into the ocean."

"Gods above," I whisper in horror.

"I floated for a time, before sinking into the depths. As I drowned, the goddess found me and offered me a new life as a powerful siren, and the pain would end. I took the offer," she tells me. "And then I sank their ship and drowned every man on board slowly, painfully, and I enjoyed it."

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"As am I that your love is gone. The world is cruel and unforgiving. We take what we want, we kill what we want, and we feel only what we wish. Natalia allows more emotions than a lot of us, but most choose to feel nothing but pleasure," Andraste breathes out. She walks closer to me. "With your power, you could drown the hellcasters' city and enjoy it. You could be anything you want with us, your power shared with us."

Her voice is seductive, luring with every single word. "We would help you in every way you could possibly need. We could share the burden of your power. The pleasure would be unimaginable. Us, together, we could rule the sea and the world."

"We could make sure Maddox is never forgotten," I whisper. "I could get revenge."

“You could,” Andraste whispers in my ear, her hands resting on my shoulders. I look down to see a part of the floor slide open, revealing the cold sea below. Water pools into the room, soaking into my slipper-covered feet. It’s so cold. “When you’re ready, step into the sea and meet our goddess. She will make everything go away, and then we will get revenge. The world will pay for taking your prince.”

My dark prince. My Maddox.

This way, I can live on, because I know if I don’t do something, I will want to leave this world to be with him.

And if I die, what happens to my family? To Arlo? To The Onyx?

No, I can’t let them all down, but I can’t continue like this. This is the only way.

“Wait.” Natalia steps closer and Andraste hisses at her. She hisses back, and I move away from them both. “It’s not the only way to be strong. This is the easy way out, and you won’t want revenge after this. You will want nothing and no one. Maddox will be a distant memory, and I don’t think that’s what you want.”

“What are you doing?” Andraste snaps, grabbing Natalia’s arm. “The goddess will drown you for this!”

“Don’t hurt her,” I demand.

Andraste turns on me. “You don’t get to tell us what to do while you’re not one of us. Become a siren and perhaps I will spare her betraying life.”

“Don’t do it. I was wrong to bring you here,” Natalia tells me, meeting my eyes. “It isn’t a good choice, and it’s wrong. Maddox would—”

“Maddox isn’t here,” I breathe out. “He is dead and gone, so who cares what he would have wanted?”

“I do.”

Katy’s voice makes me jump, and I spin in time to see her step through a portal. Alarms blast around us like a baby screaming, and Katy sighs,

pulling out her swords. “I’m afraid you have my queen, and that’s a big problem. So no, I’m not leaving.”

“You are,” Andraste hisses, grabbing my arm. “Or you will die.”

Katy rolls her eyes and looks at me as another shadow of a person glows in the portal. “You need to think things through before you act on them, Riona. But don’t worry, you’re leaving this mistake.”

“Why would I?” I ask, tears filling my eyes. “There is nothing left in this world without him. Nothing.”

Reign steps out of the portal. “Sister, I think you’ll find there is. Maddox is alive.”

CHAPTER
FIFTY-SIX



“You’re lying to make me come back with you, and it will not work,” I reply, crossing my arms and holding my ground. I’m glad Reign and Katy are alive, but something cracks deep in my chest when I see Reign, who reminds me so much of Maddox. He is a burning reminder that Maddox is gone. He is gone. Whatever lies Reign is making up are just to trick me, to confuse me, and get their queen back.

But they need to understand, their queen is an empty and broken shell. They shouldn’t want her back, not like this. “I know you won’t understand, but I am here to fix myself, and then I can be a queen. That’s what I need to do. I can’t breathe, I can’t think straight, I can’t exist without him in this world with me.”

A sob retches out of my throat, and Reign’s eyes lock onto mine. “I’m not a liar, and I wouldn’t have come here to stop you unless I was certain. I’ve seen him and—”

“This is lies!” Andraste shouts, her grip still tight on my arm.

Natalia steps to my other side and looks at Reign. “We are not going to hurt her, Prince Reign. Whatever she chooses.”

Reign looks right at Andraste. “Interrupt me again and you won’t like what happens.”

“Try it, prince,” she sneers.

Katy steps in the middle of us and looks at me, her gaze softer than usual, softer than I've ever seen it. The badass warrior vampire feels sorry for me, and I don't like it. "Ember showed us Maddox in the hellcaster city. He's not dead, it was a trick, and I'm certain your father is planning to use it against you. Are you really going to jump into the fucking sea and erase your emotions? Become like them? Your emotions are the worst and the best parts of you."

"I can't believe you," I admit, my voice cracking. "If I believe you and then find out it's a lie, it will destroy me. I'm barely holding on."

Katy takes another step forward, ignoring the hissing coming from Andraste at my side. I barely feel her nails digging into my skin. "I swear he is alive, Riona."

He's alive.

Maddox is alive?

I think back to that moment, the rush of hellfire, the ash, the scream of pain. Some of it was real, but maybe he did trick me. My father could have done that, and I don't know enough about hellfire to know if it only kills. It could have taken him away, to the hellcaster city, away from me.

My father knew it would destroy me to lose Maddox.

Hope, small and painful, trickles into my chest and blooms into a tornado of feelings. And for the first time in weeks, they aren't crushing; they aren't all bad.

Katy smiles, seeing the change in my expression before turning to Andraste, her fangs bared. "If you don't let go of my queen, I'm going to rip you to pieces."

Andraste blanches at the threat and very slowly takes her hand off my arm, finger by finger. I spin on her when she takes a step back, and nod my head her way. She nods back, but I can see she is ticking with anger. I sigh and look at Natalia. "Thank you for coming for me."

Natalia inclines her head. "Anytime, your royal highness. I hope our help and willingness to make you one of our own means we can have an alliance

in the future.”

“We will see,” Katy replies, a bite to her tone.

I walk to Natalia and pull her into a hug. Her soft voice whispers into my ear. “I can’t see your futures, but if anyone can save him, it’s you. Be his queen and show the world what happens when they mess with your king.”

Be his queen.

I am his queen, and I am going to save him.

I let go of Natalia first and walk to Reign, Katy stepping in with me. Reign watches me closely as I walk through the open portal, tasting the witch magic thick in the air. I don’t know who opened this portal, but it is no doubt another favour The Onyx owes the witches. My people in blood, the same as the hellcasters.

But it is the vampires who have my loyalty.

I step out into the dining room of Maddox’s castle. My home. But it feels like an empty shell without him here, and part of me wants to run back to the make-believe world of the sirens and the escape they offer from all this. My power feels like a glowing rock deep within my chest, and being here, it immediately starts to shine, making me feel powerful. The orbs are happy to be home.

The dining room isn’t empty at all, and I focus on Ember as she stands and runs to me, wrapping her small arms around my waist. “I’m so happy you’re back!”

I embrace her back before lowering myself down to her level. “Is Prince Maddox alive?”

She nods and touches my forehead, opening her mind to me and showing me exactly what I’ve just asked for. Suddenly a bunch of images jump into my mind, all of them moving too quick to fix onto before coming to a stop.

My heart pangs in my chest as I look at the man through a flat mirror of flames, a portal of some kind. The man is on his knees, blood coating his chest, hair and face, making him look like a monster.

A villain. A monster locked away in a cage.

But I'd know him anywhere. In any world. At any time. Prince Maddox is mine, and he is no monster.

Ember roughly pushes me from her mind, and I stumble back, only to be caught by large hands right before my legs give out from under me. A mixture of shock, hope and joy makes the room spin, and I barely hear the voices in the room or notice who is holding me until he places me down on a chair and kneels in front of me.

Cross McGowan.

My family.

The one who betrayed me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demand. He doesn't rise from where he is kneeling, but he looks up, and Reign walks over, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“I asked for their help with a portal in exchange for Tove,” Reign explains to me. “Tove was happy to get off the island, and I think she might never talk to any of us again. We didn't make the best impression.”

I nod, knowing he had no choice, and I am thankful he came to get me, because Maddox needs me. Maddox is alive.

And I'm going to fight the world until he is at my side once more.

I will kill anyone, destroy anything that gets in my way.

Standing up, the orbs' power pours out of my hands, lighting up the floor around the dining room in a soft red glow. I see Katy moving Ember out of the room as I step right in front of Cross. “I could kill you right now for everything you did. I could level your island with my powers. I could be the villain you painted my Maddox as. I am the same as him.”

Cross looks up, and there is terror in his eyes. “Ri—”

“But I won't because we were never the villains. Never, Cross,” I firmly tell him. “But I highly suggest you get the hell out of my sight and never come

back.”

Cross doesn't even blink before standing and running out of the dining room. I look up to Reign, who hasn't moved in the show of power. I like that he knows I would never hurt him.

“Brother,” I say, the first time I've ever said that to him. But it's true, he is my family, and he called me sister first, so I don't have to doubt we are on the same page. “I need you to gather every hellcaster child on the island in here.”

“Why?” he questions, crossing his arms. I pull my power back, letting it slide back into my body through my arms like liquid red water.

“I want them to practice opening portals to the hellcaster city. Tomorrow, they are going to send me there. Alone,” I tell him.

Reign shakes his head. “You're our queen, Riona. I can't let you go there alone. The orbs have been kept out of that world for thousands of years. You can't let your father get them, and he has Maddox there for only one reason: to lure you.”

My heart pounds. “I was not asking, Reign. I have to save him, and there is no one else who can do it.”

“Not alone,” Katy says, walking into the room and stopping at my side. “Reign can build an army here, train the hellcasters, and we can sneak around the city. I will watch your back.”

“You could die,” I tell her.

Reign shakes his head. “No fucking way.”

“I wasn't asking you. It's up to our queen,” Katy snaps right back. “And you damn well know she needs someone to go with her. You were just saying that.”

“Not you,” he growls back at her. I feel like I've missed something between them, because the way they look at each other in this moment only makes me want to run out of the room.

“I’m going to see Arlo and Ann,” I say into the silence. “Let me know the choice soon. We leave in the morning.”

“It’s already been decided,” Katy coldly responds, her tone meant for Reign.

“It hasn’t,” Reign smoothly replies.

On that note, I leave them in their death stare, which I suspect is filled more with sexual tension than anything else, and shut the door behind me in the corridor. The walk past Maddox’s room, the memories I have from in there, is harder than I thought. I pause outside the door and go inside, surprised to see the eagle’s cage empty, but I know she wouldn’t be far from the castle. I walk to the bed and lie down for just a second, breathing in the lingering scent on his pillow. Deep cedarwood with a cinnamon undertone, all Maddox.

Hell, I miss him so much.

“Sniffing pillows now? I’d say it’s lame, but I do the same with Austin’s,” Arlo says, making me jump. With tears filling my eyes, I jump off the bed and meet him halfway across the room, embracing him tightly. He holds me just as tightly and swings me around before putting my feet back down on the ground. “You okay, Ria-banana-llama?”

The nickname I used to hate breaks something in me, and I start crying, pouring out everything I’ve held back. Arlo simply holds me to his chest, letting me use him for strength until it feels like the wave of sorrow and pain calms. We both go and sit on the edge of Maddox’s bed, and I rub my sore eyes.

“My dad is dead. My brother and mum have been taken hostage, along with Maddox. I’m not sure how everything is going to be okay,” I admit to him, blurting it all out in a matter of seconds.

“I’m so sorry about your dad, Ria,” Arlo quietly replies, picking up my hand and holding it on his knee. “Your dad knew about Austin and me. He walked in on us kissing when we were fifteen, and Austin didn’t speak to me for two weeks. Then he started dating Macy Smith. He told me it was to make a point that he wasn’t gay and in love with me.”

I remember him dating Macy for months. I never liked her.

I stay quiet, listening. “Honestly, it nearly broke me because I was in love with him and confused about who I was. I like both girls and guys, but loving Austin was something else. So for two years, I did what Austin did, dated and fucked everything I could in denial.”

“I always thought there was something I didn’t know about Austin. A sadness I couldn’t understand,” I admit.

Arlo nods. “I really did have feelings for you, but it was because you’re like him. I’m sorry about that kiss we shared and how confused I made you.”

“I get it now,” I say. “And part of me wasn’t all that shocked about you and Austin.”

“Neither was your dad. He picked me up from a game one day, and he took me to McDonald’s. We sat there in silence for a while before he looked me dead in the eye and told me not to give up on his idiot ass son, because one day, he is going to realise the love of his life has been there the entire time. I was shocked he didn’t judge us, didn’t hate us for what he saw. He just accepted it and then said his son was an idiot.” He chuckles and I do too. My dad accepted everyone, any size or shape. Austin and Arlo could have joined a flying circus and he wouldn’t have blinked.

Tears fill my eyes, and my throat feels tight as Arlo continues, “He was right—your dad always was—and he was like a father to me too.”

“He was always right,” I mutter, agreeing. “I’m going to save Austin. And my mum and Maddox. I’m going to the hellcaster city tomorrow.”

“I want to come,” Arlo demands, and I shake my head.

“No. Katy will be coming with me, and that’s it. We need to be silent and unseen,” I softly tell him. “And you have a baby to think of. You can’t die there or get stuck there.”

He pauses and blows out a shaky breath. “You’re always right, like your dad.”

I sadly chuckle, resting my head on his shoulder. “I learnt from the best.”

“You’re a goddamn queen now,” Arlo mutters after a long silence. “A queen of a vampire race.”

“It’s surreal to me too,” I admit.

“He is going to be okay,” Arlo tells me, and I don’t have to ask who he is talking about. “I won’t ever say I like him, but I admire how fiercely he loves you, and no matter what has happened, he will be fighting for you too.”

“I hope so,” I whisper. “If I lose him, I don’t know what will stop me from burning the world down.”

He lifts my hand, revealing the curse. “I’m going to search for the missing witch with the vamps that have been sent out. If you’ll let me.”

“The curse needs to be broken,” I agree. “Thank you and good luck.”

“Same to you,” he replies, and from his tone alone, I can tell he is resting all of his hopes on me. I’m doing the very same.

“When this is over, and my father is dead, I’m going to need advisors. I’d like for you to be one,” I tell him. “I can’t run this entire island with just Maddox and me making decisions. It shouldn’t be that way.”

“I like the plan,” he replies. “This island is still full of human slaves and poverty that gets overlooked. You can promise them children and a future, and they only have to follow your rules. It’s a trade many will take.”

“We will figure out a way, but I won’t have humans enslaved here any longer,” I say. “I was a slave, and now I’m a queen. Fate wove this path for me for a reason.”

“Fate’s a bitch,” Arlo replies, and I laugh, tears falling down my cheeks.

Wait for me, Maddox. I’m coming.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-SEVEN



“You didn’t sleep.” Ann’s kind voice makes me look over my shoulder. I wipe the soil from my fingers and stand up. The sun is barely cresting the city outside, but I know most of the castle didn’t sleep well last night. I doubt the vampires in the city did, either. They are sending their queen to hell, and there is nothing they can do about it.

“No,” I answer. I feel like I can’t rest until I’m in the hellcaster city, until I see him with my own two eyes and make sure he is okay. I don’t know why he is in a cage, why he is covered in blood, but I’m sure it has everything to do with my father. Maddox won’t be his pet for long. “And I thought I’d clean up the greenhouse, but it seems someone has been doing it for me. It looks great in here, and the roses I planted are blooming.”

The greenhouse, which was once a dead and empty shell of a room, is bursting with green life, blooming flowers and vibrant colours. The now clean glass shines different colours across the tiles, and the water fountain fills the silence with a light murmur of running water.

“I did the best I could,” she tells me. “I know you’re leaving soon. Do you want me to do your hair?”

“Yes, please,” I answer. I sit on the edge of the water fountain as Ann works her magic and braids my hair into a plait that falls down my back. My leggings and light grey T-shirt are very casual, but I have the red cloak Maddox made for me hanging on the door. That colour should fit in with the hellcaster city.

Ann walks around me and holds out a dagger in her palm. The blade has been designed with gold to look like flames, and the hilt is a gold crown. “Reign said it was his mother’s blade and should be only held by a queen. He asked me to give it to you and make sure it stays hidden until you need to use it.”

I pick up the blade, and I think of the red crystals woven into parts of my hair. A present from their family, from an ancestor I can never meet. Ann hands me a leather case, and I slide the dagger back into it before walking to my cloak. I hide the dagger in the inside pocket and slide my cloak over my shoulders, clipping it together.

Ann waits and smiles at me. “Be careful. I know you have to go, but...be careful.”

“I will,” I tell her. “And thank you for keeping it nice in here. It means a lot.”

“You look nervous,” she says.

“I am,” I reply, blowing out a breath.

She nods. “I would be too.”

We don’t say anything else, because there isn’t anything that can be said, and I leave the greenhouse with Ann staying behind in it. The castle creaks in the wind, the only sound I can hear as I walk through it and to the library where the hellcaster children are waiting with Reign. The dark circles under his eyes suggest he hasn’t slept well either.

“Morning,” Reign says. The children are eating off little plates, and I wink at Ember when she looks up.

“Can we talk alone before Katy gets here?” I ask. Reign nods and walks us into the corridor, crossing his arms and looking at me expectedly.

“If I die and don’t come back, be a good king and take the vampires away from here. My father will destroy The Onyx out of spite. You can all blend in with the humans, and it will save you all for a little longer,” I say.

Reign's stern eyes meet mine. "We won't run, but I am glad to see you thinking of your people."

"I would stay if it weren't for him," I tell him. "I know the risk and what I'm doing."

"I always knew you two would destroy each other. Your kind of love is all-consuming," he replies. "And dangerous to the world."

"And what about you and Katy?" I say.

He skirts the question altogether. "Katy is going with you today. Keep her safe, sister."

"I will try my best, but heaven help anyone that tries to hurt her," I remind him. "I've never known anyone as badass as her."

"Neither have I," he replies, and I tilt my head. "And when she gets back, I'm going to convince her to be my mate."

I'm shocked for a second he admitted this to me, but then I can't help but feel happy for them. So happy for them.

"I knew it," I say with a grin.

"You knew what?" Katy questions, walking down the corridor towards us. I went for casual, and Katy is dressed in red leather, weapons everywhere, a blood red cloak clipped around her shoulders. She looks ready to take down the hellcasters on her own. Suddenly I feel like a sidekick.

"That we are going into hell and it's going to suck," I reply, blurting out something random.

She arches an eyebrow. "Is it time?"

"Yes," Reign answers, giving her one more sweeping look that leaves a blush on her cheeks before walking back to the library. Katy is blushing?

I missed something big between them, and when I knowingly smile at Katy, she glares at me. "Don't ever smile at me like that again."

I laugh. "Sure. Sure."

She glares at me one more time as she walks past, and I try hard to keep the chuckle in my throat before going after her into the library. Reign has seven of the hellcaster children in a circle, one of them being Ember, and he nods us over.

“They want you to stand in the middle, and they will open a portal around you. It might be a bit of a fall,” Reign explains, and we both nod.

Ember looks over at me. “There’s a woman who owns an inn. She takes in children, and it’s where your mother took us. They seemed like friends, and she might help. The inn is called Rockshine.”

“Thanks,” I tell her. “Be safe here, okay?”

“Okay.” She smiles brightly at me. A big part of me really likes Ember, and maybe she could live in the castle and be like a ward of mine or something. I’d like her to have a good life for all the help she has given us in this war. I nod at Katy, and we step in the gap some children make for us. Katy stands close as the children tighten the circle once more.

The air starts to vibrate before five little flames flicker to life around us, one so close to my cloak that I can feel the heat. The flames get bigger and bigger before spreading out in a wave, and then I am falling. I gasp, sucking in hot air, and I barely get a second to open my eyes before I slam harshly into a gravel surface, knocking the air out of my lungs.

I groan in pain and roll onto my back, looking up at the top of the hellcaster city, the flame-covered rock walls.

We are here.

“That looked like it hurt,” Katy drones, and I lift my head to see she has effortlessly landed in a crouch.

“It did,” I mumble as I stand up and listen to the noise. It’s so noisy here; the chatter of people, clashing of doors, and general rumble of an immense city of hundreds of thousands echoes around us as I take in the city. The vision I saw when I took the third orb flashes before my eyes as I look at the castle on the other side of the city, towering above us all like a righteous king. It’s exactly where he would live. Right in front of it is a clock tower

and a balcony made of black onyx. I remember seeing myself standing there in a silver dress and a crown.

I can't become that version of myself, because I was empty. Katy comes to my side. "We are on top of an enormous building with at least ten floors. Looks like houses, so should be easy to get down to the street and look around for this inn."

I take one more look at the bustling city full of hellcasters and pull up my hood. If we get caught, I can't save anyone. I check on my power like an afterthought, happy to feel it humming with life inside of me.

Not long now, Maddox. Wait for me.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-EIGHT



The hellcaster city is brutal.

Or at least their people are. Katy and I make our way through a gathered crowd, watching as two hellcasters beat the shit out of each other for sport. I glance through the crowd to the fight as a man slams his flame-covered fist into a woman's cheek, and she bounces onto the dirt floor. She jumps up, her arms thick with corded muscles, and wipes a line of blood off her chin before grinning. I look away as she jumps on the man, with razor-sharp teeth and a show of flames curled around her fists.

Katy looks back at me, her eyes just visible under her cloak, and I nod to tell her I'm okay. The only good thing about the street fighting is no one looks our way as we slide through the crowd and into the streets that have a nasty smell about them. The houses are more like towers, the bricks broken more than not, and all of it barely looks held together. I look up at the black stone tower as we pass it, another housing block. The one we passed down earlier was just as bad as this one, in ruins, dirty and old. Damp and other smells that I don't want to identify linger in the air, and there isn't a breeze to blow it away, it just stays. It's so hot here that my cloak is sticking to me, and sweat trickles down my back. I don't need to see why the hellcasters want to escape this place.

It's not a world. It's a prison.

Katy drops into step next to me, her voice low. We might look alone, but I don't trust any of the deep shadows that could hide someone desperate

enough to sell us out. “This place is a maze.”

“We need to find a kid and pay them with something to tell us where to go,” I suggest. So far, I’ve seen at least a dozen kids hiding near the buildings, begging anyone that walks past. It hurts my heart to see them, because I see Ember in each one of them, and then I remember my mother saving who she could.

My mum.

It feels like I haven’t seen her in forever, and I don’t know what to say to her when I do see her. She lied to me for my entire life, but it was to protect me. I need to tell her I understand what she did, and I know it was to give me a chance to escape my father.

I want to tell her I miss dad. That he will always be my dad, no matter what my blood says. I just miss her.

“I will follow your lead,” Katy replies and meets my gaze. “Don’t get us killed.”

I smile at her, and she smiles back, just for a moment, before I get moving. We pass several people on the way to the alleyways behind a large towering building, but none of them even look our way. I get the suspicion that everyone keeps to themselves, or they find themselves in fights like we witnessed on the way here. I would keep my head down if I were them. The longer I spend in this city, the more I realise how much my mum really did protect me. If I were brought up here...

I shiver. I would have been a monster by the time I turned ten.

Katy and I slide into an alleyway and walk to the end where a few large barrels hide a wiggling bundle of tatty blankets and empty glass bottles in a row that clink when the kid moves.

“Come closer and I will burn you,” the girl hisses. Katy sighs, sliding her dagger out, and I place my hand on her arm.

I slide off the gold ring on my finger, one I borrowed from the library, and hope it isn’t important. I thought it would be a good idea to bring gold to a

place like this, in case we needed to buy something. “I have gold. You can take it in exchange for directions.”

The girl pops her head out of the blankets, a whip of red hair bouncing around her shoulders. Her eyes are bright like flames under the grime covering every inch of her skin. She holds a knife in her wrapped hands, and I would guess she’s about ten.

Too young to be this forgotten.

“Where’s your parents?” Katy questions.

“Dead,” she coldly replies. “In the king’s mines, paying off the debt they had when there was a cave-in.”

What the hell is he mining for? Gold? A way out?

She shrugs like it’s nothing, but her eyes lock onto the ring with a desperation I hate to see. I want to just give her the ring to save herself from this life she has, but I need to find Maddox. Reign was right, Maddox comes above everything. “That was five years ago. What do you want to find?”

“Sorry about your parents,” Katy says. “We are looking for the Rockshine Inn.”

She twitches her nose. “Why?”

“A friend lives there,” I lie.

“Everyone knows where the Rockshine is. Why don’t you? Actually, you look so clean...where are you from in the city? What tower?”

“Do you want the gold or not?” Katy snaps.

The girl laughs. “I bet the king would pay more to find out strangers are in his world.”

Katy growls and bares her teeth. The girl doesn’t even blink, and she takes a step back. If she runs off and tells the king, we are so screwed.

“I’m the queen of an island called The Onyx, and the king here is my father. He took the man I love, my brother, and mother, and tried to kill me. I’m

going to kill him for what he has taken from me, and I'm going to free this city. Including the people in it," I say. Katy sighs in disappointment, but the girl doesn't move, watching me closely. I lower my hood. "My name is Riona Dark, and if you help me, I have a chance of saving you from living like this forever. Isn't that worth more than gold?"

"You're the heir?" she asks, her eyes wide. "The king is looking for you. He is offering a thousand gold coins. A lifetime's money."

Dammit.

"Great, now she is definitely going to sell us out," Katy mutters and slides out another dagger. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to stop her. My job is to protect you, and this is a risk. You shouldn't have spoken."

"Don't you dare," I snap at Katy.

The girl looks between us and takes a step forward. "My mother sang songs of an heir who would come and free us all. I don't like the king, and I don't need that much gold. The king doesn't have that many people loyal to him."

"Good to hear. I hate the bastard too," I reply, and she flashes me a toothy grin.

"Come on," she says and nods her head to the end of the alleyway, onto a new street.

Katy catches my arm, her voice low. "I don't trust her."

"We can't trust anyone in this city, but what choice do we have? We won't find this place on our own," I quietly reply. "Let's just—"

A small scream is all I hear before I see the girl burst into flames. Ash rains down onto the dirty ground as my heart lurches and sickness rises in my throat. That poor girl. She didn't have to die. I never even knew her name. A bulk of a man in red royal armour steps through the ash and comes to a stop. There is a crown on his chest in gold, and his helmet is crafted around his large head. Ten more guards make a line behind him, and I look beyond them to see ten more blocking the exit to our back.

“Did you really think your father wouldn’t sense your arrival, Princess Riona?”

Whoever this hellcaster is, he is going to die for touching that girl.

I channel my power into my hands and smile. “It’s Queen Riona, actually.”

Without pausing, I attack with my powers. Red power razes the ground around us in red magic, shaking it as spheres made of my magic leave my hand, and I throw them at the guards. Three orbs hit the guard who spoke in the chest, and he tries to defend himself only to be thrown back into the others. Katy is on them in a second, swords blazing as she moves so quickly I can’t see her. I spin around as the other guards run our way, and I grin, widening my arms. My magic leaks from my body in a wave, and I mentally shape it into a wave before sending it crashing towards them. The wave catches the guards, who try to flee, and burns them into nothing within moments.

I could destroy a whole army without trying.

This world is nothing.

“Stop or he dies.” I spin around, my body going deathly still as I lock eyes with Austin. The guard who spoke to me holds a red blade to the neck of my brother, who’s breathing heavily, his dark eyes blazing with anger. I barely glance at the guard as I take in my brother and how he looks terrible. Deep bruises mark his face under the dried blood, he is too pale, and I suspect he has taken more than one beating. I’m surprised he is even standing with how bad he looks. Katy lowers the hellcaster in her arms, and he drops to the floor with the pile of others she has taken out.

“Run, Ria!” Austin shouts in a cracked voice, a voice that suggests he has almost lost his voice from something. Something like screaming. The guard laughs.

“She won’t.”

He is right, I won’t, but someone else should give us a chance. I look at Katy and nod. Without looking back at me, she runs past me, and several guards chase her as I put my hands up in the air. We spent hours going over this plan, that if I got caught, then she had to run, find help, and stay hidden.

Katy didn't want to leave me, but there was always a big chance my father would know when I was in his world. He would sense my magic, the orbs, returning to the place they were created.

Katy was always plan B. I hope she doesn't get caught, because otherwise we are both screwed.

Gold-plated handcuffs are thrown at my feet, clattering against the ground. They look so out of place on the dirt ground, in an alleyway that smells of filth.

"Put them on, princess," the guard demands, and my magic reacts in my chest, repulsed by the cuffs before I've even touched them. I keep my eyes locked with Austin's as I pick the cuffs up and ignore the way my body instantly feels drained. I click the one around my right wrist, the cold metal nice in the warm heat and click the other one on next. Gritting my teeth, a cold feeling spreads from the metal, up my arms, and settles around my magic.

I instantly feel caged, even as I stand freely on my own.

The guard smirks at me before nodding his head at the guards behind him, and they walk to me. "Put her in the carriage. It's time to see the king."

CHAPTER
FIFTY-NINE



My feet drag against the floor, and the guards' rough hands dig into my underarms as I'm taken to the carriage and thrown inside. I grit my teeth as the two guards climb in after me, and the door is slammed shut.

"Where is my brother?" I demand, standing up off the floor. One guard slams his hand into my chest and knocks me back into the seat.

"Sit down, princess," he sarcastically suggests, "before I rip your pretty clothes off and see what makes the Mad Prince hard."

"Fuck you," I snap, my cheeks burning. The way he looks me up and down, and his threat make me fear saying anything at all.

He laughs with the other guard, and I scoot away from them both, closer to the window and as far as I can get in the small space. The carriage is dark with the windows covered by thick, gold, tatty curtains, but I can just about see the dark leather seats, dark fabric walls and patterned flooring. The two guards sit on either side of the door to make sure I can't leave, but I don't know why they bother while they've got my brother. There is no chance I'm going anywhere when I saw how little the guards care about his life. They would kill him to make a point, and I highly doubt King Bane would give a shit.

I catch a glimpse of the streets out of a corner of the window near me, where a bit of the curtain is pulled back. Red light pours in, highlighting the cuffs on my wrists. The buildings seem to get taller as we pass them, and

less dirty, and I'm going to guess we're going towards that castle that I saw. The one which seems to shine down on the city like a beacon of hope. I don't know what the people have to hope for here. From what I've seen, their king treats them like dirt under his boot. I close my eyes for a second and rest back, remembering that this was the plan and that I'm going towards Maddox.

That's all that really matters.

If I can just find him, just see him, make sure he's alive and well, then we can fix everything else. We always fix everything together.

It's us against the world. He is the other half to my soul, and I don't care what happens in the world as long as he is with me. The cuffs around my wrist jingle with the moving carriage as it goes over what feels like cobblestone, and it reminds me that the cool metal is there. They are some kind of lock down on my power, a darkness within the gold that is lingering. I feel around for my magic, but it's just caged away from me. It feels like it's locked in a darkness that comes from these cuffs. I try to pick at the darkness with my magic from within the cage, and it seems to crack just a little. If I work on it, maybe I can release my magic and break these cuffs.

I am not wearing these things for any longer than necessary, but they will make Bane think I'm powerless.

Perfect for me to catch him off guard.

I think back to the redheaded woman that I spoke to when I got the third orb. The vision of myself so empty and cold, standing on top of that balcony in front of the castle. I can't let myself become that, but I'm scared it's a fate I can't avoid. I'm going down the same path that she warned me of, and I can't become the queen of this place and end up empty. The only reason that might happen is if I lose Maddox.

A sharp pain in my chest nearly makes me whimper, but I push it down. Maddox is not dead.

I just have to find my family. I just have to find him, and then everything will be okay. At least that's a lie that I'm telling myself repeatedly to stay

sane. At least I know Katy is safe and I'm not alone in this world. If anyone can sneak around and find a way to get to me, it's Katy.

I can find a way out of this somehow, someway. I'm not sure how, but I'm definitely going to find a way because Maddox and my family need me. The Onyx needs me. The carriage jolts as it goes over something in the road, lifting me off the seat and into the air for a minute before slamming me down. Then it stops quickly and everything is so silent. Too silent. The door is pulled open by another guard, with a silver helmet covering his face, and the two guards in the carriage grab hold of my arms and drag me out. The sweltering heat hits me one more time as I'm dragged across a courtyard and straight through an open door. They move quickly, forcing me to keep up and not giving me a second to look around the place.

The inside of the large castle is pretty similar to what I would expect with its black walls. It reminds me of the castle from the Dracula movies but in all black instead, making it creepier. The walls are made of black onyx that lines the castle, and strange paintings hang on the walls, showing wars, forests, women with crowns, men with crowns, and beautiful beaches. One painting of a dark forest takes my breath away with how excellent it is, and in one corridor, there are paintings of a massive, vibrant city with flames stretching into the sky and people dancing in the street.

I don't know where that city is, but it is familiar. I wonder if it was this city years ago, and this is what is left.

I'm dragged from corridor to corridor and up flights of stairs until we come to the throne room. I don't need to even be told it's a throne room, because right in the centre of the room is a gigantic gold throne with black onyx crystals on either side that stretch to the ceiling. They just shoot up into the air and are shaped into flames. My father is sitting casually on the throne, and kneeling next to him is my mother. Her head is bowed so I can't see her face, but I'd know her anywhere. I can't see her under the silver cloak she wears, only her small hands piled in her lap.

I turn to my father, King Bane, the monster who has ruined everything in his quest for power. He leans against the throne, his hand resting on his bent leg, and he smirks at me like he's the one who has won already when he definitely hasn't.

I sarcastically smile back as I'm dragged through the room and thrown onto my knees in front of the king. He nods at the guards, and they step back, leaving me alone with my father and mother. Not the joyous reunion I wanted, but I'm glad to see her.

While my mum is in silver, my father has a long, dark gold cloak that's littered with black marks that are designed to make symbols. It curls around him on the throne, and his clothes underneath are quite plain, just dark clothes made from delicate material and large, heavy boots. He has shaved his beard since last time that I saw him, and now he's cleanly shaven and his hair is nicely styled. Everything about him screams perfection as I observe him, like you would do any monster.

I lock my eyes onto his, so black and empty, and I wonder if he was ever good. If he was ever kind or nice or anything other than the power-crazy man he is now.

I see our mum's head twitch slightly, like she's desperate to look my way. But she can't, not when she is at his side. My hands itch to reach out to close the distance between us and throw my arms around her just to see my mum one more time to speak to her.

My eyes catch on the armrest where there is a crown, one I've seen before. I was wearing it in that vision.

It makes it so much more real.

I look away from the crown and the fear it gives me, and back up to my father, who simply watches me closely.

Too close.

"Did you come here for your mother, or did you come here for Maddox?" he asks. The question holds so much more power than it seems.

I hate that he doesn't include Austin.

"Both," I reply, making sure to keep my head held high despite the fact I'm on my knees. He laughs, the sound echoing around the empty room, and it is empty. There's nothing else in here but black walls, pitch darkness in each corner, and bright chandeliers hanging from the ceilings. They barely

cause much light to shine down on us, but they are pretty, smothered with what looks like thousands of tiny diamonds.

If they have this wealth, it's all for show, because his city is suffering. They need to escape here as much as he wants to with my power. It's something I can play on.

Bane looks down at my mother and puts his hand on top of her head like she's some sort of pet of his. It makes me want to growl; it makes me want to move forward and fight him with everything I have. She's a powerful witch, and here she is, completely subdued by this hellcaster king, someone she once fell in love with.

What made her love him in the first place? What did she see in his darkness?

"Did you hear that?" he asks her. "Our daughter thinks you want to be rescued from me, your mate."

She doesn't reply, like she's a well-trained pet, and I close my eyes for a second to swallow the frustration I feel.

I'd rather die than be a man's pet.

No woman should be owned by a man.

"I thought you killed Maddox," I say, desperate to get his attention off her. "I suppose that was the whole point, to hurt me. To lure me here when I figured it out."

"I assumed he was your mate already," Bane replies, his voice cold. Tense. Empty. "But it seems I was mistaken. If he was your mate, you would have known."

"I have the orbs as you wanted," I reply. "As you planned when you stabbed me. What's next?"

"Why would I tell you, daughter?" he replies with a dark laugh. "You're right, I wanted you here, and I wanted you to have the orbs. All I will say is that you won't survive what I have planned. Your time is limited."

“No!” my mum finally speaks, and he sharply looks down at her. She lifts her head to look at him. “You promised me my children wouldn’t be harmed! You can’t!”

“Shut up before I make you,” he growls back. “Guards!”

My mum looks at me, pushing her cloak back. My heart hurts as I take in her bruised face, the bruises on her neck, and her short blonde hair. Her eyes are so bright but dimmed with sadness, and I want to rush to her.

The guards walk her out, her eyes staying on mine until she is forced out of the door.

“Mothers are always too protective of their babes,” Bane sighs. “I never understood it.”

“Did you have parents?”

I remember the woman with long red hair in my vision. She said her son stole the throne, and she ran away with the orbs so he couldn’t get them.

Bane said a god created the orbs for him.

I’m not sure which story is true. It wouldn’t shock me if Bane lied, and I don’t know either of them well enough to know who to trust.

“Yes. My mother was immortal, powerful and made the orbs. She was a god of this world,” he replies, his voice drifting like he is imagining her. I don’t dare tell him I know what she looks like, too. “But she wouldn’t share any of her power with me. Those orbs lived within her, and she told me she was given the power to make them by my father. I never met him, but I was his son, so surely the orbs belonged to me?”

“Not if she made them,” I respond, and his eyes flash with anger. “The Moral Fall City was hers, and you were the prince then?”

“Yes,” he replies. “For hundreds of years until I demanded my throne, my birthright, and she didn’t take it well. So I used spells I created to pull the orbs from her body. Little did I know it would kill her slowly. I made a mistake and turned my back on her, holding the orbs, and she struck me.”

“Then she ran to The Onyx and gave them to the king,” I reply, “knowing you could never get them.”

His eyes narrow. “Yes. But look, her plan failed. The orbs are back here, and the same fate is going to happen to you that did her, but this time I will get my orbs.”

“So you are going to kill me?” I ask.

“Not yet. The spell has to be done perfectly,” he replies, like killing his daughter is nothing. He stands up off his throne and saunters closer. Bane looks down at me for a second before circling around me.

“The orbs will free my people, my army, and I will be the king of every world,” he tells me. I knew he was insane, but it turns out he is far crazier than I expected.

“You would murder millions to be crowned king. What is the point?” I ask. “What’s the point of being a king that everyone hates? You will be alone forever no matter what crown you have!”

He pauses in front of me and leans down, grabbing my chin. “Don’t you want to let our people out into the world? The children who suffer here?”

“No,” I bite out. “Not when it would let you out. You should stay here and burn forever.”

I should expect it, but I don’t, as he hits me hard across the face, and I bounce onto the floor, my cheek burning. Seconds later, he kicks me in my stomach with his large boot, and I gasp, all the air leaving my lungs in a rush of pain. I roll across the floor, a mixture of pain and shock freezing me to the spot. Tasting blood in my mouth, I groan, looking up at the ceiling of chandeliers right before Bane stands over me.

I can see nothing but disgust in his eyes, like he hoped the blood we share would make me as insane as he is. He leans down, and he wraps his large hand around my throat, lifting me into the air. I try not to struggle, but the lack of oxygen makes me after a few seconds, and being this close to him feels wrong.

All I want to do is lift the hidden dagger and stab him in the chest with it, but I suspect only my magic would kill him at this point.

His body flickers in and out; at one point, he is made of blue flames in the shape of a tall man, and the next he is normal again. It's creepy to watch how he changes into a monster, and that is who he is deep down. He has tricked everyone with the face he wears when he is really nothing more than empty fire underneath. I hate that I'm powerless right now.

I hate him so much.

"I can't wait to burn the magic from your soul and watch you die. You might have my blood, but you are not anything," he breathes into my face before he drops me onto the floor. I gasp for air, crawling away from him. I only crawl for a few seconds before two guards are picking me up by my arms and holding me between them.

"You came all this way to see your lover, so you will see him," he says, a sardonic smile on his lips, and he nods at the guards. As they drag me away, he watches with a smirk on his face. Slowly, he whispers three words.

"Meet my monster."

I have no clue what he means, but if he means Maddox, then he's no monster.

Not to me.

CHAPTER
SIXTY



Every staircase I'm forced down brings me closer to him. My Maddox. I barely notice the guards' tight grip on my arms, my blood dripping from my swollen and cracked lip, my swelling cheek or the bruises forming on my stomach and the pain that goes with them. The world feels numb, empty, and all there is, is another step towards my Maddox.

As a little girl, I always dreamed about falling in love with a prince, just like Cinderella did. Just like every little girl does.

My prince was the good guy, the saviour of the stories I read and everything my little heart dreamed of.

But in reality, my prince is born from darkness, and part of him will always be the villain. But he would never hurt me, never hurt anyone unless they threatened me. He is the villain I needed to protect me. I'd always choose him, and he is made for me. Our souls are so similar because I was never all good, and part of me came alive when I met Maddox. A darkness I hid deep.

We were shadows chasing the night away long before we met. Maddox embraced his way before we met, and I was ignoring my own. Together, we somehow fixed each other. I saved him and he showed me how to accept both sides of my soul, the good and the bad.

It can't have all been for nothing. We deserve a happy ending, a future, and not to die down here.

The guards push me through a door and into a damp room that has a metallic tang, and it's smothered in darkness. The guards stay by the door, standing still as statues, and neither look at me. I turn back into the darkness, seeing a light ahead, and I walk towards it.

Maddox.

Every breath, every footstep, echoes in the room, but I can only hear my own pulse beating away as I see the outline of a large metal cage with thick iron bars that look like they are plain, with no magic in sight. The light is coming from a small hole in the top of the room, which pours in light from another room with a white ceiling above us. I look back down at the cage as I get close enough to touch the bar and see him.

The world seems to stop. Everything pauses.

Maddox is crouched down in the middle of the cage, his chest bare and his muscles tense as he faces away from me. I run my eyes over his muscular back and up to his dark hair.

"Maddox," I breathe out, hoping he will turn to face me, my heart bursting with so much emotion even as I break apart. He tenses up further than before but doesn't turn, and I search the cage for a door, finding one on the side. I rush to it, needing to be close to him more than anything else. I rush to the cage door and push it open, stepping inside and briefly wondering why the door is open.

Why is he staying in this cage? There isn't much in the cage other than a toilet, sink and a small metal bed that looks bolted to the ground.

I walk around Maddox, hyperaware of every slight movement he makes until I'm in front of him. Seeing him for the first time brings me to my knees, and I almost can't breathe for a moment as he meets my eyes.

And I don't see any of the red, any of the light, only darkness and my own reflection in them.

Maddox looks at me like I'm a stranger, and I don't understand how my father has done this to him in such a short time.

“It’s me,” I whisper, crawling closer. He doesn’t move, his hands held in tight fists on either side of him. I place my hand over his heart, hearing and feeling it race fast. I run my hand up his chest, up his neck, and cup his jaw. “It’s Riona. Maddox, I need you.”

He moves so quick I barely trace the movement, but one second later his lips are inches from my neck, his hand is gripping the back of my neck, and the other is on my waist. His lips softly, carefully press against my neck, and I close my eyes, a shot of pleasure washing over me from the kiss alone. I can’t do much with the handcuffs on, but I want to touch him.

“Riona,” he groans against my neck, my name echoing around the room, his deep voice making my body feel weak. I’ve missed his voice, his scent, and everything about him. His teeth graze my neck, his sharp fangs tearing a line in their path, and I feel my blood welling from the graze. That’s when he snaps.

His teeth sink deep into my neck, and I cry out from the sharp pain, right before the pleasure hits. A sweet mix of pleasure courses through me, and I moan as he feeds from me, feeling myself getting wet between my legs. Maddox rips my leggings off and my top next before pulling me on top of his trousers. I reach between us with my cuffed hands and manage to pull out his hard cock, making him growl against my neck.

Never breaking from my neck, he lies me down on the cold ground and thrusts into me in one long glide. He breaks from my neck to push my cuffed hands above my head and hold them there as he bites into my neck again. This time I don’t feel any pain, only pleasure.

I kinda like the handcuffs right now.

I moan loudly, the sound echoing as unbelievable pleasure courses through me. Maddox doesn’t pause, thrusting in and out of me, fast and hard, every thrust rubbing against my clit. My hard nipples press against his chest, and soon I’m coming hard and fast, and I can’t feel anything but sheer pleasure.

“Maddox! Maddox! Maddox!”

His name is like a prayer as he finally breaks away from my neck and roars as he finishes in me, his whole body shaking. Breathlessly, I reach up,

rubbing my blood away from his lips as he looks down at me. His eyes change, bleeding back from the darkness and back to the mix of red and black I'm used to.

"Riona," he whispers, a plea, a groan, a mixture of them all. Either way, it breaks something inside me, and I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my lips to his. I kiss him with all the built-up passion, and he kisses me back with just as much, just as desperately. When I shiver, the room cold despite how hot it is in this world, Maddox pulls away and picks up the cloak. He wraps it around me as he pulls out of me and holds me on his lap.

Maddox searches my eyes, tracing over my cut lip and swollen cheek. "Who the fuck did this?"

His anger makes me shiver. "Bane."

"Dead," he growls. "That fucking bastard signed his death warrant when he stabbed you. I'm going to make it painful for him. It won't be easy or quick."

"I'll help," I reply, and his eyes sparkle with amusement. The Riona he met for the first time wouldn't have ever said that, but I've changed. His world, my world, has changed me.

And I wouldn't go back.

"How are you here?"

"More importantly, what was wrong with you when I came in here? It's like you didn't know me," I question.

He strokes a hand down my cheek. "They put something in the blood, and I black out. I don't know what I do when I'm out, but I'm glad I woke up inside of you."

My cheeks redden, and he chuckles low. "I enjoy seeing you blush."

"You always say such dirty things," I whisper back, and he smiles at me. A guard coughs and I cringe, remembering that they are by the door and likely heard everything.

Maddox glowers at them and turns to look down at me.

His tone changes, the playfulness gone. “Riona, how are you here?”

I can’t tell him about Katy, not when the guards are listening and could report anything we say back to Bane. “I came for you. I...I thought you were dead, and it broke me, Maddox. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t exist in a world without you, so I went with Natalia.”

His eyes darken. “She took advantage of you at your weakest, and I wasn’t there to stop it. I failed you.”

I shake my head. “No, Maddox. You didn’t fail me. Natalia tried to save her people, and with the orbs in her grasp, it might have made them strong enough to fight my father. I also think she really wanted to help me. Everyone is desperate, and at the end of the day, she didn’t have a choice. In the end, she tried to help me leave.”

Maddox tilts my chin up, my eyes locking with his. “Even if he had killed me, I would have found a way back to you. I don’t give a fuck about death. It’s not enough to keep me from you. Nothing is.”

“I’d find my way to you too,” I whisper, a stray tear falling down my cheek. “I want forever. I want you as my mate. Us, always.”

“Always, my Riona,” he whispers back, his voice sensual and filled with dark promises. “Now tell me everything that’s happened, starting with how long it’s been.”

For a while, I explain every detail of what happened since the rooftop, leaving out Katy, until we get to seeing my mother.

“Was it hard to see her like that?” Maddox asks. “If I saw my mother at a man’s feet, I’d kill him.”

“Yes,” I say, my voice laced with anger. “She was like a pet to him, and I hate him for it.”

“My bloodthirsty little human,” he murmurs into my ear. “I’ve hidden the dagger you had in your cloak. I’m going to get us out of here.”

“I thought I was the stabby one,” I whisper back.

He grins at me and nods his head to the cuffs. “Now, I like handcuffs, especially in bed, but we need these off.”

“I’m working on it,” I whisper back. “Trust me.”

“I do,” he replies. “And let me get us out of here. The timing has to be perfect.”

“I won’t leave without my mum and Austin,” I softly tell him.

“Them too,” he replies. “We have to get you back to The Onyx. You’re their queen.”

“I’m your queen,” I correct him. “And you are the only king in the world for me. The Onyx needs you too.”

We both pause when we hear footsteps, and I look over to see a guard walking to us. Maddox growls low, the sound echoing and pure frightening. The guard pauses outside the door of the cage, his hand shaking the tray he’s holding, before straightening up. He pushes the door open and walks in, placing the tray down.

I freeze when I see it has a silver dress on it and a silver suit with a black bow tie.

The silver dress... It’s the one from the vision.

Maddox looks at me, wondering why I’ve frozen. I couldn’t tell him about the vision when Bane could find out about it. Something tells me him knowing I spoke with his mother, my grandmother, wouldn’t end well for me.

The guard backs away and steps out of the cage before speaking. “King Bane has demanded your attendance to dine with him this evening. You have an hour, and you must wear these.”

“Why don’t you leave the cage?” I quietly ask Maddox.

“It’s magic,” he warns me, his voice laced with a violent edge. He leans closer, his hot breath blowing against my cheek. “But I have a plan. One I’ve been working on.”

“Good,” I whisper back. “Let’s bring down my father’s world and get the hell out of here.”

The way Maddox kisses me promises nothing but pure destruction to anyone in our path. The Moral Fall City doesn’t know what is coming. Neither does my father.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-ONE



The silver dress chosen by Bane falls around my body, tight around the waist, held up in an A-line cut at the top, and it's really quite beautiful, made of silk that is the softest I've ever felt.

But I hate it because it's from him. I hate that he is dressing me up like a doll that is meant to fit into his life, his castle, as the perfect princess to be sacrificed.

Because that is what I am to Bane. Nothing but a ticket out of here.

A cold breeze makes my skin prickle, and not for the first time, I wonder how it's cold down here when this whole world is boiling hot outside. It doesn't make much sense, and I feel like I'm missing something.

I'm tempted to pull Maddox's cloak over me, but I decide to leave it on the bed instead and embrace the chill as I know it will be warmer upstairs.

Maddox looks great in his suit, even if he still looks a bit on the wild side. No suit could hide his wild darkness. His hair is still a mess of black waves dotted with the red gems he always wears, and his eyes are like red and black flames, designed to draw you in. His muscular body stretches out the suit, almost making the buttons pop open, and the overall effect makes him look very attractive even if silver is not his colour. I much prefer him in black. I can't say silver is my favourite colour either, and after this, I won't be wearing it. I run my fingers through my hair, which is now a tangled mess of curls that falls to my waist, and it's pointless to try and tame them without a brush. Maddox lifts a curl and wraps it around his finger, his eyes

burning with lust. He makes me feel like I'm on fire as he slowly takes in my body in this dress.

"I look forward to ripping that dress off you later," he purrs.

"You can rip it to pieces," I reply, my voice low. We both stare at each other, the room thick with sexual tension, but we can't do anything about it right now. I clear my throat and pull my eyes away. "What do you think tonight's about?"

I look towards the doorway when Maddox's eyes drift over. He doesn't have the answers and they are the only ones that do. I can't see them in the darkness, but I know they are there. The guards change every eight hours; Maddox counted and some of them like to chat. Turns out Bane has told the city the blessed princess has returned to free them all, and he is getting his army ready. The rest of the things they chat about are gossip regarding affairs in the castle and how the king has a new harlot.

Loves my mum? Lying bastard.

Every day spent in this hellhole makes us both itch to get out and do something. Anything. Maddox says he has a plan, and I trust him completely, so I can wait. I know that he'll get us out of here somehow, and then I can do my next part of the plan. The cuffs are tight on my wrists, digging into my skin now, and the magic coming off of them is slowly wearing thin. I don't think it will be long before I break it.

Then everything is going to change. My power is building up, waiting for me, and it can't be caged for long. I just have to break out of its hold before Bane can use the spell that will kill me.

Maddox must notice me focusing on the cuffs, and he seems to know what I'm thinking.

"How long?" Maddox whispers to me.

"Maybe a few more days, possibly a week," I murmur back, and he nods.

"That timing will work for me too," he replies with a dark smile. The city is going to bleed.

I smile back.

Loving the villain has its benefits in more than one way.

I just hope I'm right. I'm only guessing about how long it takes to wind a crack into the magic. It's tiring, and I have to sleep before waking to bite at the magic once more. Maddox puts his arm around my waist as we hear the door open in the distance and the heavy footsteps of many guards. I'm not surprised to see seven guards outside the cage door, and one of them opens it before stepping back.

They're not stupid, but I do wonder who they fear? The princess that came here willingly and is a ticking time bomb? Or the vampire who can so easily turn into a monster?

I lift my head high and look towards Maddox, trying to remember the fact that I'm not weak and I'm someone that should be feared. I have the three orbs. I'm the rightful queen of The Onyx, and I was born for this.

Maddox is moving us fast out of the cage, with his arm tight around my waist, giving me the strength to stand up. My bare feet scrape against the floor as I walk, and the guards look down at my feet as I go past. I almost smile as they look at each other in a panic, like they probably should have thought about things like slippers or shoes. My shoes were taken, along with my ruined clothes but not my cloak, and I expected them to bring me new shoes to wear. I miss my favourite boots. It makes me smile in some sense to know the guards make mistakes. It's almost humanlike. The horrible thing is, not all the guards in this castle are going to be evil. Some of them are going to be good, but all of them are in our way.

And that means that they're a problem.

This whole city is in our way, and we have to get out of here. It's selfish and cruel, but I won't die in here, and I won't let my father out. He would destroy the world. I have to get out and I have the orbs, though I'm not sure if it's even possible to leave at all. My father can only leave at certain times, and we don't have anyone to open a portal. I'm guessing my orbs might give me a way out on this. I'm hoping they do. They were designed to help him get out of here. Well, that's what he says. Perhaps they could help me instead.

We finally leave our prison and head out into the lush corridors of the castle. The dark walls are eerie, and they seem to hang over us as we walk down the first corridor and to the stairs. Tiny little rocks cut into my feet with every step, making me flinch, and Maddox looks towards me, noticing everything. Without saying a word, he sweeps me into his arms and carries me up the remaining steps. I shake my head with a small smile.

I know there's no point arguing with him to put me down.

"I've always loved carrying you," he whispers, his hand squeezing my ass. I blush and his lips tilt up in amusement.

One of the guards coughs, and I miss what he says, but Maddox doesn't. One minute I'm in Maddox's arms, the next I'm standing on the carpet at the top of the stairs, and Maddox is holding the guard against the wall by his throat.

"You made a mistake talking shit about my queen," Maddox states, his voice dark and empty of any humanity.

He snaps the guard's neck and lets his body drop to the floor. The other guards all step back, their swords out and flames curling around their hands. Maddox straightens his suit and smiles at them.

"We best get moving," he suggests, a touch of promised violence to his voice. "We wouldn't want to be late?"

The guards look between each other as Maddox steps back to my side and winks at me. I shake my head and try not to look at the dead hellcaster guard.

The guards move into place and keep a tight circle around us as we carry on down the corridor, but this time they are all tense, watching Maddox carefully.

I smile. They couldn't stop him if they tried.

Maddox stays right at my side during the entire walk into warmer parts of the castle. This part of the castle is almost brighter too. Big diamond chandeliers hang all the way down the corridor, and they light up the onyx walls, almost making them shiny. The floor is carpeted in a deep red,

luscious velvet, and it's quite nice to walk on. There are several little side tables filled with fresh flowers that are magical. They are flowers I've not seen before, and I'm fascinated by them. They're mixes of red and orange, almost lit up at the ends, with tiny little sparks of embers flying off them but not burning anything they land on.

I want to ask what the flowers are, but after what just happened, I doubt they would tell me. We turn around a corner and come to a big open space. In the middle of the room is a long dining table. The table is made of pure glass, but it's not any kind of normal glass. Fire snakes up and down inside the glass, softly changing into swirls and patterns like it's alive. More of those flowers make the centrepiece, but these are larger, spreading up into the air like a tree and sparking little red embers everywhere on the table. They don't set the red placemats or glasses alight, they just disappear. The table is empty of food and guests, and there are red velvet chairs pushed up against the table, each place setting already laid out, ready for guests.

"You have to sit down," a nervous sounding guard suggests. Maddox gives him a look that would make any man back down and rush away before he walks me across the room.

We sit down at the table next to each other, and I move my seat a little closer to his.

Maddox leans across and brushes some of my hair away from my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

"I've memorised every single one of these guards' faces, and I'm going to rip every single one of their throats out," he informs me. "No one gets to look at you."

I don't doubt it. And at this point, I probably wouldn't stop him, as the guards aren't respectful and they seem like pure assholes.

I lean my head on his shoulder as we wait. And wait. And wait. Eventually I hear footsteps behind us, and I turn to see Bane walking in, and on his arm is my mother. She looks beautiful in a long silver dress, one that's similar to mine, but hers is more detailed, filled with lace and frilly parts. It's funny because it's something she would never wear. I don't think I've seen my mum in a dress like this ever. She's always the one who wore leggings and

large hoodies and her hair up in a messy bun. A normal mum. The woman in front of me is a complete, utter stranger in that sense until I meet her eyes and see the same warmth there that always was.

I miss her, even when we are this close. There might as well be miles between us. Her eyes flicker to Maddox, and I swear I see relief in them.

I look behind her as Austin walks in, two guards stopping at the door, who must have been his escort. I wonder where he is locked up. Austin's in the same matching silver suit as Maddox, his face still littered with bruises, some of them fresh. His lip is cut in two new places, and I nearly gasp when I see his ear is missing, nothing but a bloody mess left. I don't need to know who did that.

I look at my father and glare at him to make sure he sees the look of disgust and horror on my face.

I hate what he has done to Austin, and what he is still doing to all of us. I don't want to be at this meal, pretending to play happy family.

My mother sits down opposite me, right next to where Bane sits down in his gold suit. I'm sure it's to make a point that he wears gold while all of us are in silver, a lesser metal to his. I hate all the passive-aggressive, unspoken things that are going on in this room.

Austin sits down next to Maddox and looks across at me. He's saying a million questions in his eyes.

Are you okay?

Why did you come here?

Is Arlo alive?

You shouldn't have come here at all. The last isn't a question, but a statement. I don't need to tell him why I came here. He should know. I have to look away because it's overwhelming, and I find Bane's eyes looking at us with a knowing smile that I want to wipe off his face.

"I'm so glad we finally had this family meal, even with you here, Maddox," Bane states, folding his hands together in front of him. "Though I was

happily shocked to find that you weren't my daughter's mate yet. Maybe she will wake up from her infatuation with a monster soon enough."

No one says a word, and Bane sighs. "Unless you managed to fix that mating issue. My guards told me they had quite a bit of a viewing earlier this week."

"Shut the fuck up," Maddox growls.

"You touch me or anyone at this table, and then a hundred guards would be here in an instant, and you'll watch as I kill her," Bane replies, gesturing towards me. "One way or the other, she dies. I'd much prefer she dies in my own timing, releasing all the people in the city, but I would kill her to stop you."

"You'd need more than a hundred guards, Bane," Maddox replies. Only because I know Maddox well do I see under the facade he puts up, and I see the worry for me under it. He couldn't fight them all and protect me.

And I can't fight with my magic while I have these cuffs on. I look towards Maddox and slowly shake my head. He sits back, and I take that as confirmation that he's not going to jump across this table and attack Bane. Not yet.

Bane smirks in victory and claps his hands twice. The room is soon filled with waiters who place various plates of food on our table and bring a large glass of blood for Maddox. After that, fourteen women come into the room, of all ages, but the one thing in common is their beauty. They're all dressed like belly dancers, with skirts of thin orange chiffon and matching bras. They have high heels on that would trip me up in a second, but I can't help admire them. They all have bells and coins attached to their skirts that jingle as they walk.

I watch as they place themselves in different spots around the room, and slowly music starts to play. It's a familiar song, twisted and changed to be more upbeat, and I like it. The dancers immediately start to dance like controlled puppets, perfectly in time and not a footstep out of place. Slowly, their bodies start to light up with fire as they dance, embers flying out of their hands that make a circle around them. Several circles are created around their bodies, and those flames dance with the women. It's rather

mesmerising to watch the flames, the dancing, the skill it must take to hold that magic continuously. They never once blink or look away or show any emotion, and it's really quite fascinating.

“My dancers, everyone. Aren't they magnificent?” Bane says, watching them, and the flames reflect in his black eyes. “Each one of these women was hand-picked for me as teenagers. They dance until they break or burn.”

I try not to imagine that ending for any of them.

I don't answer. I don't scream at him like I want to. I've got to play nice for now. He already knows I hate him, and that isn't going to change. But he doesn't need to know my plans for what's coming next. I have to get through this meal. Get through all of this.

“I have a deal for you, Riona,” Bane states, looking directly at me. Mum looks between all of us, a tiny moment for her, but I notice it. Her hand clutches tightly around the knife in her hand. Bane briefly glances at her and smiles as she carries on eating, before turning back to me.

“Deal?” I echo.

“Yes, there's a game that all royals in our family can play. It was created thousands of years ago, and I played it once,” he explains. “So did my mother and her mother and so on. I wanted Austin to play the game, but he is too weak.”

“I disagree,” I reply quickly and without thinking.

“You would, being his twin,” he responds. “You're blinded to his weakness.”

I try really hard not to roll my eyes.

Maddox places his hand on my knee, moving closer, his whole body tense, ready for the attack. “Will you play the game?” Bane asks, looking at me intently. “And in exchange, I'll give you something.”

“What kind of thing?”

“One request,” he answers. “One thing, but it can't be escaping from here. I don't have that power, but something else.”

Maddox looks down at me, and I meet his gaze. I'm not being asked to play. This isn't a question, it's a demand and another game. He wants to see if I will refuse, but I don't doubt for a second the game isn't already being set up in my name.

I nod and Bane grins.

The rest of the meal is tense and quiet, but it's better than hearing Bane go on and on. The only sound is dancers and the music, which switches tunes now and then. Eventually, the meal ends when Bane and Mum have eaten everything. Maddox, Austin and I haven't touched anything. I've just moved the food around, not trusting Bane not to drug our food.

Bane stands first and steps over to pull my mum's seat out. I stand up and Maddox moves to my side quicker than I can track.

I want to get the hell out of here, even if it means going back to the prison. As I pass Austin, his hand reaches out, and he brushes my fingers just a little. A sign of comfort. Everything in me wants to rush and give him a hug.

I hope he knows I'm going to fight. I'm going to win and get us out of here.

"Oh, by the way," Bane calls, and I look up at Maddox, whose jaw tightens as we both turn. But he isn't looking at us. He looks towards the door as it opens. All the guards that escorted us out here are waiting outside.

Bane clicks his fingers, and they burst into flames. I turn away as the guards scream and scream until there is silence.

"They should have brought you shoes," Bane says as he walks past me and through the piles of ash, all that is left of the guards, even as new guards come rushing over.

Maddox looks down at me, and I know we are thinking the same thing. How do we fight powers like that?

How do we take down the insane king?

CHAPTER
SIXTY-TWO



I stare up at the hole in the ceiling, which is some sort of metal grating, and it pours in the only light in this room right onto us. I wonder if it was a viewing room of some sort years ago, and then I wonder if it means my grandmother was all good if she had a place like this. I curl up on Maddox's chest, and he grumbles a little in his sleep before pulling me even closer, burying his head into my neck as he moves down the bed. I run my hands down his back to comfort him, as he needs this sleep. It's been three days since the meal, and I'm hungry, tired, and grumpy. Maddox is worse. He refuses to feed from me, claiming I need my strength, and he didn't want to sleep in case someone came in here and took me.

It took a while, but he finally gave into the need for sleep...but I wish he would feed on me. I'm already weak, and there isn't any point in both of us suffering.

I think back to my mum and Austin at the meal, and everything that happened. How I wish I could do anything more than be forced back into this cage. I sigh and carry on wearing down the barrier of darkness around my magic, making tiny crack after tiny crack until it finally breaks.

And it will break.

I hear the door opening a second before Maddox is awake and pushing me back on the bed as he stands, fangs out and bared, ready to attack anyone who comes close. I sit up and watch as a figure slowly comes into view until I can make out it's a woman.

A very familiar one.

I have to keep my features neutral and give nothing away as Katy comes into view, carrying a plate with a bottle of blood and food for me. Maddox looks down at me, and I softly shake my head to warn him not to say a word. His eyes narrow, but he doesn't say a word as I stand and Katy comes to the cage door and pushes it open. She places the tray down and pushes back her red hair, which must be a wig, and meets my eyes with her green ones. I'm guessing contact lenses, but I haven't a clue how she managed all that down here.

She winks at me before walking away, and I watch her go before Maddox goes to the tray. He carries it back to the bed and places it between us.

"Secrets?" he asks, the single word hanging between us.

"So many ears around here," I gently explain without giving anything away. I lift the plate, not surprised to see a note underneath. I read the note without lifting it, pretending to look through the various breads, cheese, and grapes.

"I'm here and ready. The food is safe, and be careful. The king won't let you win tomorrow. It's all set up."

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath before carefully pulling the note out and sliding it into my cloak pocket. I look up at Maddox, who is tense and staring at the bottle of blood like it's his own personal enemy.

"It's okay," I tell him.

"Every drop of blood I've touched here made me forget. I could have done anything in that time, and I wouldn't have known," he reminds me, but I haven't forgotten. It's horrible what happened to him, and I hate to think what happened when he wasn't aware. The sex we had flashes into my mind. How out of it he was. I don't think he knew who I was, not fully, and it was only our connection that brought him back.

Whatever drug it was had made him uncontrollable, like a caged monster, just like my father said.

I hate him so much.

“Trust me,” I ask, lifting the bottle and uncapping it. I hope it’s animal blood, and I try not to think about it too much as I pass him it. He gulps, his eyes flashing like fire for a second before he takes it.

I open the water bottle and take a long drink before digging into the food. Maddox has drunk all the blood in moments, and he wipes his lips and waits for something. After a few minutes, he puts the bottle down and watches me as I eat my food.

“I will be strong enough for you to feed on me,” I say with a coy smile.

His lips twitch with amusement, and his voice drops. “I think you just like having me inside you. In every. Single. Way.”

My cheeks burn red as he laughs, and I love hearing his laugh, how normal it is between us. For a moment, we can pretend we aren’t locked up in a world that isn’t our world, and my life isn’t literally a ticking time bomb. My eyes betray me as I flicker a glance to my arm, the white veins crawling all over it.

The Mad Prince loves me.

And I will pay the price of the curse a million times over.

“I will save you if it’s the last thing I do, Riona,” Maddox vows. “You will not die from that curse.”

“I know,” I reply, and he arches an eyebrow. “Arlo is going to find the witch, and I trust him. Your job is to get us out of here and spend forever at my side.”

“Arlo?” he questions, pulling a face. “Maybe it was a good thing I didn’t kill him after all.”

“Yes, it was,” I deadpan.

Maddox simply smiles. “If he ever looks at you like you’re more than a friend, I will end him, though. Only I get to look at you that way.”

I shake my head, secretly loving his possessive nature. It does things for me. “Does it matter when I’m only ever looking at you?”

He leans across and kisses me, a sharp metallic taste lingering in my mouth when he moves back. “Yes. You’re mine.”

“Tell me something you want to do when you’re out of here,” I ask, running my hand over his chest.

“Very naughty things, Riona,” he replies, and I pat him.

“I mean like go to Paris,” I suggest.

“Why Paris?” he asks me. “Is that where you want to go?”

I sigh, thinking on it. “No, I want to go to Greece and sit on a beach with you and pretend to be humans. I want us to be forgettable and mix in with all the tourists. Then it will just be us.”

“I doubt very much you would be forgettable to any male,” he tells me. “But we will do this. A beach, in Greece, naked—”

“I never said naked,” I interrupt, and he smirks at me.

“It’s the way I see it,” he tells me. I bet. Laughing, I cuddle him tighter, imagining the beach, the hot sand, and the even hotter man at my side. We could go anywhere in the world, travel together and see everything.

He is my home, and we will have a future out of here. I won’t ever give up on us.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-THREE



*S*oft, billowing clouds surround me in a comforting embrace, and yet all I can focus on is her long red hair, which drops in between the clouds, disappearing below. The red is a stark contrast to the white clouds, and it's so out of place. I stand on the clouds, in a white dress that whisks around my legs in the wind. Yet the wind doesn't move her hair at all or the silver dress she wears. She just lies there, looking up at the cold ceiling of the room. I'm quite aware that a room shouldn't have clouds as a floor, wood walls and the cement ceiling. It doesn't take me long to figure out this is a dream or vision or whatever it is where she comes to me.

"You never told me that you're my grandmother, only that we are related," I say, speaking for the first time. I didn't ever expect to see her again, but something makes me happy to have this time with her.

"Well, titles do not matter much when we will never meet outside of here and I'm long dead," she replies. "I can only come to you one more time. I was given three times."

"Who gave you that?"

"Do you really believe you're alone in this world, Riona? That you aren't being watched, guided and protected by the unknown? There is much you will never know until it is your time, and that's how it should be," she softly explains. "But know you are never alone."

I've felt alone so many times in my life, and if someone is guiding me, they aren't doing the best job so far. Everything is seriously messed up. My

grandmother really is beautiful and enchanting in an otherworldly kind of way. I stare at her for a second, wondering if I have any of her looks. I see some of it, I suppose. Maybe, but not a lot. I find my mother's side too much, but I don't count that as a bad thing.

"What's your name? You never told me," I question.

"It's best you do not know it, Riona," she replies. In case I accidentally say it in front of him. "Riona, your fate is linked to another, and if you take what is right in front of you, you will be free."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Oh Riona, I cannot tell you. You must make the decision on your own," she whispers to me, her voice easily carrying to my ears over the small space. "But you will survive what is to come. It will not break you. You've been broken far worse, and I know you can survive this."

"Whatever he throws at me, I will not break under his hand," I say. As long as I have Maddox, I can fight the world.

"I know this," she replies, standing up. "But some things, some things are a test of the soul."

Her red hair is like a curtain around her back, and it really is beautiful. Almost looks like it's laced with gold. She walks to me and gently places her hand on my shoulder and leans in. She whispers something in my ear, and it changes so much.

It changes everything.

The dream is fading as she leans back and smiles at me, both of us keeping a secret.

Secrets hidden in dreams.

I wake up slowly in the prison room, looking up at the cage bars above me and above that, the grating and the light pouring in from the other room. Sometimes I swear I hear footsteps in there, but I can't see anyone. I think back to the dream vision, whatever it is, and something relaxes inside me, knowing that I have one more time to see her. To say goodbye. To thank her

for giving me the orbs and for sacrificing her life to get them away from him. I'm just glad at this point. A grunting catches my attention, and I look up as Maddox pulls himself up on the bars with just his hands, his feet leaving the ground.

Sweat slides down his back as he does his pull-ups. It's quite the view to wake up to, and I'm completely in awe watching.

And a little turned on. Okay, more than a little. He really has an amazing body, and he is so beautiful. I don't think I've seen anyone as muscular as he is. He looks back at me and drops to the floor, wiping his hair out of his face. I smile at him as he leans over me, popping a kiss on my forehead before going to the sink. He washes his face and neck and back with cold water before drying with the small rough towel that they gave us.

"Sleep well?" he asks me.

"Something like that," I tightly reply, wishing that I could tell him exactly who I saw in my dreams. But I feel like it's not safe to talk about her anywhere in this castle. There are too many ears, and I know our conversations are being listened to, then repeated back to Bane.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the test is today," I say. I just have a feeling it is.

"I hate this," he replies with a tight jaw. "I wish I could do this for you and take your place. I don't like it, and I'm not going to let them easily take you from me."

"I know," I say, sitting up. I pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them as he paces the cage.

He wants to burn this world down for me.

And funny enough, I have the power to do just that, but I'm cuffed.

I watch him as he stalks over to me. "If it didn't cost you your brother and mother, I'd destroy everyone in this castle."

"But you can't," I softly say, knowing this is breaking him inside as much as it is me. His eyes flicker, like flames going out in a dark room. He hides

it well, but I know he is struggling in more than one way. “You’re hungry, Maddox.”

He smiles and brushes some curls away from my cheek. “Always, but only for you.”

He won’t drink what they give us, and I don’t blame him. The food seems fine for me, at least. I was reluctant to eat any of it when it wasn’t brought by Katy, but my hunger gave out in the end. I nibbled on some of the bread, and so far, there haven’t been any effects.

I yawn and try to hide it behind my hand. I’m exhausted, even after sleeping, but I have to keep biting away at the binds on my magic. I know I’m close, I can feel it, but it seems harder every single time.

“I can get us out of this. I know I can,” I say, lifting my hand up to him, offering him my wrist. “But you need to feed.”

“No,” he says, taking my hand and holding it in his. “I love you for offering.”

“I’m worried, Maddox,” I say.

“Do not worry about me being a bit hungrier than usual. It only makes me more dangerous,” he replies with a dark smile. He has a fair point, and he has won this argument. I don’t say anything out loud as I crawl into his lap. I place my head on his shoulder, wrapping my arms around his waist. He embraces me back, and we just sit there for a moment in silence. Content silence, even in this horrible place.

“Don’t fight them when they come for me,” I ask him softly. “They could tell Bane, and he would hurt my family. They could force you to have that drug stuff, and I don’t want that.”

“I’ve never felt so powerless,” he admits.

“I know this is hard, and I don’t want to be away from you,” I gently reply. “You have to trust me to look after myself for a while. He won’t kill me.”

“There are far worse things to do to someone than kill them,” he tells me, his eyes flashing with memories of probably things he’s done to people that

are far worse than killing. I try not to think of it or what's coming up for me next.

"I love you, Maddox," I say. "Your past and all."

"And I've never once deserved you," he replies. "But I will never, ever love anyone like I do you."

He leans in and kisses me softly, gently. The kiss soon turns from soft and gentle into passionate and deep. His tongue slides into my mouth, battling with my own, and his hands glide into my hair, holding tightly. I moan into his mouth, and that's when he pulls away, leaving me wanting more.

"I don't want the guards hearing a single moan like that from your lips," he murmurs. "Those are for me alone."

He leans closer, running his thumb across my lip. "I can't wait to get you alone and take you as my mate."

A shiver shakes through me at the thought. We don't get more than a second to talk about mating before I hear the door opening. Some part of me is relieved that this test is finally here, that there's no more waiting, but most of me is nervous. Maddox helps me stand and clasps my hand as I try to count the many footsteps coming towards us. Eventually, I see four guards. Maddox growls low as I take a step towards them, and one of them opens the cage door. I lean up and kiss him softly once to say goodbye without saying that word.

"Hurry back," he urges. "And don't you dare let him win."

"Never," I reply. "My lover taught me how to be fierce. He taught me how to be a queen that doesn't give in."

"I like the sound of him," Maddox replies, and I chuckle as I let go of him.

I walk out of the cage to the guards, who stand around me, and we walk to the door. I step out into the corridor after one of the guards, my bare feet already getting cuts from the rocks that litter the floor. One of the guards stops me and offers me a pair of shoes. They are small black leather shoes, and they look about the right size. I can't see his eyes under the helmet, but

there's a silver symbol on his chest that suggests he's different from the other guards in some kind of rank.

"Here," he gruffly says.

"Thank you," I reply as I take them, and I pause. I might be stupid for saying anything, but I need to say it. "I didn't tell my father, by the way, about the shoes. I never would have wanted all those guards dead over a goddamn pair of shoes. It was wrong, and I am sorry for his actions. I wish I could have stopped it."

The guard doesn't say anything, simply stepping back. I slide the shoes on, and as we start to walk, the guard lowers his voice. "We know, princess." His tone is almost kind and completely unexpected.

I look up at the steps before starting to ascend them, wondering what kind of fresh hell is waiting for me in a test for royals.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-FOUR



The air is thick and uncomfortably hot as we walk through the castle, down the familiar corridors, and I try to mark a path for myself, but it's a maze. We come outside to a balcony and walk down several flights of stairs, out where the walls are so high I can't see anything else, but the fresh, albeit warm, air is a welcome relief. I missed being outside. The guard in front of me blocks the view for only a second before I see the massive gardens filled with flowers. The flowers are huge and thick, stretching to make forests of them on either side of a large clearing with a dip in the middle. The flowers flicker embers all around us, and they look like falling stars, bright and beautiful.

Right at the front of the gardens are Bane and Austin. Austin is wearing cuffs, smothered in his blood as they cut into his wrists, but he doesn't move. I don't see any new bruises on his face, and the cuts look better than before. He looks up like he can sense me, and I try to give him a reassuring smile. I instantly don't like that my brother is here, but I feel powerless to do anything.

As the guards step back, I walk straight up to my father, and he pointedly looks down at my shoes before meeting my gaze. His expression gives nothing away, but I can see how happy he is. He's planned this for years; he must have done. Ever since my mother left him, ever since he knew we were born, it's probably been an ongoing plan. All this time, as he's desperate to get these orbs back and us. He seems like a completely sick bastard to do this kind of thing, because it's all about control. He needs to control everything around him, and while we weren't at his side or at his

feet bowing, we weren't under his control. Truthfully, he most likely hates us for taking our mum from him, because she would always choose us.

"My children," he says eventually. Of course he had to start with a really pompous attitude. God, I hate him. "I'm really looking forward to today. It gets boring down here."

"I can imagine," I reply dryly.

"You can walk straight through my gardens, and you'll find the test begins there. It's easy, really. You can bring one person alive out of there, just one. That's it. The rest are sacrifices," he says with a cold smirk.

"One?" I ask.

"Yes, the right person," he says with a small smile. It sounds like there are going to be more people in this test than I thought. Is that why Austin is here? Is he one of them? Where is my mum? I look towards Austin and back to my father. "Oh yes, I brought him here to watch. Won't be fair to have his sister risk her life without having her twin brother there to watch. It might teach him something about strength to see you go through this."

I pause. "Did you ever love us? You know, we're actually your children, right?" I ask. "You claim to love our mother, that she's your mate, and we are children of that mating. Yet you do this to us. This isn't how you love someone. Do you even know how to love someone? Was it because your mother never loved you?"

He looks down at me with cold contempt, and before I can blink, he whacks me really hard across the face. I stumble a little, but I don't fall this time, having gotten used to him hitting me. He certainly isn't winning any parenting awards. I straighten my back and try not to flinch at the pain throbbing in my cheek.

I got my answer, though. His reaction said it all.

"You don't get to speak to me like that. I am your father," he angrily snaps. "Now go and play the test before I decide to make you pay for speaking out of line."

“Yes, Bane,” I reply sharply. I look once more towards Austin. His eyes search mine.

“Good luck, sister,” he tells me, his voice broken and cracked, sounding like he’s been screaming too much. It hurts my heart to hear it, and it makes it ever so hard to walk away from him when all I want to do is destroy the monster hurting my brother. The cuffs remind me they are there, jingling as I walk away through the garden.

I never wanted the power of the orbs, the strong magic and responsibility that came with it, but now I can’t use the magic to save my family, my man, and my people. I realise I always needed it. The magic was always mine.

I walk through the garden until I can’t see my father or Austin over the hill. I go deeper and deeper down until I come to the bottom of a crater the size of a football pitch. There’s really nothing here, just a stretch of dirt, and I can’t even see above the hill on the other side. It’s too high. I look around, a frown on my face, wondering what the hell I’m going to be doing. Ever so slowly, the ground starts to shake, and I brace myself. A scream is ripped out of my throat as a piece of earth shoots up in the sky in front of me. The ground under my feet shakes before it does the same, and I’m thrown up in the air as I dig my fingers into the dirt to hold on. I clutch the ground as tightly as I can as it stops, jolting me up in the air once. I stand up on shaky legs as the ground around me starts to rise in all different pointed levels.

Dozens of towers of raised earth appear, and the height makes me dizzy. It doesn’t take me long to see where the people are, right ahead of me, and it’s worse than I thought. Just outside the crater are five people tied to wooden pyres. One of them is a young child with short black hair and dark skin, dressed in a pretty silver dress. My gut feels like it’s been punched as I look at the young girl, who can only be about ten. She’s tied in the middle, and a woman next to her is trying to reach to her, wriggling in her rope, and she has long black hair and similar features to the girl. I’m going to guess that she’s her mother. The others are all men, and all of them look unconscious. I look around, wondering what I’m meant to do before making a bad plan.

I’m going to just jump across the raised earth to get to them, and I can only take one of them back.

But why would this be dangerous? It all seems too easy, and I don't like it. Seconds later, something else bursts out of the ground in a blast, and I duck as dirt rains down on me. Dirt with embers in it. I look down to see what looks like a massive bird, but it's made of pure fire with a long tail and long beak. It squawks loud, and the sound burns my ears. Soon after, dozens of the fire birds fly out of the hole, all of them smaller than the big one, but there are so many of them. They follow the big fire bird, swirling around the raised earth like a wave of fire. My god, they're going to burn the people.

That little girl.

No. Hell no. It's not happening.

Without thinking, I jump onto the next ledge of earth right in front of me. My cuffed hands make it hard to grab onto anything, and I nearly fall. I use my knees to pull myself up, grazing them against the dirt before standing. The flying birds are getting higher, crawling with every wave, and I regret looking at them. I jump to the next ledge and the next one, which is easy, and I don't have to even fall to my knees as I manage to stand. I keep jumping until I'm covered in dirt and getting close. The girl and her mum have noticed me now, and they both look terrified. I'm only halfway across the crater when the fire bird rises up right in front of me. I jump back as flames bounce off my hands, and I flinch in pain. I was wrong, the fire birds are more phoenixes up close, and they're beautifully deadly.

Maddox would like them. The sharp beaks and the red eyes make them look ever so dangerous, and I know they must be. They swirl around me on the ledge, right below me, and I don't think they know I'm here. I look down at my fingers and see there are welts on them. I don't think I've ever been burnt. These phoenixes aren't normal, and that isn't hellfire. The girl starts crying, and it makes me stand, pushing away the shock. The major problem I've got is the next ledge means I need to jump over these phoenixes and the path that they're making.

The flames flicker up in the gap, and I know it's going to hurt. I take in a deep breath of air before running and jumping. I feel my feet catch on one of the bird's wings, burning me before I slam hard into the ledge on the other side. It takes the wind out of my lungs, and everything hurts as I roll

onto my back, pulling my feet towards me. They're covered in little burns, blistering and bleeding already, and it kills me when I stand on my feet.

I must get to the girl. Nothing else matters right now. It's just pain. I look towards the next ledge and realise I can make three more jumps. I could get right in front of them. I run and jump onto the next one, everything hurting me as I do. But I'm ahead of the phoenixes now, just by a little. I have to keep moving. I don't pause as I jump to the next one and the next, and then I'm right in front of the pyres. I'm not sure how to get onto that last ledge, but I take a running jump anyway, knowing that if I land anywhere near, I can climb. I land right on the edge, and it's easy enough to stand up in front of the pyres, breathless and covered in blood and burns. I look straight behind me to double-check where the phoenixes were.

They're not far.

"Please save my daughter! Just take her!" the woman cries at me, pleading. "Please! Please!"

"No, mama!" the girl wails.

"I'm not leaving either of you," I tell them and give the mother a nod, understanding she doesn't care as long as I get her child out. I might not be a parent, but I know what she's asking me to do. I run to the girl and start undoing the ropes with my burnt hands. There are so many wraps of rope that it takes me longer than I hoped, and the flames of the phoenixes get closer and closer with every passing second. It's extremely hard to undo the rope, thanks to the cuffs, and I must push each layer of rope around her every time to untie it. I'm covered in sweat and blood and burns, but I push it all to the side to focus. I have to get her out. I couldn't live with myself.

The girl looks at me with pure panic in her eyes as her mum tries to soothe her, telling her repeatedly how much she loves her. It makes me think of my own mum and how she must feel about having me in this world, the world she fought to hide me from. The second the girl is out, I run to the mum and start undoing her.

"No, get my daughter away from here! They are coming!" she shouts at me, her voice pleading. "Please! Please!"

I look over at the phoenixes and know there is a slim chance.

“Help me pull the rope!” I tell the girl. She moves to my side, and we work together, pulling and untwisting the rope.

I can feel the heat of the phoenixes right before the rope falls, and she jumps out, grabbing her daughter. I look around us, seeing that the other side of this hill is a massive jump to freedom. We won’t make it back over the crater, and the forest would hide us. It’s a big jump, though, for a little girl. I look at the little girl, her little legs, and close my eyes.

“Dammit,” I whisper to myself, thinking of anything to get us out of this. I have one idea that settles in my mind, something crazy, perhaps even insane. It probably won’t work, but it might do, and it’s the only way I see the girl surviving this.

I look down at the girl. “I want you to climb on my back and hold on tight. Can you do that?”

She looks at her mum, who nods at her and meets my gaze. “What’s your plan, princess?”

“It’s Riona, and you won’t like it. I just need you to trust me and make that jump,” I say, pointing at the gap.

Her eyes widen, and she looks between her daughter and me.

“Promise me you won’t leave her?”

“I’d die first,” I firmly state. “I’m not my father. I’ll bring your daughter over, I promise.”

She hugs her daughter tightly, whispering something to her and nodding at me. She runs and I hold my breath as she makes the jump over, slamming into the cliff wall. She grabs hold of rocks above her, and she starts climbing up the last bit as I hear squawking behind me.

I look towards the little girl, keeping an eye on the approaching phoenix. “What’s your name?”

“Alyx,” she tells me in a shaky voice.

“I’m going to do something completely and utterly insane, and I really need you to trust me and hold on. Ok?”

“Yes,” she replies with nothing but fear in her tone. I have to do this. I can save her. I’m a goddamn queen, and I won’t let the king of this hellhole force my hand.

The girl climbs on my back as I lean down, and holds onto me tightly like she’s scared to even let go, and I don’t blame her.

The phoenixes dive towards us, and they immediately start burning the first man, who never wakes up, and I really hope Alyx doesn’t look, because I barely can. The smell is awful, and I’m glad the man doesn’t wake. I can’t save him. I keep my eye on the phoenix at the front, the biggest one and the best chance I have of doing this. It flies directly towards me, its red eyes and sharp beak so close as it snaps in my direction, and I slide to the side. I throw my arms around it and use the metal of the handcuffs like a collar to hold me to its body. It immediately lifts us off the ground and flies forward, trying to shake us off, and I lunge to the side. My stomach feels like it has a million butterflies in it as the phoenix swerves and shakes and tries to lean back to peck me, but the hold on its neck with my handcuffs makes it impossible. The girl screams, latching onto my back as I try to keep my eyes open, even as embers flicker into my face, down my hair, arms, and chest.

The scream stays lodged in my own throat as the handcuffs pull, pressured in the way they cut into my wrists. It almost feels like they could snap off. The phoenix flies directly in the way I want it to go, and I pull the handcuffs to make it turn right a little. It squawks and squeals at me as it fights, and I soon realise I haven’t thought out the plan entirely, because when I let go, we’re going to have a big problem.

It’s going to be angry and ready to burn us to ashes.

The girl holds on tight, though, strangling me, and I hope she isn’t getting burnt like I am. If she is, she doesn’t cry out or say a word. As we come towards the edge of the trees, the second that I can, I let us go by sliding the handcuffs down its long body, and we both tumble to the ground. The fall hurts like a bitch, but I don’t have a second to think about it. I grab Alyx’s

hand, pulling her to her feet as the phoenix spins around and lets out a long squawk, like the noise it made coming out of the ground.

Double fuck.

The phoenix flies up in the air and comes back down, squawking at us as we run into the trees where Alyx's mum is waiting.

“RUN!” I shout at them, and I run as fast as I can towards the tree line, the phoenix nipping at me from behind, catching my hair. Parts of it burn, but I try to ignore it, and I could barely feel the pain of the burns all over my body at this point. We head to the tree line, and it's easy to lose the phoenix as it backs away from the trees. I fall to my knees, the world getting dim and spinning.

Alyx kneels in front of me. “Are you okay? You look bad.”

“Thank you is what my daughter meant,” her mum says with a light laugh. “And do you need my help to stand? You need a healer.”

“I doubt I'll be getting one in the prisons,” I reply.

Alyx's eyes widen. “But you're the heir! Why would you be in the prisons?”

“My father,” I reply. Her mum looks equally in shock and leans down, wrapping her arm around me to help me stand. The little girl goes to my other side and holds me up with her tiny arm. Every step hurts more than the last, the adrenaline wearing off, but we keep a good pace as we walk through the forest, back to Bane and Austin. Austin's eyes widen when he sees me, and he takes a step forward, looking devastated, but Bane puts his arm out to stop him.

I must look bad. Maddox is going to lose his shit.

Bane claps once as we stop in front of him. Alyx and her mum step back behind me, bowing their heads low.

“I said one. You've failed the test and now you must kill one of them. No spares,” Bane demands.

“NO!” I scream at him. “I will not kill anyone, and neither will you! I’ve failed, sure you can say that, but killing either of them will make me hate you forever. It would be wrong, and you know that!”

“Fine,” he replies.

One word, followed by one movement.

He spins and stabs a dagger through Austin’s lower arm, cutting it off, and it falls to the floor before disappearing into flames. Austin’s scream of pain is terrible, and it makes me scream too as I run to him, only for Bane to catch me, forcing me to watch as Austin screams and cries on the ground.

“LET ME GO!” I scream, fighting off Bane’s arm.

“I told you one of them, and I’m being nice, daughter, but there is always a price. I hope his screams haunt you forever, because you caused this by not listening to me,” he tells me calmly. I can’t breathe, I can’t think as I struggle to get to Austin, right before something slams into my head and darkness invites me, with a calm silence I will never get while I’m awake.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-FIVE



The world is a mixture of pain as I drift awake and blink a few times to focus on Maddox as he holds me in his arms, my body in his lap. He isn't looking at me, but everything about him is tense, and the sting of the healed burns snaps me back into the reality of everything that just happened. The test, Alyx and her mum, and Austin. Gods, Austin.

"Austin..." I whisper, my voice cracking. Maddox looks down at me as I cry, feeling so powerless, so useless in every sense.

"I'm here, sweetheart," he murmurs in my ear. "And Austin is alive. I know that much. The healer who came to heal you told me and wanted you to know. Tell me everything when you're ready."

I nod, sobbing as I try to calm down. He might be alive, but it doesn't mean he is whole. I will never forget his screams, his cries of pain and what Bane did to his arm. There is no fixing that, hellcaster or not, and I hate Bane so much for it. Eventually I calm down enough to tell Maddox everything that happened in the test, and I swear he stops breathing when I talk about riding the phoenix with the handcuffs.

"And after Austin's arm was gone, Bane hit—" I pause as a sharp pain lances across my chest. I look down and pull my top to the side, seeing the white veins of the curse crawling across my chest.

I look up at Maddox, his jaw tight as he looks away. "I've only ever wanted to protect you, and I am failing. I am failing you."

“No, you’re not,” I softly say, cupping his cheek and turning his face to mine, his beautiful dark eyes locked on mine. “We can’t stop everything that happens to us, and we can’t fight everything together. But just knowing you’re here when I wake up, loving me, caring for me, is everything. Maddox, you give me the strength to fight every single day.”

“Be my mate, Riona,” he asks me. It’s not the first time he has asked, but the answer will always be the same. This seems like more than a question, though. It’s like he wants to become mates right now. He runs his fingers through my hair, sending goose bumps down my spine. “When they brought you in here, covered in burns and unconscious, I realised I don’t want to wait anymore. I lost it, Riona, and barely let the healer treat you.”

He pauses. “I love you, and I want us to be mates when we face your father next. I want us to be mates in case anything happens and mostly because I love you more than anything in this world or the next.”

“Until the stars fade from the sky,” I whisper back. “And even after, I will always love you. Through the darkness and through the never-ending night, I will be your light.”

His eyes light up, and he leans down, kissing me softly. “I’ve seen a mating, most of it, and know the words. You will have to repeat them.”

“Then what?” I ask.

He runs his fingers down my arms. “Then I bury myself inside you and claim you, Riona.”

“But the guards?” I whisper, a thrill of pleasure shaking down my body.

“None in here,” he tells me with a dark and wicked smile. “Are you ready?”

I brush some of my hair out of the way and look up at Maddox. “I was born to be yours, Maddox.”

He leans down and captures my lips in a scorching kiss that curls my toes. He moves us so we are sitting cross-legged, facing each other on the bed. I glance at my oversized brown top and black leggings, wishing I was wearing something nicer.

Maddox is wearing a soft black shirt and ripped black trousers, and he looks amazing even if he wore nothing.

Maddox takes off his shirt, and I suck in a breath at the sight of his muscular chest. He always takes my breath away. He rips the shirt up into a long piece of fabric and takes our hands. Maddox ties our wrists together, carefully avoiding the handcuffs that are a weight on my soul.

Maddox pauses when our hands are tied and looks me dead in the eye. “Riona Dark, I take thee as my mate and offer up my soul.”

I repeat his words. “Maddox Borealis, I take thee as my mate and offer up my soul.”

His eyes are burning through me as a new tension builds in the room, and the air begins to feel like magic. It crackles in the air like electricity, but I hardly notice as I watch Maddox.

“*Anima mea ad te, Sanguis meus ad te; Anima mea ad tuum,*” he softly but firmly states, and I gasp, feeling something crashing into me. Into my soul. My eyes widen as I look behind us, and there is red energy in the air, flickering to life in swirls that flow from Maddox to me. It burns through the bindings around our hands and wrists, leaving more of the red energy in the air.

As I repeat the words, the red energy brightens and changes, getting thicker, and it almost covers us. Maddox is on me the second the last word leaves my lips, and I kiss him back with the same passion, a desperate need for us to mate. To take him as my own.

I rip at his trousers as he rips my top off and pulls my leggings off until we are both bare. His thumbs rub against my nipples as he kisses down my stomach. Maddox dives between my legs, a man on a mission, and his hot tongue swirls around my clit.

My back arches, and a moan escapes my lips that echoes around the room.

“You’re mine,” Maddox growls, kissing my clit one more time. “Mine.”

His growl vibrates against me, and I cry out in pleasure as he slides two fingers into me at the same time he flickers and sucks my clit.

“Maddox, I—” I scream as I come hard, my orgasm shaking through my body as Maddox flips me over on the bed and slams into me. I moan as he thrusts, leaning over my body and brushing my hair to the side.

I arch my neck for him, feeling my second orgasm building, and the second he buries his teeth deep in my neck, as deep as his cock is inside me, I come again. He thrusts hard and fast as he drinks from me, and I can’t feel anything but Maddox as he takes me as his mate, marks me as his, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Riona,” he groans against my neck as he comes inside me. We collapse to the bed, and he pulls me into his arms, the room still buzzing with the red energy of our mating. As I focus on breathing, I feel the mating bond clicking into place and binding our souls as deep as anyone can be bonded. I can feel Maddox, like a sixth sense, and it’s amazing.

“Why did we wait to do this?” I question with a slight laugh.

He darkly chuckles, holding me to him. “I’m not sure.”

“Wait,” I say, sitting up and looking down at my handcuffs. I’m not tired anymore, and something is different...my magic is leaking out of the barrier. I look up at Maddox, and he tilts his head to the side.

“My magic is going to you,” I whisper. “We are sharing it.”

“I can feel it,” he murmurs and gives me a sinister smile before grabbing the cuffs. His hands immediately glow with red magic, the orbs’ magic that we now share. The cuffs melt into red dust that falls onto the bed.

I take a deep breath of freedom.

“My queen, shall we kill the king?” Maddox asks, rising from the bed after pulling on his clothes. I get dressed quickly after cleaning up and look at the bars. I hold out my hand and slam my power into them, and they melt down into puddles on the ground. I look at the silver dress next, and the vision flashes into my memory as I burn it into nothing. I will not be the heartless, empty queen I saw.

“The only king here is you. It’s about time this world bowed. Don’t you think?”

Maddox's dark smile mimics my own. He might be the villain, but together, we are going to be Bane's worst nightmare.

This world is getting new royalty.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-SIX



“Kneel before your queen and king or die,” Maddox coldly demands to the guards who wait at the top of the stairs. There’s five of them, and they all fall back, moving away from us. One of them I recognise because of the silver crest on his jacket. Three of them instantly pull out their swords and light them up with flames before running at us. Maddox barely even moves before he is on them. He rips the throat out of one of them before the guard even realises Maddox is there, and the others, he burns into nothing as he feeds off the guard in his arms. His eyes stay on me as he drains the hellcaster and lets him fall to the ground with a thump that echoes around us. As Maddox walks to me, we both see the last two guards are kneeling with their heads bowed.

I look at the guard in the middle, and he raises his helmet. “Pass the word to your soldiers, to your guards, to anybody here in this castle. Leave. Leave and get out of here, because this castle isn’t going to be standing for long.”

He takes off his helmet, revealing greying black hair, an aged face and bright golden eyes. “Yes, my queen. My name is Gordian, and I am glad you broke out of the handcuffs. They were made with phoenix hearts, the strongest metal in the worlds.”

“Good man,” Maddox replies as he takes my hand, linking my fingers.

“Where are my mother and my brother?” I ask.

He points at the staircase on the right. “Go up. They’re both heavily guarded, so it shouldn’t be hard to find.”

A few guards come running down the corridor, and Gordian holds his hand up. They instantly stop.

“Evacuate the castle, get your families, and run for the borders of the city. NOW!”

The guards don’t need told more than once, and Gordian looks down at me.

“Don’t kill the guards unless you have to. Yes, we have followed the king for a very long time, and it’s all we’ve ever known. I was trained since I was a young child, and I don’t remember my parents. All I remember is serving the king and learning to fight and being this. This is what everyone in this castle is like. Show us a bit of mercy and you will find a castle full of hellcasters who will worship you for a chance at freedom. None of us like being here,” he tells me and bows his head. “Alyx is my daughter. You saved her and my mate. I owe you so much.”

“Get them out of here,” I tell him.

“Yes, my queen,” he replies before running away.

We head down the corridor, which is thankfully empty, and come to two more staircases, and I hear the shuffle of feet on the staircase above on the right side where Gordian said to go. He could be leading us into a trap, but I don’t think so. I saved his mate and child. Hopefully that is enough. We go up together and come to a corridor full of guards, seven on each side standing against the walls, and behind them are two doors. They instantly turn to us, and I nod at Maddox before we clasp our hands together. A wave of red energy slams out of us, blocking the hellfire that they threw our way. The orbs’ magic slams into each of the guards and knocks them unconscious one by one until they’re nothing but piles of bodies in armour on the floor.

“I can see why my father liked this power so much,” Maddox says.

“I have to admit I quite like it myself,” I reply. “Let’s split up.”

“I don’t like the idea of leaving you, my mate,” he replies.

“I know, but we need to find them, and we don’t have much time before Bane gets here and we fight him,” I remind Maddox.

“Okay, but call for me if you see Bane. Destroy anyone in your way,” he commands.

I wink at him and go to the door on the right. Maddox goes into the left door, and I watch him before going through the right door. I’m surprised to see Katy as she slams her dagger through a guard’s throat, and he convulses before falling on the floor at her feet.

“About time,” she says, wiping her bloody dagger on her white maid dress. She rips the dress off, revealing her leather clothes underneath. “Don’t feel bad for him. He touched my ass, so he deserved it.”

I make sure to kick the bastard as I step over him to Katy, who is still talking. “Your mum’s back there getting her stuff and changing her clothes. I was getting her out either way.”

“Thank you,” I say, wrapping her in a hug. She doesn’t hug me back and stands stiffly for a long time, like she doesn’t know how to hug.

“I don’t do hugs,” she reminds me.

“I know, but I do,” I tell her, letting go, and she rolls her eyes at me, but I see a hint of a smile. “Please tell me we’re getting out of this place. I need to see snow again. I cannot stand all this heat, and the hellcasters are pretty lame,” she questions.

“I’m half hellcaster,” I remind her.

“I said what I said,” she replies, and I chuckle, walking towards my mum’s bedroom. “Maddox is in the other room across the corridor. He might need help with Austin.”

“On it,” she says and runs out the door.

I feel nervous for some reason as I open the bedroom door. “One second, Katy. I can’t leave without a cloak to protect me from hellfire—”

My mum pauses as she pulls on a red cloak as she turns to me, realising I’m not Katy. We both pause just for a second before we’re running towards each other. I throw my arms around my mum and hold her tight like I’ve never hugged her before in my life, and I never want to let her go.

“My daughter, my daughter, my daughter,” she says in an emotional rush, cupping my cheeks and leaning back. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I should have told you about all of this. This was never the plan. I was always going to keep you safe from him and explain this all. I—it just went all wrong.”

“I know,” I softly say. “But you kept me safe all those years. You gave me an amazing childhood and not one part of me hates you for it. Ok?”

“Really?” she asks, and I nod. She kisses my forehead and hugs me one more time.

“But we really do need to get out of here, because we are leaving this hellhole and going back to The Onyx. I have someone I want you to meet properly. Maddox, my mate.”

“Your mate?” she asks softly. There’s a bit of sadness in her eyes because her mate, he is what he is.

“Bane has to die,” I tell her. I hate that I’m killing someone she is bonded to, because she will feel it, but he can’t live. He can’t escape this world, because so many would die, and no one would be able to stop him.

“What do you know about bonded mates, Riona?” she asks me, picking up a small bag and throwing it over her shoulder.

“Plenty, but this isn’t the time. We have to get Austin and go.”

“If he dies, so do I,” she replies, and everything goes still. “But I want you to kill him. You’re right. He can’t live.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head, but it’s true. I know this, Maddox told me, but I never thought about it when it came to my mum. I always knew I’d die in a heartbeat without Maddox. The only way to survive your mate dying is with a lot of magic. The orbs’ magic is the only way known or surviving death is rare. The orbs’ magic kept Maddox’s father alive, but his mind was different, and he was cruel. It broke him. I can’t let my mum be broken. I can’t let her die either. “We’ll find a way to break the bond and keep you alive. It’s not happening. You’re not dying, Mum.”

“Riona—”

“No,” I say, my voice cracking. I finally have my mum back, and I am not losing her. “No.”

“Riona, come on!” Katy shouts, and I walk to the door, leaving that conversation in this room. I won’t watch my mum die.

“Let’s go,” I tell my mum. Her eyes are ringing with sadness, but she follows me out into the corridor. Katy and Maddox have Austin between them, his arm a bloody stub wrapped badly, and he looks feverish.

I rush to him, my mum doing the same, and she cups his face. “He is burning up. My poor boy.”

“I’ve given him some blood. It will keep him alive,” Katy tells my mum. “But the arm is gone, and I think he has an infection in it. He needs a healer.”

“The castle is evacuating. We have no chance of finding a healer,” I say, hearing the noise behind us, the sound of so many hellcasters running out of here.

“We need to go,” Maddox says and nods at the corridor. “Lead the way, sweetheart.”

Mum stays close to Katy, and I lead the way, making sure my hands are full of my magic in case anyone comes this way. I get three steps in before I hear a screeching noise echoing around us. It’s like an alarm, but it’s not normal, echoing through the entire castle so loud it hurts my ears. “What the hell is that?” I ask.

Mum looks at me with a little confusion. “It’s an alarm that goes off when there’s been a portal opened and someone’s coming. It went off last when you came to this world with Katy.”

Katy smiles at me. “It’s really about time his pretty ass turned up here.”

“How do you know he has a pretty ass?” I ask with a grin.

She raises an eyebrow for an answer.

“I really, really hope you’re not talking about my brother’s ass,” Maddox mutters in disgust.

“We are—” I say at the same time Katy says, “We are not,” and I laugh a little with her.

“Come on,” I say, turning down the corridor. The alarm never ends, making me wonder how big the portal is and how many of our people Reign is bringing through. We need an army to take Bane down, and I trust Reign to have that part handled. After going down a long winding staircase, we come out on a veranda that overlooks the front gates of the castle and a big space underneath it. The room is full of hellcasters running out of the door, carrying bags and anything they can as they escape. The word got out, it seems. I’m happy to see a bunch of the hellcasters who are running are guards, and they look like they are getting their families out. They barely even look our way or notice us in their escape, and I look down, knowing he is there without finding him right away. Bane stands in the middle of the doors, still as a statue as his people run past him.

The look of betrayal on his face is completely and utterly priceless as he stares at us all.

“Katy, take my brother and mum and get them to Reign. Get them out of this castle,” I instruct her.

“I’m not going anywhere,” my mum firmly states. “I started all this, and I will help end it. Katy, take Austin and keep him safe.”

“I can—can help...,” Austin groans, trying to push off Maddox’s grip. Maddox pats his head and says something quietly to him, and whatever he says seems to calm him. Maddox lets Austin go, and Katy helps him stand.

“Stay safe,” he tells me. “I need my pain in the ass sist—sister.”

“I love you, bro,” I tell him. Mum speaks quietly to him as Maddox steps to my side, and we head to the top of the steps. A few stragglers are leaving the room as Mum joins us at the top of the stairs, and Bane walks to the bottom. I look over to see Katy leaving through the door on the other side of the corridor.

I trust her to get to Reign and to keep my brother safe. Katy is a good friend, a loyal vampire, and I owe her a hell of a lot for everything.

Bane pauses at the bottom of the steps. His gold shirt and dark trousers don't match the crown on top of his head, and I don't know why it stands out to me, but it does.

"You would really side with them over me? Your mate?" he asks her, his voice easily echoing through the small space between us.

"Oh, Bane," she says, holding her head high. "I once felt completely and utterly in love with you. I knew you were a monster. Part of me always knew. I saw the things you did, and I tried my hardest to push them from my mind. I hoped you'd change. When you told me you'd change for me, I believed it. You were kind to me, sweet and caring, so I believed you could be that way to the rest of the world."

She blows out a breath. "But it was a ticking time bomb, as you were pretending to be those things. You told me the only reason that you were lost in darkness was because you never found your mate, and I fell in love with that lie. We played happy family for a while, but all that time, you were lying to me. You were betraying me constantly. It was just a game to you because you don't have a clue how to love someone, let alone your own mate."

She looks over at me. "They're the only good things that ever came out of our mating, and part of me will always thank you for them. But no, I do not love you. I have not loved you in a long time. I loved a human who may not be my mate, but he was the kindest, gentlest man I've ever met. He brought up my children with me. No questions asked about who their real father was and why I was so scared of men. He was just there, and he was amazing. He was my best friend, and I will always love him."

It brings tears to my eyes to hear her talk about my dad like that, and I wish he was here. I wish he were alive.

I wish Bane hadn't killed him.

Mum looks over at Maddox. "You're different. I know you are. I foresaw you a long time before you met my daughter, and I always knew that between the pair of you, you would destroy this world, remake it and save these people. He's yours to kill, Prince Maddox."

She steps back and looks towards me and nods once.

Maddox flashes me a wickedly dark grin and picks up a sword someone dropped on the stairs. The sword lights up with the power of the orbs, glowing red.

“How is that possible?” Bane demands, his eyes flickering with darkness. “It’s not possible!”

“When you have a true mate, you share everything. Including your souls and your magic,” I say.

“My king,” I whisper to Maddox and wink. “I believe this fight is yours.”

Maddox steps away from me, prowling towards my father, who snaps.

“You will never be king!” Bane shouts at Maddox, who continues down the steps like a wave of darkness. Every footstep cracks the stairs with red magic, and I move to stand next to my mum.

“I’m so happy to see you find your equal. Love him forever, Riona,” Mum whispers to me. “Always.”

“Don’t talk to me like you’re going to die. You’re not. I have a plan, and you are going to fight one last time for your children,” I firmly tell her. “But first, let’s watch a king finally die.”

CHAPTER
SIXTY-SEVEN



It's hard to watch Maddox walk into this fight alone when I want to be there at his side, but something tells me that he needs to do this, and it shouldn't be me killing my father.

It should be him.

Bane has done a lot of things, killed a lot of people I love, and nearly destroyed me and my mate. He deserves this, and he always had this coming, from the second he decided to take my mum and brother and Maddox.

If he had treated his mate with kindness and looked after his people, maybe they would be in here defending him.

Instead, he is on his own, with his family watching his fall.

This is a fight between kings, and I will be here continuously supporting Maddox, because we both know that Bane does not have a queen supporting him.

He is alone.

And he will die that way.

Maddox walks to the bottom of the steps, and Bane starts to lose his appearance as a man and turns into something out of a horror film that I've seen once before. Bane is made of a pure red fire, and this other form is monstrous as he towers above Maddox at least eight feet. His arms are

made of pure flames with sharp points like daggers at the ends, and on his back are spikes, along with a spiky tail. Every bit of him is on fire, and it flickers out.

He sort of resembles a man, but his face is long and protruding, like a wolf. Maddox isn't fazed as he lifts his sword and moves quicker than I can trace; he is on Bane. Bane must be able to track his movement better than I am, because he meets his sword with his arm, the clashing sound vibrating through the air. They both clash against each other again, and Bane uses his giant arms like swords to block and hit at Maddox.

The only difference is Maddox is faster, smarter, and he has the magic of the orbs. Maddox slams a sphere of magic into his chest, and it throws him back against the wall. The wall cracks and I watch the fractures slide up into the ceiling, knowing it's going to fall.

Bane roars, shaking the walls, and throws a wall of hellfire at Maddox. My heart lunges as I step forward, and Maddox stands still as the fire simply brushes through him.

He looks over, his dark hair lined with ash and his cheeks marked with dirt, and winks at me.

My mate can't be burnt, either.

"Take out the ceiling before it falls on Maddox," my mum suggests in a panicked voice. "Hurry!"

I build power in my hands, as much power as I possibly can into a giant orb. My mum stands back behind me to hide, and I can feel how scared she is. I quickly slam the magic up into the air through the castle ceiling where it spreads, destroying everything into red magic ash that falls around us. Red light pours in through the ash onto us, and I look down to see Maddox and Bane are locked in their deadly fight. Neither of them even notices what I've done as they hit each other again, and I'm not sure who is winning. My heart catches in my throat as Bane manages to get a hit on Maddox's arm, and Maddox hisses in pain before turning back and baring his teeth. That's when he sees a second sword on the floor, and he picks it up, swinging it around in his hand. This one lights up with the orb magic

too as they both start circling each other once more. Maddox attacks first, crashing across the room.

I feel like I'm always connected to him, like I'm fighting there with him as one person, but I can only watch. I'm not a trained fighter, but Maddox is. He has been trained by his father and Reign since he was young.

He was trained to be a king that won the battles. Maddox springs off the ground, right over Bane's head, and swings to the side. It takes me a second to realise what he did as Bane howls in pain and his right arm drops to the floor.

Maddox did that on purpose, and he swings his bloody sword around in his hand. "An arm for an arm. Bastard."

Bane loses it, rushing at Maddox in a frenzy of hellfire, and he's almost animalistic in how quickly he moves. Maddox holds steady, waiting for him to get closer and casually moving out of the way. He spins as Bane turns and crashes into him, and he blocks him with his swords. They both crash against walls, knocking down everything in their path, and my soul feels out of control and will be until this battle is over.

Outside the castle, I can hear screams and shouting and more alarms going off and blasts, and god knows what is going on outside there. I try not to think about it. I try not to think about Katy and Austin out there getting to Reign. It's going to be nearly impossible for her to carry him all the way through the city. But if anyone can do it, it's Katy. Reign might have someone who can heal my brother, and it's better than being here right now with this fight. I watch as Maddox jumps into the air and slams his sword straight down into my father's chest, grabbing his neck at the same time, and he throws Bane across the room with the force of the hit. Bane collapses into the wall, choking as he starts to flicker back between forms. Maddox grabs his leg and drags him across the room before flipping him over his shoulders, slamming into the steps. Maddox is breathless as he stands over my father and roughly pulls the crown off his burning head. He holds the crown up in the air before letting it burn away into ash with the orbs' power.

“There’ll be no king of the hellcasters. There’ll be no king of this place. The Moral Fall City will be nothing but a memory, and you will be nothing at all,” Maddox states. “My rule will outshine yours, and you will be forgotten.”

He lifts his other sword, and my mum screams, even as Maddox slams his sword down and beheads the king. His head rolls down the bottom of the steps, and I look away, unable to watch, my stomach turning at the sight of all the blood. My mum suddenly stops screaming and goes still before collapsing to the floor. I fall with her and hold her in my arms.

“Maddox!” I scream, calling him over. He rushes up the steps, and he’s at my side in a second. “Give her your blood. Turn her! Please!”

Maddox cuts his wrist and puts it over her mouth in seconds, feeding his blood to save her for me. He feeds her for a long time before she collapses asleep, and I lay her down on the floor.

Everything is so still for a while, and even as the city cries outside go silent, I hear nothing until I can feel my mum’s heartbeat under my hand flare to life.

I suck in a breath and wipe the tears away from my cheeks. “Will she survive?”

“She’ll be a d’vampire, but yes,” Maddox says, standing up and wincing from the cut on his arm. I straighten up and go to his side, peeling back his shirt to have a look at the deep wound. “I will heal, sweetheart.”

I shake my head, reminding myself that he heals quicker than I do. “We need to get outside and see what’s going on. The city needs to know the king is dead and the war is over.”

“I’ve got your mum,” he says, leaning down to pick up my mum and throw her over his uninjured shoulder. I head down the ruined steps, dodging fallen pieces of the roof and tall piles of ash. I look down at what’s left of Bane’s body on the stairs. It’s softly burning into embers before my eyes, and soon there will be nothing left. I make a decision to level this entire castle and this world once everyone is out.

He's nothing but dust, and no one should remember him. He should be nothing. I don't look back as we pass him and get outside onto the top steps. The steps go right down into the houses of the city on this side, and we are so high up we can see everything.

The city is at war. There are portals open everywhere, ripping apart the world, flooding it with incoming vampires and what looks like witches and sirens too. Hundreds of the houses and towers are burning and being blown up before my eyes. The streets are full of hellcasters, fighting or running from the portals and the vamps coming out of them. I catch a glimpse of siren magic, water flooding one street in the distance, and blasts of witch magic that light up areas in a way witch magic can do. Maddox gently puts my mum down on the steps in the corner where she's well hidden.

Everyone is being killed, and it's pointless. The hellcasters are fighting for a dead king and a war that they can't win with no leadership. I know not everyone in this city is evil, and the good should be saved.

"We need to stop this," I say, "before we all destroy each other. I don't want to be the queen of this kind of world. There has been enough war. We need peace."

"The orbs...the power. It could rip this world apart," Maddox suggests. "If we use it, it could mark a change. The hellcasters would stop. Everyone would."

I walk to Maddox and look back at my mum for a second. Maddox moves quickly down to the bottom of the steps and talks quietly with a bunch of hellcaster teenagers hiding before he whizzes back to me.

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me. He kisses me even as the world burns around us, and I love every second.

"I've been a villain for most of my life," Maddox whispers against my lips. "And you make me want to be a hero."

"You are," I whisper back. "Even lost in the darkness, you couldn't hide who you are."

"Save the world with me, sweetheart?"

“Okay,” I reply and kiss him one more time in this mess of a world. “Let’s burn it down.”

CHAPTER
SIXTY-EIGHT

REIGN



The hellcaster streets are in utter chaos, and it's a shithole of a city. No wonder they were trying to escape. Half the buildings look like they were ready to crumble before we even got here, and the army isn't any better. They don't have any control or direction, and half of the ones I've seen so far can just about throw a tiny ball of hellfire. I would be embarrassed if The Onyx army was in this state.

My trained vampires move as a unit across the streets, and I don't have to look their way to trust what they are doing. They are under strict instructions to only fight those who attack first and to find our missing royals, Katy, and Riona's family. There is a surprising number of women and children, who are told to stay in their houses as we head through the streets. Surprisingly, not a lot of hellcasters have attacked our army, and we were prepared for a much bigger fight.

"No sign or news of the queen and Katy," one of my vampires tells me, and I nod at him. I need to find Katy more than I want to breathe.

I need to find my brother and my sister-in-law, but I have a feeling they can look after themselves. I come to the top of a large hill filled with hellcasters running away from a giant castle at the other side of the city. It's falling to pieces even before my eyes, and there is a giant hole in the ceiling. I'm going to take a wild guess that's where my brother is. He's always in dead centre of some kind of massive destruction. I walk down the streets, watching as hellcasters run into their houses with wary glances at my vampires standing guard and mapping the city. The sirens send water

splashing over the towers on fire, trying to save whoever is inside. The witches caused the fires, and I'm not sure it was an accident. I fought for the alliance between the sirens' new queen, Natalia, and me. She wasn't queen until a week ago, as apparently she decided to fight for Riona and the future she offers.. The previous queen, Andraste, was still pissed that we took Riona and was happy to not help us at all. Natalia is a friend, she came to me, and I see a long alliance between us all.

There's no need for us all to be at war when there is a magical orb-bearing queen in the world. She gives us life. Power. Safety. We can rather all share the power and share everything that comes with it, including the ability to have children, or we all end up alone, cold, and empty. Well, at least they would, as Riona would be ours either way. Whereas the alliance with Natalia came easily, Sabina was another matter. She might be Riona's aunt, but she is a cold woman with only her own goals that she cares about. After careful talks with her daughter, they decided it was a good idea to side with us. I'm still going to watch them, though, carefully. I don't trust Sabina at all, especially on her quest for power. She would quite easily rule the world if she could.

But I don't think she's brave enough to go against Riona, and hopefully Riona's mother is alive and well. That might soothe the alliance a little better.

I am heading slowly down, further into the city, when I hear a massive commotion. I rush ahead and I'm surprised. Well, I'm not completely surprised, because Katy is always in trouble, but there she is with five guards surrounding her, and she's fighting them off on her own, protecting a body behind her.

Every single time I see Katy, she takes my breath away with how fucking beautiful she is. Her black hair is in a braid down her back, her eyes sharp and stunning as she assesses the area. She moves as fast as lightning, her curvy body made to entice me.

And only me.

Using my vampire speed, I'm at her side in seconds, but I pull my swords out with a grin. My vampires stay back, knowing this is personal.

No one, and I mean no one, threatens my woman and gets away with it.

They die.

Now.

I fight the untrained hellcasters, knocking them down like dolls. Idiots. I knock three of them down in a blink, beheading two of them. I turn to see Katy pulling her sword out of one of the hellcasters, and I throw my sword into the neck of the last one, who is running away. It hits perfectly, and he falls.

I smile as she throws herself in my arms and kisses me like we have been apart years. Fuck, it felt like it. I didn't see Katy at my side for years. I knew she was there, but I didn't see her. Really see her.

It's that classic saying, you don't know what you have right under your nose. I had the whole fucking world, and I am never letting her go. I kiss her back, dropping my sword and sinking my hands into her soft hair, tugging her body against mine.

"I missed you," I tell her.

"I don't do sappy shit," she replies, making me laugh before capturing her lips one more time, loving how she leans into me, bending to my will and letting me take control.

A building nearby blasts apart, sprinkling embers and rocks down on us, and only then do I let her go, enjoying the dazed look in her eyes and her pink cheeks.

A groan makes us both look down, and I realise it's Austin, Riona's brother, and he isn't in good shape.

"Have you given him blood?" I ask Katy, leaning down over Austin and taking in his lack of arm and ear, and how pale he is.

"Yes, but he needs a witch healer," Katy says. "Riona sent me with him. Maddox was fighting Bane."

I nod and stand. "Get him through one of the portals to The Onyx. There are witch healers waiting to help anyone who comes through."

“Witches helping?” Katy says, picking up Austin over her shoulder.

“Escort—” I stop mid-sentence when I see why everyone has gone silent. Every single person in this world seems to have paused, looking up above the castle. Maddox and Riona are floating up in the air, smothered in red orb magic that I remember from my father. He used to use the magic like that but in a deep, horrible red colour. Their colour is different. It’s bright, and it’s glowing, almost a rainbow of colours underneath them, and they’re floating in the air right above the castle, drawing in everyone to see them. They look like a star almost, but I feel completely awestruck by the power spreading from them. It’s like a cobweb, spreading through the air and out of their feet into the ground.

They’re sharing the power.

I didn’t even know that was possible. We really have a new king and queen. I never thought my brother would be king, and I was literally named to be the king. But right in this moment, it feels perfect, like it was the right thing all this time. He was born to be king, and I was born to be at his side, his advisor.

His brother.

I watch as they rise in the air, almost swirling around each other, holding hands, and I realize they’re building energy like a ticking time bomb.

What the hell are they doing?

“I need to get to them,” I tell Katy. “And you need to get back to our world safely.”

“Not without you,” Katy demands. “They are dangerous!”

“Not to me,” I reply. “They are my family, and whatever they are doing, I need to be there.”

I whistle and four of my guards are at my side instantly. “You take Princess Katy back to our world and help her get Austin straight to a healer.”

“Yes, sir,” one of them answers and carefully takes Austin off her, carrying him easily with another one of the guards. The other two move to Katy’s

side.

“Princess?” Katy asks in disbelief, like she just realised being with me meant she would be part of the royal family.

“Yes,” I firmly state with a smirk. “The second we get back, I’m literally going to tie you to my bed for weeks, and you’re not leaving unless you’re my mate.”

She leans up and kisses my earlobe. “Who says I’ll be the one tied up?”

This woman.

I growl at her, and she growls back before stepping back. The guards heard, and there are a few awkward coughs.

“Didn’t know vampires got coughs, or are you all choking?” Katy asks.

Wisely, none of them answer as I chuckle. Forever with the most sarcastic, sexy-as-fuck Katy is a life I want.

I kiss her cheek before running straight towards the castle. I want this damn war to be over, and I want her in my bed permanently. I try to push my thoughts from Katy to focus on the task at hand. Maddox and Riona’s power that they’re building seems to rise, getting stronger and brighter, cracking the paths and towers, sending hellcasters screaming as they run out. It’s almost hard to run towards them, the light and magic pushing me away. The city is a maze, and there’s so many people around, it’s hard to jump in between them as they go in the opposite direction to me. Eventually, I decide to climb one of the houses and start jumping over the rooftops, ignoring the sting of the orb magic above me.

Finally I get to the bottom of the castle steps, and I run to the top of them, right where Maddox and Riona are floating above me. I pause, surprised to see an older blonde woman tucked in the stairs, completely out of it. I don’t know why, but she looks extremely familiar.

Someone is right behind me, and I instantly flip around and grab the boy’s throat. I let go when I realise that he is a young teenager, and he coughs, stepping away with his hands up.

“The glowing man said to look for you. To tell anyone that’s a vampire that this woman is Queen Riona’s mother and should be cared for,” the boy says before running away from me down the steps. I look at Riona’s mother, struggling to remember her name and wondering what is wrong with her. I can’t see any injuries or reason for her to be out of it, but I do scent Maddox’s blood.

Could she be changing?

I pick Riona’s mother up in my arms, noticing how she looks like Riona but a little older. Part of me can’t wait to have her wake up, because she knew my father, and I believe we met once.

And she can sort her damn psychotic sister out.

I look up at the glaring light and make the decision to get Riona’s mother out of here. Maddox has this under control. I hope.

I run down the steps, coming to a halt when I see Sabina at the bottom of the steps. Her eyes fixate on her sister, and to my surprise, she falls to her knees. The emotion on her face looks wrong, like a statue that’s finally learnt how to smile. I really, really don’t like it.

“I never, ever thought I’d see her again,” she says, and I watch her cautiously.

“We should get out of here. It isn’t safe,” I say as Sabina rises and walks to me.

“I sensed her in the city and came for her. I don’t know what your queen and king are doing, but we are leaving. Give me my sister.”

“How can I trust you to not hurt her?” I question.

“I would never. She is blood,” Sabina harshly replies. “And she is sick. Changing into a d’vampire. She needs a healer to guide her body and soul from witch to d’vampire safely.”

I know she is right, but I also know she treated Riona like dirt. I don’t have time for this. “Hurt her, and it will be Riona who comes for you.”

Sabina pales at that and clicks her fingers. Riona's mum floats out of my arms and follows behind Sabina as she walks away, several witches appearing out of the shadows and picking up Riona's mother. They are running in the next second, with a shield of darkness around them.

A long ringing noise echoes in the air, and I look up just as Maddox and Riona's power seems to explode.

It takes out the city in a hail of red magic, and the wave of magic heads right to me.

I can't escape it or outrun it, so I do the best I can and stand proud, thinking of only one person in these last few seconds.

I wish I had forever with her. My Katy. The woman I am completely in love with.

The red magic slams into me, and the next second, I feel like I can't breathe under piles of red ash. I close my mouth and push some of it away as I climb out and gasp in the fresh, salty, and cold air.

Pure sunlight shines down on me, and the soft sound of waves fills my ears as I take a minute to realise what they did.

They destroyed the hellcaster world and took all of us out of it unharmed. Thousands of hellcasters fill the beach, the sea and forest in the distance, buried in the red ash that has carried over. I wipe some of the ash from my eyes, looking for anyone I recognise.

I see them first, on a deck, and they are kissing, oblivious to us all.

“Bow to your queen and king. All hail our saviours.”

Like a wave, the hellcasters, vampires, sirens, and witches on the beach fall to one knee as I do. They cheer Maddox and Riona's names, and I look up at the stars above.

Long live the rightful king and queen of The Onyx.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-NINE



I missed my home.

Looking over the salty, sand-filled shores of The Onyx brings me back to the first time I stepped onto this strange and unique land.

I was terrified, alone and fearing for the future, but little did I know it was all leading me to my mate, to my crown and the future I was meant to have. I never would have believed this place could be my home, but it is, and it's the only place in the world I want to live with my family. I finally step off the ship, onto the decking. I feel different and free.

I'm finally free and home.

It's been three months since we broke the hellcaster world down into nothing and brought the hellcasters to our island, offering them peace and a world where they could be what they wanted and live wherever they like. A few thousand of them decided to go live in the human world under the promise that if they caused any trouble or killed anyone, then I'd be sending vampires after them to bring them back to face the consequences. We have vamps keeping an eye on them, and so far, only a few have been brought back and locked up for life. Even if they don't live on The Onyx island or with the witches or sirens who also opened their doors, I'm still their queen, and Maddox is still their king. I don't know who they're more frightened of, but it's certainly one of us or both of us.

Maddox steps off after me, jumping into the sand, and links his fingers with mine. We spent the last month with the witches, doing what should have

been done a long time ago and breaking the curse. It took a lot of animal sacrifices, some pretty strange magic and a hell of a lot of pain on my side. But finally, my hands are free of that god awful curse, and our lives are ours, ours to live forever because we're immortal.

I used to think all the vampires were immortal and damned, but now I realise they were never damned. This is one hell of a life.

I look up at Maddox, and he smirks at me, leaning down and kissing my cheek. "It's good to be home with you."

"Did you not like the witches' company these last few weeks?" I question, teasing him. I know he didn't.

"I really, really don't like all the black shit on that island and the awful food," he replies, his voice a dark purr. "And the eyes always watching us. I didn't have you naked nearly as often as I wanted."

"You literally wear black all of the time," I reply, ignoring the shiver of pleasure that goes down my spine from his flirting.

Sex with your mate is incredible, and if I thought I couldn't get enough of Maddox before we were mates, it's nothing on now. I want him all the time.

"Yes, but red is definitely more my favourite colour," he whispers to me. "Like the panties and bra you have on that I'm going to rip off with my teeth."

He captures my lips in a deep kiss before I can reply, and I almost moan, my knees weak from one single brush of his lips.

"Brother!" Reign shouts in the distance, and Maddox takes his time kissing me before letting go, his eyes flashing with a promise.

This will be continued.

Maddox steps to my side as Reign and Katy run, stopping a few feet away.

"Why are you two always kissing on this beach with an audience?" Katy asks as a way of saying hello.

Maddox laughs and gives his brother a manly hug as I walk to Katy. I hug her tightly and she pats my back.

It's an improvement.

"Why do you smell different?" I ask randomly and out loud, when I didn't mean to.

Maddox chuckles, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me to his side. "She's pregnant. Congratulations, both of you."

"That's amazing!" I say cheerily. Katy sighs and steps to Reign's side, resting her head on his arm. They literally mated days after we came back from the hellcaster world, and they didn't leave their bedroom for weeks, so I'm not that surprised to hear she's pregnant.

I love kids, but for a long time, I'm taking a witch solution to stop pregnancies. I want to spend a good fifty years with my mate and sort out the mess of The Onyx so that humans do not have to fear living here and there is some kind of peace.

Peace takes time. I'm happy to be auntie, and I will adore their child.

"It was a surprise, but not an unwelcome one," Katy says. "I don't know how to look after a baby, but there are plenty of babies on the island now from the hellcasters, and I can learn."

"Can we go back up to the castle and say hello to everybody?" I ask Maddox, and he nods.

"Good to see you, brother. I expect to see you at dinner tonight," Maddox says.

"We will be there," he replies. "And I have a lot to update you on, King Maddox."

"Brother," Maddox replies with a smile. I love the relationship they are building now and how happy they both seem. Reign is relaxed and happy with Katy and his title as royal advisor to the king. I don't think Reign ever really wanted to be king.

Maddox was born for this. He is a good king because people naturally follow him, and he can make good decisions when he wants to.

He is still a bit of a villain, but what king isn't?

Maddox picks me up and, using his vampire speed, runs us off the beach and through to where the royal carriage is waiting with a driver. Maddox helps me into the carriage and pats the side before closing the door. The carriage takes off, and Maddox immediately starts pushing up my knee-length dress and pushing me back onto the seat.

“Maddox,” I whisper as he exposes me to him, covered only with the red panties he talked about earlier.

The carriage bounces on something, and Maddox looks up at me. “Hold on, my queen.”

I moan as he grabs my ass and rips off my panties, tearing them with his teeth. He dives between my legs, pulling my ass to the edge of the seat and licking all the way up my slit to my clit. I moan and arch my back, digging my hands into the seats. He growls against my core and flicks his tongue faster against my clit, his hands digging into my ass.

I come hard and fast, moaning so loud I place my hand against my mouth to stop the noise from escaping. Maddox picks me up and sits on the seat, placing me on his lap. He undoes his trousers and pulls out his hard, long and thick cock.

If his cock could win medals, it would get gold.

“Keep looking at him like that and I will never stop fucking you,” Maddox whispers into my ear, pulling me close and lining me up. He runs the tip of his cock up and down my sensitive clit, and I moan.

He finally loses control and aims his cock, and I sink down on him. His eyes close in pure pleasure, and I love seeing him like this.

I rock my hips, building up speed, and he guides me for a moment before focusing on pulling my dress off. He cups my breasts through my bra, constantly fucking me as he rips it off.

He stares at my breasts like they are pure gold. I ride him slowly, enjoying him looking at me like this.

“My queen, you’re fucking killing me with how sexy you are.”

His dirty words just turn me on more. I moan, getting close to another release, and he leans forward, licking my hard nipple. I moan and ride him harder, his cock hitting a spot inside me perfectly with every single movement.

I rock my hips and he groans, kissing his way up my chest and to my neck. Right as I’m about to come, he bites into my neck at the spot he loves, and I cry out in ecstasy as I come. He repeats my name against my neck as he finishes inside me, adding to the pleasure I’m feeling as he hits deep.

I rock on him for a second as I calm down, and he releases his teeth.

“I will never tire of this,” Maddox says, still inside me. “You have half an hour to say hello to everyone, and then I’m fucking you in my bed. For hours.”

I shiver at his command.

Yes. Hell, yes.

I barely get my clothes back on as we get to the castle, and I still end up with no underwear, but Maddox gives me his cloak to tie on, and it hides my body, anyway. My cheeks are extremely bright red as the carriage comes to a stop.

“What is it with you in carriages?” I ask.

He laughs. “It’s just *what is it with you?* I want you constantly, Riona.”

“Good, because you have me forever, Maddox.”

“I love you,” he replies before he opens the door and helps me out. This cold castle used to be something I feared once a long time ago. Now the red snow, the towers built into the mountains as it looks over our city, is our home completely. It’s filled with all the people I love. Standing at the door is my mum next to Austin, who looks a million times better than when I last saw him, and Arlo is holding his hand.

It's been a hard few weeks for Arlo after his little girl was born early, but with the witches help, she will live and thrive. He sent me a few texts, and I'm happy to be back here, to just support him the best I can.

Austin looks sad, which I think is more than just seeing Arlo have a baby with someone else. It's the loss of his arm. We discussed with the sirens and witches, and it can't grow back or be replaced by magic. There was no way of healing it back to what it used to be, and it's a permanent reminder of what our father did to him.

He broke something in Austin in those weeks down there. I know it did. My brother is quieter, more reserved than he's ever been, but I have high hopes that Arlo will heal something inside of him.

And the little girl who follows Austin around, making him occasionally smile. Ember. In my letters, Austin and Arlo explained Ember took the room near theirs, and they love her company in the cold castle. I really like that. She's definitely become my ward, but I have a suspicion they will be her dads.

I walk up, and I hug Mum first, her powerful arms tightening around me. It was touch and go with her too, and if it weren't for my Aunt Sabina, I don't know if Mum would have made it through the change. We didn't know whether it was going to work as she didn't wake up for over a week, but she fought her way back. I'm so glad she did. Sabina has been coming here often to see my mum and to make amends. I don't think I can ever fully trust her, but as long as she never brings Cross here, I won't say anything because my mum asked me to trust her on Sabrina. Plus, Sabrina wouldn't stand a chance if either Maddox or I decided to kill her, and she knows it.

"How was the trip?" Mum asks, like we were on vacation. I chuckle. We wanted her to come, but the witches aren't all in agreement, and it brought up issues with Sabina that we didn't want to affect breaking the curse. "It was okay, but the curse is gone. That's all that matters."

"We heard that, but I'd like to see," she demands in her mum's voice. I lift my arm out of the cloak, and everyone looks happy to see nothing but pale skin.

“It worked and I’m finally free,” I say. “Not a curse in sight. Thank you for finding her, Arlo.”

“Anything for family,” he replies. Arlo never once rested in his search for the witch, and no one could have found her as quickly as he did. Luckily, she’d already had four children and lived in a nice little cul-de-sac in America, and she was more than happy to help once she believed Arlo about the witch’s curse. The curse is broken, and no one will ever pay that price again. I look at Maddox and smile.

“It’s over. It’s completely and utterly over,” I whisper, more to myself, but I know he hears me.

“Now we just have forever,” Maddox replies.

“Did you hear about Reign and Katy? They’re having a baby!” Mum says. I love how she is so close to Reign and Katy, and she treats us all like her children. Even Maddox. “Isn’t it brilliant?”

“It is,” I reply with a smile before going to Austin.

“Welcome back, sister,” he says, letting me hug him. Arlo hugs me next before shaking hands with Maddox.

“Ember has been doing drawings for you both,” Arlo says. “And all of them are on your bedroom wall because she’s taken a real liking to that hawk, who seems to love her.”

“I don’t know if a giant hawk and a small child are a good mix,” I say with a chill.

“She is literally a fire-breathing child. I’d be more worried for the hawk,” Austin replies, and I laugh.

We all head to the castle to get out of the cold, and I’m surprised to see Hector in the entrance hall. I come to a stop and look at Maddox, who doesn’t look happy to see him.

“What are you doing back?” Maddox asks, none too friendly.

“I was happy to come back now that everyone’s at peace and there’s no war. See, I don’t like war, and you can call me a coward if you like, because I

am one, but I'm here and I'll cook for you forever if you wish," he replies and bows his head. "If you will take me."

"Did you know about Cross?"

"That he was a slimy bastard? Yes," he replies. "But I didn't know he was a witch and plotting against you."

I look to Maddox, and he nods once, just for peace. "Step one foot out of line and it will be your head. Got it?"

"Yes." He bows. "I will start on your dinner."

"Prepare a big meal," Maddox warns with a growl, and Hector is gone. I link my hand with Maddox, and we go into the main sitting room where everyone seems to gather. The fire is lit, and it's so cozy, just like I remember. I look forward to many nights curled up on the sofa with Maddox. Ember is sitting on the sofa, drawing on a sketch pad, and she drops it when she sees me. Ember runs over and flings her arms around me tightly. I hug her back and pop a kiss on the top of her head.

"You're looking amazing," she says. "No more of the curse stuff. It faded your light."

"It had. I've heard you've been drawing loads," I say.

"Yup," she replies. "I like drawing the day you finally can be crowned king and queen."

"I think it's about time for that," Mum says, sitting on the sofa. Austin and Arlo sit on the other one, and Maddox wraps his arms around me from behind as we stand.

"Definitely time. We were thinking perhaps a massive celebration all across the city, and the day could be celebrated every year," I say.

Everyone is busy on the island with the new homes that are being built, the changes with so many vampires getting pregnant, and schools being set up for the hellcaster children. There hasn't really been time to celebrate.

"We can bring in human food and lots of wine," Arlo suggests.

“As long as I get to keep the queen at the end,” Maddox agrees with a possessive note. Everyone laughs as Ember brings over her sketchbook and shows it to us. It’s a picture of all of us together, and I definitely have a very strange crown on top of my head with a big red ruby in the middle.

“Red’s your colour,” Ember explains, and her cheeks are red.

Maddox reaches over me and picks up the drawing. “Kid, this is brilliant. Can I keep it?”

“Yes!” she says cheerily.

“I’ve been looking after the greenhouse,” Mum tells me, and I’m relieved that she did. Ann is in the castle, but it’s a lot for her to do on her own. “It’s such a beautiful room, and I’m thinking of extending it all down the side of the castle so Ann, you and I can really make something special to be used by all the castle staff.”

“That would be amazing,” I say, agreeing. “Thank you, Mum.”

“Don’t thank me. This castle is a dream, and I’m not leaving,” she replies, her tone dropping. “I wish your dad could have seen it.”

“He is with us,” I softly say, placing my hand over my heart. “Always.”

“Always,” she agrees. “Maybe we could get a stone placed in the greenhouse with his name on it to honour him.”

“I will get it made as soon as possible,” Maddox says.

I smile at Maddox over my shoulder. “We are going to get changed, as we have been on the ship for a week.”

“That’s not what you smell like,” Arlo jokes, and I flash him my middle finger when Ember is walking back to them and can’t see.

He grins as Maddox leads me out of the room and to the door to the corridor. I look back once at my family and smile. This is everything we fought for, and it is worth all the pain.

We head down the corridor, which has some new lights fitted, and I think we are going to the bedroom, but Maddox stops me, and he tugs me down

the corridor towards the dining room.

“Where are we going?” I ask him.

“I want to show you something,” he replies in a secretive tone. We head through the dining room straight to the massive, lit, stone fireplace. I pause as he turns the head of the dragon on the one side and twists it all the way around, and there is a clicking noise.

“No way, is this a moving fireplace?” I excitedly ask.

He laughs at my excitement as the fireplace literally slides to the side, revealing a dusty corridor and staircase at the end.

“I wanted to show you this for a while. It’s a royal secret,” he explains, unhooking an oil lantern off the wall. “Our father showed me and Reign when we were young kids, but it’s been a while since we used this room.”

“What’s in here?” I ask, really curious now. Old castles. Moving fireplaces and royal secrets. Sign me the heck up.

Maddox smirks at me before he lights the lantern with the flame from the fireplace and walks in, offering me his hand. I take his hand, and he guides me into the corridor, the thick stone walls freezing cold to the touch as I brush my fingers against them on the way down the staircase. The room smells untouched and old, but it’s not damp, and there’s no obvious noise as we head inside. Maddox tells me to wait by the staircase and works on lighting all the hanging lanterns around the room, slowly revealing it. It’s beautiful. There were several old red and black gowns at the one side, hanging on the wall, and in the centre is a massive chest filled with gold coins and necklaces and other things. There are dozens of chests around the edges of the walls, and a few of the walls have solid gold ornaments and vases that look delicate but expensive.

At the back of the room, on a tall shelf, are four crowns, and two of them are tiny, maybe for children, made with twisted silver and little red jewels. In the middle, there are two large crowns. One is very clearly for a king, with jutting gold spikes all the way around and rubies attached to it. The other one is more delicate, smaller and a tiara in shape, with a large red

ruby in the middle and small diamonds at the side, holding it up before being encased in silver and gold.

“This is the Royal Treasury,” he explains. “All the boxes that line the room are filled with ancient gold. This room is filled with enough gold for us to protect our people for lifetimes.”

“Why have you never used it?”

“My father didn’t want human interference on the island and believed humans were just food,” Maddox says, picking up a gold coin and flicking it in the air before perfectly catching it. “So, he wouldn’t use it.”

“We should,” I suggest.

“I was thinking we could trade for human things to bring onto the island to modernise. More cars would be a good start. We need to catch up with the modern world,” Maddox says. “And I never used this room before because I didn’t see a future. Now all I see is the future with you.”

My heart warms.

“I love the idea of modernising the island,” I say with a big smile. “I really love that.”

With the whole *no slavery* law we made instantly and with no human slaves on the island to do everything for them, the vampires aren’t happy. Maybe if we gave them more human and modern things, like a TV for instance, they might not try to ignore our rules.

Or Maddox will kill them.

I’d take the TV option if I were them. Blood banks have certainly been a thing to get used to for the entire island, but not Maddox, who loves to feed off me, and being mates, my body never weakens. I can’t say the constant orgasms are a bad thing. When we first came back and announced that there would be no more human slaves and that every human on the island was considered free and their own person, it did not go well. There were a lot of murders and a lot of issues. But after Maddox had to carefully sort out a few of them, it became clear that unless these rules were followed, you’d leave the island one way or the other.

The other way happened a lot when Maddox lost his temper. But then we set up and encouraged the use of blood banks. Humans go and donate once a month, and we plan to import blood from the outside world eventually, which will be easier now that we can pay. The idea of blood banks is so the humans can freely give blood if they wish to, and most do. We also let numerous humans go back to the human world, to their homes they were stolen from, but they had their memories wiped by witches before they left, so they didn't risk our safety. After a few weeks, we also set up a system of humans being paid to be blood donors, so the humans living here didn't have to suffer without work. Overall, it seems to work. We left Reign and Katy in charge, so we'll have to ask them about how it's been the last few weeks. But we've been sending regular texts, and we've not had any issues.

So far, I think we aren't failing at being their king and queen, and we will keep working hard and keep fixing all the broken parts until it works. Maddox walks over and picks up the small tiara and comes right back to me. He places it on my head and runs his fingers down my cheek.

"It suits you," he murmurs. "I'm not surprised. Red is definitely your colour."

He picks me up in his arms, and I hug him tightly, kissing him softly, which soon ends with him carrying me to our room. I never wanted to be a queen, but from the moment I met Maddox, I wanted to be his.

I will always be his queen.

EPILOGUE



*T*he red snow of my home floats around me in a light breeze, and I reach out, catching one of the delicate snowflakes in the palm of my hand.

“Riona Borealis, daughter of my line,” she says, her hair the same colour as the snow, and I lower my hand as she walks to me through the snowstorm that blocks out the rest of the world. My grandmother is glowing, quite literally, and she is wearing a similar dress as before. I didn’t think I’d see her in my dreams ever again, even though she promised there would be three visits. It’s been ten years since I saw her last and, on some days, I wondered if she was even real or just a dream I’d made up to protect myself and give myself hope in the hellcaster world.

I look around at all the snow that fills the mountain of my castle home I share with my family. Well, most of them. Reign and Katy moved into the castle five years ago when their third baby arrived, and it was easier for Reign to help Maddox and me, and still be close to Katy. Arlo and Austin have stayed living with us, and Arlo’s daughter now lives with us too after her mum had five more children and she wanted some space and to be with her dad. The castle is full of children, happiness, and joy...a far cry from what it once was. My mum lives half the time at the castle and the other in a house she owns in the city, which doubles as a women’s protection unit where any woman or child in the city can go to find safety. The Onyx has changed so much in the last ten years, and now we have roads, cars (not a lot of them as importing fuel sucks) and modern plumbing throughout the city, along with electricity. With the fortune Maddox had, we made deals

with a few governments who already knew about our existence and were happy to keep us a secret.

It hasn't been an easy ride with freeing all the humans, but the anti-murder law has held, and we currently have a prison with fifty-two vampires and three hellcasters inside, living a hundred-year sentence with correction therapy.

Maddox just wanted to end them all, but I somehow talked him down off that cliff. As for being queen of hundreds of thousands of people...it's been something to get used to. The bowing, the gifts, the title, and crown.

Maddox makes it all worth it. As does The Onyx. It was once a cold, horrible island with just as horrible vampires living on it, treating humans as slaves. It's different now, and the last thing I would call The Onyx is cold.

It's bursting with life, literally, with all the kids around, and people are trying to learn about humanity.

"Do you know why the mountain always snows red?" I ponder, more to myself, but I say it anyway.

She laughs. "I'm dead and, instead of asking what it is like to die, you ask about snow?"

"I don't want to know what it's like to die," I reply with a small smile.

"There is a spell on the island that only red snow shall fall. Some witch cast it on her deathbed many, many years ago," she tells me. "But I am here to speak one more time to you, and we do not have long before your mate will wake you."

"You're here to say goodbye," I say, a part of me feeling sad. I don't know her well, but she is family, and she helped me.

"I am," she replies and steps forward. "But your child will be born in a few years, with hair like mine and eyes of red flames like your mate. I know a part of me lives on."

My child? Maddox will be happy to know there will be an heir around soon. Our own child. I've thought about it a lot over the last year, mostly with all

the kids and babies in the castle. It's hard not to. Currently, Reign's oldest daughter is our heir, but Maddox wants a bunch of kids. I'm hoping he will be happy with one.

Maybe two.

"Boy or girl?" I ask.

She smiles. "You will find out soon, Riona. I am proud of you, so you know. Your dad is too."

My heart hurts as I give her a sad smile. "Tell him I love him so much."

"He knows," she softly replies. "And he is with you, as am I until the end."

"Thank you. I can't thank you enough for giving me the orbs; I could never have survived without them. And thank you for sacrificing your life to get them away from Bane. I don't know where any of us would be if you hadn't."

"Thank you for making me proud. Go and enjoy your life, Riona."

"I will," I whisper back, and I mean it. Every moment I have in my life feels special because I know what it is like to lose everything and everyone you love. This is a second chance, and I will never waste it.

"By the way, don't you have a secret to tell?"

I WAKE UP SLOWLY, the dream like a movie in my mind I can repeat over and over. Warm, toasty sunlight beams down on me, covering nearly all of my body as I breathe in the salty, warm sea air of Greece in the middle of summer. I rest my arm over my forehead to block out some of the light as I sit up and stretch and look around for him. My king. My lover. My mate. I find him instantly, his soul calling to mine in a way only mates can do. I could find him anywhere on earth, and he could find me, too. Maddox is in the water right in front of me, facing the ocean and watching the yacht floating in the sea, attached to the nearby dock.

Droplets of sea water, the emerald green and sea blue droplets, fall from his wet hair. His hair is long enough that it now hits his neck and shoulders, in

locks of dark brown. I'm glad he's decided to grow it out again after cutting it, as I love running my fingers through it. The red crystals woven into his hair shine in the sunlight and catch my eye. There are three blue ones woven in, and Reign wears the other three. They both might have bad memories of their parents, but they did bring them up, and they chose to honour them in that small way.

The beautiful sunlight of our private beach in Greece shines down on us as I watch my mate in the sea. It's one of his favourite places in the world, and it's definitely in my top three. Maddox bought a villa and the private beach that goes with it five years ago for me as an anniversary present. We come here at the same time every year, and it's our way of getting away from the responsibilities of our life. We spend most of the year looking after the monarchy and being the king and queen they need. We spend a week or two sometimes being normal pretend-humans and mixing with the crowd. I spend most of the days on the beach, and we spend our nights in the cities, dancing and enjoying everything the world has to offer. The Greek people are the kindest in the world, or at least I think so.

Maddox is relaxed here...in a way I love to see. On The Onyx, there is always the pressure of so many people needing us, and here there isn't. We get to be free, for a moment, and it's something we treasure. Maddox looks back, spotting that I'm awake, and I watch his lips tilt up in a devious smile. I watch him as he starts to walk out of the ocean towards me, and I swear I don't know how to breathe for a moment. He's only wearing tight black shorts, and water drips all the way down his muscular form, between every muscle and groove, teasing me, I'm sure. His powerful thighs have him walking right up to me, and he crawls onto the sun lounger. Sea water drops onto my bare skin, my red bikini doing nothing to protect me from him.

Which is kinda the point.

"You're getting me wet," I tease. He laughs and shakes his hair, splashing me with water, and I giggle, pushing him away, but he is like a rock and moves nowhere. Maddox cups my cheek before kissing me softly.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks, looking down at me.

“Yes, and I saw her again. My grandmother,” I say. “But I forgot to ask her name again. I feel like I’m never meant to know it.”

“Perhaps not,” he replies. “What did she tell you this time?”

I enjoy the fact this will surprise him. “That we would have a child with bright red hair and eyes of flames that look like yours. That we will have a child.”

I ramble on as he doesn’t say anything. “She said that it won’t be long until he or she is here. Not right now, but in the next couple of years, perhaps... Say something.”

He kisses me deeply and I moan, arching my body closer to his. “This is brilliant news, sweetheart.”

“I think so too,” I say. It’s always been me who’s more hesitant to have a child, and it’s not from not wanting one, but more I wanted to make sure The Onyx was a safe place to bring a baby into. The truth is, it’s been at peace for four years, and not much has changed. The people are happy, they adore us, and I know they would protect any child we had.

“I want to see what our child would be like, and I want to do it right. I see how Reign and Katy are with their children, the stark difference to how my father brought us up. He was cold and unfeeling, and there was no laughter, no joy, nothing. I like watching Reign chase his children around the castle, laughing as he hangs them over his shoulder and telling them their shit stick paintings are masterpieces. We always laugh around the dinner table, and it’s filled with the opposite of what I was used to. I want all of it with you. I want that for our child, and I know that we can have that together. There might be more pressures with the crown and everything else that comes with it. But I want us to have that family, and I swear to you, I will be the best father I can be.” He pauses with a smile. “I will love listening to them play violin as you try to teach them and we all go deaf in the meantime. I will love teaching my child to paint, even if they paint on every wall in the castle. I will read them a fairy tale every single night as I hold you both. I want all this, Riona.”

Tears fill my eyes as I imagine it all with a small redheaded little girl. He will be an amazing father, I just know it. “I want that too.”

In fact, hearing about the child that we will have makes me want to try for that child already, but maybe I can make that a surprise for us when we get home. I want our baby to be conceived in our home and born there too.

Maddox is already on the baby-making plan as he runs his hands down my arms, stomach and thighs.

“I have to tell you a secret first,” I say, and he pauses.

“Have you been keeping secrets from me?” he asks, teasing. He knows the goddess told me something important, but it wasn’t about me, and it was never the time to tell it.

“Ember is my sister,” I say, and Maddox raises an eyebrow in surprise.

“Father’s side, I presume?”

“Yes. One of the bastard children he had,” I reply. “My grandmother whispered it to me. I won’t meet the others, but she told me that Ember was the only one that I will meet in this lifetime and have a close connection to.”

“So her adoptive dad is really her brother, and her queen is her sister. It also makes her a hellcaster princess by right,” Maddox replies, thinking on it. “I can see why you kept this to yourself. It’s complicated.”

“I kept her as my ward to keep her close and to give her a place in the world that is right. She is a princess and should be in the royal family,” I reply.

“Do you want to tell her?” he asks.

“Yes, I want to tell her when she is a bit older. I felt like she had a really messed up childhood, and things have only been normal for a short time. But she’s older now, and I think it’s probably about time I have a sit down and tell her the truth. I might tell Austin first, and we can tell her together.”

Maddox nods in agreement. “He should be told first and Arlo too.”

“Are you sticking up for your best friend?” I ask, referring to Austin.

Maddox pulls a face that is cute even when he isn’t trying to be. “He’s not my best friend.”

I laugh because the truth is they really are best friends. They hated each other when they first met. But somehow, over these ten years, they have bonded. Ann and Katy are the women I'm closest to, and I consider them both my best friends. I miss Sophie, but she mourned me, moved on with her life and is happy now. It wouldn't be fair for me to turn up in her life. Truthfully, she is human, and she will die one day. Arlo was changed to a d'vampire eight years ago, and now all of us are going to live long lives, together, the way it should be.

“Oh, so you both love spending time together for no good reason?” I tease. “It's okay to have friends.”

“He is a great help with the hellcasters,” he replies, scowling. Austin loves to help us out with the more political side of running the island and to set himself up as almost like a people's person for the hellcasters and vampires who don't have a voice. He goes into the towns and villages to listen to what the people say and what they want, and retells that to Maddox and Reign in the meetings. We can't change everything, but sometimes changing a little thing makes a big difference in the life of many. It all just works. The first time I realised Austin and Maddox were actually friends was six years ago when I found them both drunk and laughing about Reign's terrible attempt at a romantic gesture to Katy by singing through her labour.

Then it became a regular thing for Maddox and Austin to sit together, talking and drinking. They do like to drink together, and I kind of love to see my brother and mate being friendly. They fix each other with this friendship, and it was something Austin desperately needed as much as Maddox. Austin somehow got Maddox into actually having a friendship, something I never thought he would have.

Changing the subject, he tickles me for a bit until I beg him to stop, and we both lie down side by side, our faces close.

“Are we done with your trips?” he asks me. I nod. I made it my personal thing to give closure to all the families that I could find of humans taken in the auction. It started with me finding Lucy's boyfriend. I will never forget what Lucy asked me to do when we were on that boat traveling here

together, and I always thought a part of her knew she was going to die right there and then in that cage. I promised her I would find him, and I did.

Lucy didn't give me much to go on, a beach house in California and a name, but I found him, and I went and told him everything. At first, he didn't quite believe me, and then Maddox showed him his fangs and a little orb of magic, and then he definitely did believe me. It turns out he'd been looking for her all this time. Never gave up, but he knew somewhere deep down that she wasn't here anymore. It's just it was hard to break his heart, but it was the right thing to do. I know Maddox regrets killing her, and he said sorry, but we both agreed not to tell her boyfriend that he did it.

He is human, and he couldn't understand Maddox if he tried.

I went down to all the humans and took over a year to make a very long list of anyone who knew anything about the families of the humans that have been killed. I made a list of over four hundred, and I found three hundred and sixty-two of them. The others, I will continue looking for, but I know there are thousands that will never get that closure. Never know what happened to their family members.

The only thing that I repeat to myself is that the auction is a horror of our past and will not be repeated. For now, we've still got people working on finding the others, and I hope that we do, but maybe they just can't be found. I sit up on my sun lounger and gather the towel underneath me to dry Maddox's hair. The towel is black, and it has our new royal crest in the middle.

We've gotten rid of the old crest, deciding that his father's rule and the crest that went with him just instilled fear in our people. We need to be fresh and new. So now there's a line of roses on a stem with thorns, a blue dagger and a black snake woven around the dagger in the shape of an infinity symbol. We think it represents everything to do with The Onyx and its mix of people under its rule. It represents freedom, a new way for our people. The snake is for the witches. The dagger is blue for the sirens. The roses represent the vampires, and the thorns are for the hellcasters.

Maddox brushes his hand down my cheek. "I know you're wishing you could find closure for all of them. If someone took you from me, I wouldn't

stop searching the whole world. In fact, I'd just burn it all down for you in your memory, so they'd all know who you were and that you were gone. We can't change the past."

"Do you ever think about the people you killed?" I ask him. "I don't judge you for it. I know where you were and what was going on in your heart—"

He stops me and looks down for a second. "Yes, I do think about them sometimes. But I was a monster who was created, and I didn't know better. I was taught that was the only way, and I was taught that loving someone would kill that person. Quite truthfully, it nearly did. So I pushed everyone away, and I killed those that ever got close. I used and did whatever I could in my pain. The truth of all of it is, I just wish you were there sooner. My mate. I won't ever go back to that darkness."

I softly smile at him, loving his growth and the changes he has made to improve his outlook since we met. Who knew the villain could change and end up the good guy?

"Not unless someone threatens you, and then I will enjoy my old ways," he purrs with a dark undertone.

Not all that good.

I love him.

He is my villain, and I am his heart.

BONUS EPILOGUE

The sun sets quick as I watch the horizon, a soft breeze blowing against my cheeks. The colours are pale this afternoon, a mixture of pinks and greens, the odd dot of yellow mixing them together into something special.

I hear them before I turn around. I watch my daughter and mate walk straight towards me. My daughter is as beautiful as my mate as he holds her small hand, and even with her red hair, red eyes and bright smile, she reminds me of Maddox with every single breath she takes. Beatrix, our only daughter, is our shining hope for a better future, and her birth brought joy to the entire island, who covet her as much as we do. I know she will be queen one day, surrounded by all of her family.

“Mum!” Beatrix shouts, running the distance between us as fast as any vampire her age. She might be seven, but she looks at least ten with her long legs.

I wrap her into my arms and hold her tightly as a hello, popping a kiss on her head. “I rode on my own today!”

“Well done, sweet,” I say, smiling at her, enjoying her joy as if I could taste it in the air. Maddox decided a good present for her seventh birthday was a pony...an expensive, imported show breed pony that looks like a black shadow. But Beatrix loves it. “I think uncle Reign was looking for you. Something about red velvet cake, and-“

And she is gone.

Maddox watches me as he walks over, leaning on the balcony and watching the sunset with me.

I kiss his cheek and rest my head on his shoulder. “I believed once that the curse would be everlasting. That I was born to the curse, nearly lost you to it and I’d never have this. You.”

I look up at my mate, my villain, my life. “We are everlasting, Maddox.”



G. Bailey is a USA Today and international bestselling author of books that are filled with everything from dragons to pirates. Plus, fantasy worlds and breath-taking adventures.

G. Bailey is from the very rainy U.K. where she lives with her husband, two children, three cheeky dogs and one cat who rules them all.

A few random facts about her...

She loves tea. (She may be a little obsessed but what Brit isn't?)

Chocolate and Harry Potter marathons are her jam.

She owns way too many notebooks and random pens.

Please feel free say hello on here or head over to Facebook to join G. Bailey's group, Bailey's Pack! (Where you can find exclusive teasers, random giveaways and sneak peeks of new books on the way!)

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I knew nothing about mates until the alpha rejected me...
Growing up in one of the biggest packs in the world, I have my life planned out for me from the second I turn eighteen and find my true mate in the moon ceremony.

Finding your true mate gives you the power to share the shifter energy they have, given to the males of the pack by the moon goddess herself. The power to shift into a wolf.

But for the first time in the history of our pack, the new alpha is mated with a nobody. A foster kid living in the pack's orphanage with no ancestors or power to claim.

Me.

After being brutally rejected by my alpha mate, publicly humiliated and thrown away into the sea, the dark wolves of the Fall Mountain Pack find me.

They save me. The four alphas. The ones the world fears because of the darkness they live in.

In their world? Being rejected is the only way to join their pack. The only way their lost and forbidden god gives them the power to shift without a mate.

I spent my life worshipping the moon goddess, when it turns out my life always belonged to another...

This is a full-length reverse harem romance novel full of sexy alpha males, steamy scenes, a strong heroine and a lot of sarcasm. Intended for 17+

readers. This is a trilogy.

“Don’t hide from us, little pup. Don’t you want to play with the wolves?”

Beta Valeriu’s voice rings out around me as I duck under the staircase of the empty house, dodging a few cobwebs that get trapped in my long blonde hair. Breathlessly, I sink to the floor and wrap my arms around my legs, trying not to breathe in the thick scent of damp and dust. Closing my eyes, I pray to the moon goddess that they will get bored with chasing me, but I know better. No goddess is going to save my ass tonight. Not when I’m being hunted by literal wolves.

I made a mistake. A big mistake. I went to a party in the pack, like all my other classmates at the beta’s house, to celebrate the end of our schooling and, personally for me, turning eighteen. For some tiny reason, I thought I could be normal for one night. Be like them.

And not just one of the foster kids the pack keeps alive because of the laws put in place by a goddess no one has seen in hundreds of years. I should have known the betas in training would get drunk and decide chasing me for another one of their “fun” beatings would be a good way to prove themselves.

Wiping the blood from my bottom lip where one of them caught me in the forest with his fist, I stare at my blood-tipped fingers in a beam of moonlight shining through the broken panelled wall behind me.

I don’t know why I think anyone is going to save me. I’m nothing to them, the pack, or to the moon goddess I pray to every night like everyone in this pack does.

The moon goddess hasn’t saved me from shit.

Heavy footsteps echo closer, changing from crunching leaves to hitting concrete floor, and I know they are in the house now. A rat runs past my leg, and I nearly scream as I jolt backwards into a loose metal panel that vibrates, the metal smacking against another piece and revealing my location to the wolves hunting me.

Crap.

My hands shake as I climb to my feet and slowly step out into the middle of the room as Beta Valeriu comes in with his two sidekicks, who stumble to his side. I glance around the room, seeing the staircase is broken and there is an enormous gap on the second floor. It looks burnt out from a fire, but there is no other exit. I'm well and truly in trouble now. They stop in an intimidating line, all three of them muscular and jacked up enough to knock a car over. Their black hair is all the same shade, likely because they are all cousins, I'm sure, and they have deeply tanned skin that doesn't match how pale my skin is. Considering I'm a foster kid, I could have at least gotten the same looks as them, but oh no, the moon goddess gave me bright blonde hair that never stops growing fast and freckly pale skin to stand out. I look like the moon comparing itself to the beauty of the sun with everyone in my pack.

Beta Valeriu takes a long sip of his drink, his eyes flashing green, his wolf making it clear he likes the hunt. Valeriu is the newest beta, taking over from his father, who recently retired at two hundred years of age and gave the role to his son willingly. But Valeriu is a dick. Simple as. He might be good-looking, like most of the five betas are, but each one of them lacks a certain amount of brain cells. The thing is, wolves don't need to be smart to be betas, they just need the right bloodline and to kill when the alpha clicks his fingers.

All wolves like to hunt and kill. And damn, I'm always the hunted in this pack.

"You know better than to run from us, little Mairin. Little Mary the lamb who runs from the wolf," he sing songs the last part, taking a slow step forward, his shoe grating across the dirt under his feet. Always the height jokes with this tool. He might be over six foot, and sure, my five foot three height isn't intimidating, but has no one heard the phrase *small but deadly*?

Even if I'm not even a little deadly. "Who invited you to my party?"

"The entire class in our pack was invited," I bite out.

He laughs, the crisp sound echoing around me like a wave of frost. "We both know you might be in this pack, but that's only because of the law

about killing female children. Otherwise, our alpha would have ripped you apart a long time ago.”

Yeah, I know the law. The law that states female children cannot be killed because of the lack of female wolves born into the pack. There is roughly one female to five wolves in the pack, and it’s been that way for a long time for who knows what reason. So, when they found me in the forest at twelve, with no memories and nearly dead, they had to take me in and save my life.

A life, they have reminded me daily, has only been given to me because of that law. The law doesn’t stop the alpha from treating me like crap under his shoe or beating me close to death for shits and giggles. Only me, though. The other foster kid I live with is male, so he doesn’t get the “special” attention I do. Thankfully.

“We both know you can’t kill me or beat me bad enough to attract attention without the alpha here. So why don’t you just walk away and find some poor dumbass girl to keep you busy at the party?” I blurt out, tired of all this. Tired of never saying what I want to these idiots and fearing the alpha all the time. A bitter laugh escapes Valeriu’s mouth as his eyes fully glow this time. So do his friends’, as I realise I just crossed a line with my smart-ass mouth.

My foster carer always said my mouth would get me into trouble.

Seems he is right once again.

A threatening growl explodes from Beta Valeriu’s chest, making all the hairs on my arms stand up as I take a step back just as he shifts. I’ve seen it a million times, but it’s always amazing and terrifying at the same time. Shifter energy, pure dark forest green magic, explodes around his body as he changes shape. The only sound in the room is his clicking bones and my heavy, panicked breathing as I search for a way out of here once again, even though I know it’s pointless.

I’ve just wound up a wolf. A beta wolf, one of the most powerful in our pack.

Great job, Irin. Way to stay alive.

The shifter magic disappears, leaving a big white wolf in the space where Valeriu was. The wolf towers over me, like most of them do, and its head is huge enough to eat me with one bite. Just as he steps forward to jump, and I brace myself for something painful, a shadow of a man jumps down from the broken slats above me, landing with a thump. Dressed in a white cloak over jeans and a shirt, my foster carer completely blocks me from Valeriu's view, and I sigh in relief.

“I suggest you leave before I teach you what an experienced, albeit retired, beta wolf can do to a young pup like yourself. Trust me, it will hurt, and our alpha will look the other way.”

The threat hangs in the air, spoken with an authority that Valeriu could never dream of having in his voice at eighteen years old. The room goes silent, filled with thick tension for a long time before I hear the wolf running off, followed by two pairs of footsteps moving quickly. My badass foster carer slowly turns around, lowering his hood and brushing his long grey hair back from his face. Smothered in wrinkles, Mike is ancient, and to this day, I have no clue why he offered to work with the foster kids of the pack. His blue eyes remind me of the pale sea I saw once when I was twelve. He always dresses like a Jedi from the human movies, in long cloaks and swords clipped to his hips that look like lightsabres as they glow with magic, and he tells me this is his personal style.

His name is even more human than most of the pack names that get regularly overused. My name, which is the only thing I know about my past thanks to a note in my hand, is as uncommon as it gets. According to an old book on names, it means Their Rebellion, which makes no sense. Mike is apparently a normal human name, and from the little interaction I've had with humans through their technology, his name couldn't be more common.

“You are extremely lucky my back was playing up and I went for a walk, Irin,” he sternly comments, and I sigh.

“I'm sorry,” I reply, knowing there isn't much else I can say at this point. “The mating ceremony is tomorrow, and I wanted one night of being normal. I shouldn't have snuck out of the foster house.”

“No, you should not have when your freedom is so close,” he counters and reaches up, gently pinching my chin with his fingers and turning my head to the side. “Your lip is cut, and there is considerable bruising to your cheek. Do you like being beaten by those pups?”

“No, of course not,” I say, tugging my face away, still tasting my blood in my mouth. “I wanted to be normal! Why is that so much to ask?”

“Normal is for humans and not shifters. It is why they gave us the United Kingdom and Ireland and then made walls around the islands to stop us from getting out. They want normal, and we need nothing more than what is here: our pack,” he begins, telling me what I already know. They agreed three hundred years ago we would take this part of earth as our own, and the humans had the rest. No one wanted interbreeding, and this was the best way to keep peace. So the United Kingdom’s lands were separated into four packs. One in England, one in Wales, one in Scotland and one in Ireland. Now there are just two packs, thanks to the shifter wars: the Ravensword Pack that is my home, who worship the moon goddess, and then the Fall Mountain Pack, who owns Ireland, a pack we are always at war with. Whoever they worship, it isn’t our goddess, and everything I know about them suggests they are brutal. Unfeeling. Cruel.

Which is exactly why I’ve never tried to leave my pack to go there. It might be shit here, but at least it’s kind of safe and I have a future. Of sorts.

“Do you think it will be better for me when I find my mate tomorrow?” I question...not that I want a mate who will control me with his shifter energy. But it means I will shift into a wolf, like every female can when they are mated, and I’ve always wanted that.

Plus, a tiny part of me wants to know who the moon goddess herself has chosen for me. The other half of my soul. My true mate. Someone who won’t see me as the foster kid who has no family, and will just want me.

Mike looks down at me, and something unreadable crosses his eyes. He turns away and starts walking out of the abandoned house, and I jog to catch up with him. Snowflakes drop into my blonde hair as we head through the forest, back to the foster home, the place I will finally leave one way or another tomorrow. I pull my leather jacket around my chest, over

my brown T-shirt for warmth. My torn and worn out jeans are soaked with snow after a few minutes of walking, the snow becoming thicker with every minute. Mike is silent as we walk past the rocks that mark the small pathway until we get to the top of the hill that overlooks the main pack city of Ravensword.

Towering buildings line the River Thames that flows through the middle of the city. The bright lights make it look like a reflection of the stars in the sky, and the sight is beautiful. It might be a messed up place, but I can't help but admire it. I remember the first time I saw the city from here, a few days after I was found and healed. I remember thinking I had woken up from hell to see heaven, but soon I learnt heaven was too nice of a word for this place. The night is silent up here, missing the usual noise of the people in the city, and I silently stare down wondering why we have stopped.

“What do you see when you look at the city, Irin?”

I blow out a long breath. “Somewhere I need to escape.”

I don't see his disappointment, but I easily feel it.

“I see my home, a place with darkness in its corners but so much light. I see a place even a foster wolf with no family or ancestors to call on can find happiness tomorrow,” he responds. “Stop looking at the stars for your escape, Irin, because tomorrow you will find your home in the city you are trying so hard to see nothing but darkness in.”

He carries on walking, and I follow behind him, trying to do what he has asked, but within seconds my eyes drift up to the stars once again.

Because Mike is right, I am always looking for my way to escape, and I always will. I wasn't born in this pack, and I came from outside the walls that have been up for hundreds of years. That's the only explanation for how they found me in a forest with nothing more than a small glass bottle in my hand and a note with my name on it. No one knows how that is possible, least of all me, but somehow I'm going to figure it out. I have to.

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