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TRISTITIA

SHADES OF SIN

Tristitia

A Shades of Sin Novella

Colette Rhodes

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Author's Note

Tristitia is a monster x monster novella set in the Shades of Sin universe. It is best read as 3.5 in the series, after Gula.

Prologue

LEVANA

The hall was so silent that no matter how much I tried to suppress the noise of my chewing, it sounded deafeningly loud in the cavernous, echoing stone room.

Father tore a piece of meat off the bone with his teeth at the head of the table, making me jump in my seat. Sirena spared me a disapproving glance from across the table before elegantly continuing to eat her meal.

“Father,” Sirena began, saccharine sweet as always. “I can’t help but be concerned that although Levana has reached her age of majority, she is poorly equipped in her role assisting with the running of the estate.”

Traitor, I told her with my eyes, holding myself stiffly in my seat as I waited for Father’s reaction. What was she saying? Sirena was the heir, my role was just doing whatever Father

said until Sirena inherited the family seat, and then it would be doing whatever *she* said, just like Uncle Yestin did for Father. I was more than capable.

“What are you saying?” Father snapped, glaring at Sirena the way he did every time she spoke.

“Just that defending the estate is traditionally the purview of the second child, and Levana has had no training.” No matter how biting Father was, Sirena never rose to it. “Perhaps some retired members of the Guard would be willing to stay on the property to train her—”

“Absolutely not,” Father interrupted, ripping through the meat on his plate and looking at Sirena like he wished it was *her* flesh he was tearing into.

Why had she suggested that? Father hated having *anyone* on the estate who wasn't the three of us or the few trusted staff members he'd selected.

As he liked to remind us daily, the last time he'd had guests on the estate, Mother had run away with one of them.

“This is our *sanctuary*,” Father reiterated. “We do not let anyone else enter. You know what happened the last time I was foolish enough to make that mistake.”

We happened, though he never seemed to make that connection. Mother had left right after I was born, abandoning us both here, and *of course* Father was still distressed by her terrible treatment of him. But occasionally, I couldn't help but

remember that Sirena and I wouldn't exist if not for Mother, and Father didn't like to acknowledge that at all.

"It is," Sirena soothed. "I'm sorry, Father. It was a foolish suggestion. I was thinking too much about the future safety and protection of the estate and not enough about our happiness living in it. Uncle Yestin will be a more than adequate mentor."

Father sat back, his flash of temper disappearing after her placating words. Not for the first time, I wondered if there was more to Sirena than there appeared. She was only a few years older than me, but sometimes the age difference felt much larger.

"You *are* ill-equipped to defend us from intruders," Father said, turning the full force of his furious gaze on me. There hadn't been an *intruder* for centuries, but I knew better than to point that out.

"Yes, Father," I agreed, looking down at the table.

"And Yestin has probably forgotten everything he learned during *his* time in the Guard. Your sister has been working hard to learn how to run the estate. What have you been doing, Levana?"

"Finishing my education," I said in a small voice, already missing Liriene, my tutor. I'd gone to her home most days—a tiny little cottage on the coast—and absorbed every piece of knowledge the elderly Shade could impart.

“Well, what good is that?” Father snorted. “You don’t need to be educated, you need to be *strong*. I should have pulled you out far earlier—Liriene was hardly going to give you combat lessons.”

“Yes, Father.” Perhaps there was another local Shade whom Father would send me to for combat lessons? I perked up slightly at the idea of getting to leave the house each day again.

“The Guard *would*, logically speaking, be the best place for you to learn,” he added, chewing loudly as he spoke. “After all, what use are you alone if we are on the receiving end of a full-fledged attack? No, you’ll need allies. Fellow trained Shades you can call on in times of need for the benefit of *our family*.”

He said the last two words pointedly, looking between Sirena and me to reiterate why this conversation was happening at all.

“Yes, I have come to the decision that a short stint as a member of the Guard would serve us well. You have an impressive family name and enough raw power to be accepted without any issue.”

I was too scared to even raise my head, worried that he’d change his mind. *Join* the Guard? Live away from the estate and train in combat with the finest warriors of the realm? It was too good to be true. I couldn’t let myself believe it.

I’d never gone more than a few miles from Erith, the family estate where I’d been born. I’d never shadow-walked. My first

trip to the human realm to feed was to happen tomorrow, with my father as an escort.

“Yes, this is a very good idea of mine,” Father said decisively. “It goes without saying that your loyalty is first and foremost to our family.”

“Of course,” I agreed hurriedly, stumbling over the words.

“But you also need to be *useful*, or what is the point of this all? So yes, you will join the Guard and hone your skills. But when I call you home, Levana, make no mistake that you will come. You only exist because of my graciousness. Your privileged life is a gift I have given you. You owe *everything* to me, to this family.

“When I call you home, Levana, you will return immediately, willingly, and gratefully.”

Chapter 1

LEVANA

S EVEN YEARS LATER
I hated these things.

The fire in the middle of the clearing reeked of burning herbs, and the Shades nearby reeked of cheap wine. It was meant to be a bonding experience among the palace staff and the members of the Guard who weren't celebrating with their own families, but I was mostly overwhelmed.

Crowds were a lot more comfortable when I had something to *do*. A job. Someone or something to guard.

Socializing was an entirely different beast.

"Drink with us, Levana!" Andrus called, holding up his goblet in a toast, wine sloshing over the sides onto the dry dirt. "I don't think I've seen you have one drink yet."

“Because it smells undrinkable,” I mumbled.

“Pah! What a snob,” he laughed, making me bristle. Andrus had been trying to get into my bed for years, having singled me out as a Shade of equivalent social standing and possibly worth impregnating.

My family would probably approve, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Andrus was just *so* obnoxious.

“Calm down, Blue,” a gruff voice from behind me drawled. “Here. I brought the good stuff.”

Calix, the palace’s head cook, pressed an open bottle of fine vintage into my hand, watching me expectantly.

“Blue?” I held his gaze as I took a swig, more to get everyone off my case than anything else.

He grunted, not bothering to acknowledge the obvious—the eyes that marked me as something of an oddity, a darker color than most Shades possessed. The only thing I’d inherited from my mother.

“Good?” he asked. If it had been anyone else, I would have thought the question was asked purely out of politeness. A meaningless throwaway, meant to make small talk and nothing else.

But Calix wasn’t known for either politeness or small talk. And he probably *did* care how the wine tasted. As far as I could tell, flavor was the only thing he was interested in.

I'd always admired that about him, though I barely even admitted that to myself. There was something very *compelling* about seeing someone who was unashamedly passionate about what they enjoyed.

It had made Calix something of a fascination of mine since he'd come to work at the palace, though I did my best to ignore it. Any day here at court could be my last. I couldn't afford fascinations.

"Yes, it's good. Thank you."

He gestured for me to have more, but I shook my head, passing the bottle back. Perhaps I could leave now. I'd made an appearance. Verner was the only other member of the Guard whose company I enjoyed. He was the closest thing I had to a childhood friend, having grown up not far from Erith. My father didn't invite guests onto the property, but I'd met Verner a few times at local festivals over the years.

He'd wisely skipped this event entirely.

"Leaving so soon?" Calix asked, taking a swig of wine and giving me a challenging look. "The party just started."

"I'm not much for parties."

"Pity."

"I'm sure you'll be miserable without my company," I agreed drily, already looking around for an exit path through the trees that would draw the least amount of attention.

"I'm confident I will be." Calix sounded so serious that I couldn't help but turn my focus to him. Was he being

facetious? He had to be. There was no other explanation. “I had hoped I might get to talk to you tonight.”

“Why?” It was a blunter response than I’d intended to come up with. Wasn’t Calix the direct-to-the-point-of-rudeness one? It had been much remarked on at court.

By the night, it was inconvenient that he was so attractive, with his rich orange eyes and defined, muscular physique. Combined with his unabashed love for what he did and his outrageous confidence, it made him very... distracting.

Calix took a step closer and I was surprised to find I *almost* took a step back in response. It was unlike me to be intimidated by anyone, but there was no denying that there was something about Calix that was *more* than most Shades I encountered.

He seemed like the kind of male who could make anything happen just by the force of his personality alone. Like no obstacle would be too big for him to overcome. I never quite knew how to deal with those types.

“I’ve seen you looking at me.” Calix tipped his head back, all obnoxious swagger.

“Being aware of my surroundings is part of my job. Don’t read into it.”

“Too late, Blue.” He grinned. Why had I thought all those nice things about him? Calix was insufferable. “Come, dance with me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Afraid you might enjoy yourself?”

“I’m confident that I wouldn’t.” I was very fond of dancing, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Liar.” He set the wine down on a tree stump, reaching out his hand for me to take. It was a very chivalrous gesture, one not usually extended to members of the Guard, who were generally regarded as too stoic to require such things. Which I was. I didn’t need chivalry.

“Dance with me, Blue.”

If only I’d had more wine so I could blame my decision to take his hand on the liquor. I couldn’t. The choice was all mine.

Calix’s grin grew a little more feral as he pulled me toward the Shades dancing around the fire, and I was struck with a feeling of absolute certainty that I didn’t often experience.

I was going to fuck this male tonight.

The trajectory was already in motion, it had been from the second he’d told me to calm down—perhaps the most insulting of pickup lines. Was it a poor decision? Almost certainly. He was antagonizing and stubborn, and his smug face would probably irritate me every time I saw him around the palace.

But it had also been awhile since I’d orgasmed from anything other than my own toy collection, and Calix *had* always intrigued me. And unless I was reading the signs very wrong, he was interested in me too. At least for tonight.

Let's hope all the smugness he oozes is warranted. At least I'll enjoy myself.

I startled as Calix's shadows brushed teasingly against mine, boldly caressing me as he pulled my body against him, his claws pricking my hips.

"Aren't you confident?" I asked, my voice less steady than usual as I rested my palms on his firm chest, his shadows immediately covering my hands.

"Why wouldn't I be? I have you right where I want you." He pulled me a little tighter against him, angling his leg between mine. "Grinding on my thigh."

"I am not *grinding*."

Well, I wasn't *yet*. The idea had some appeal, though now I didn't want to on principle.

Calix flashed me a grin that seemed to travel directly between my thighs before leaning in close, speaking quietly in my ear. "Don't be stubborn, Blue. Relax. Let yourself feel good if you want to feel good. We've both been putting off the inevitable for too long. May as well embrace it and enjoy ourselves in the process."

"For one night only," I warned, pressing in a little tighter, chasing the friction I was searching for. "Don't get any ideas."

"And if you beg for more?"

I snorted. "That's not going to be an issue."

“We’ll see about that. I very much plan on making you addicted to me, Blue.”

Chapter 2

CALIX

I was on my knees the moment the door to my apartment closed behind Levana, wrapping a hand around her thigh and encouraging her to drape her leg over my shoulder. I dragged my teeth over her smooth inner thigh, following the path I'd taken with my tongue.

I'd been watching Levana for two years, since I'd first taken the head cook position at the palace. There was no shortage of beautiful Shades at court, but *she* was the only one who'd ever captured my attention.

Maybe because she was aloof in a way that seemed so earnest. Levana wasn't *trying* to seem haughty and reserved, it wasn't an act to fit in with the other courtiers. That was just her personality.

There was something refreshingly honest about her genuine indifference.

Not that it mattered beyond tonight. Levana was a daughter of the nobility, and while I had a respectable career, her mysterious family would never consider me a suitable match in the long run.

“I’m not going to beg,” Levana panted—apropos of nothing—letting me shift her limbs where I wanted them as she dropped her shadows, revealing long lines of toned muscle, evidently getting impatient with my teasing.

“You sure about that, Blue? Look at this pussy, shining with slick. It’s doing the begging for you.”

She grabbed the base of one of my horns with an impatient snarl, dragging my face where she wanted me. I grinned up at her, dragging my tongue over the sharp points of my teeth.

“So impatient.”

“You’re infuriating—”

I cut her off by spearing my tongue into her pussy, finally getting a taste of the slick I’d been craving for two long years.

Fucking delectable, just like I knew she would be. Like the richest mulled wine.

I lived for flavor, and I’d never tasted anything quite as perfect as her.

“Calix!” Levana’s grip on my horn tightened, her other hand fumbling at the door behind her, claws gouging into the wood.

I might have to cut out that panel and frame it.

She didn't pull me back as I licked deeper, my teeth moving closer to her sensitive flesh. Something akin to pride ran through me that Levana trusted me with her body.

The first pulse of her walls around tongue had me fisting my cock roughly, torn between wanting to taste her orgasm and not wanting to be trapped kneeling on the floor, her pussy clamping me in place.

That didn't sound terrible. I could get myself off—

“Give me your cock,” Levana demanded raspily, writhing impatiently against the door and trying to tug me to my feet. As if I was going to fuck her *here*.

With one final greedy mouthful of slick, I climbed to my feet, grabbing Levana's hand and dragging her toward my bedroom.

Despite having dropped our coverings, both of us seemed to be leaking impatient shadows, greedily licking at each other's skin.

We tumbled through the door and onto the bed, and I rolled us until I was above her, nipping at her throat and shoulders with my teeth, surprised again that she was letting me near such vulnerable areas.

I'd intended to be gentle. To make love to her like the noble-born Shade she was.

But *I* was no noble. I didn't fuck like one either.

I grabbed the back of Levana's legs, pushing them upwards so she was all but folded in half.

"Hold them for me," I ordered.

Levana moved her hands slowly into place, looking at me as though she couldn't decide whether to follow my instructions or not.

"You can always say no," I pointed out with a grin, dipping my head to lick a long stripe up her cunt one more time, savoring the taste of her. "Tell me to stop. Tell me to fuck off. I won't mind."

I spit on her pussy before straightening, using the head of my cock to mingle my saliva with her slick.

"Or maybe you don't want to tell me to fuck off. Maybe you like that I don't treat you like you're made of glass."

I notched the head of my cock at her entrance, closing my eyes for a moment to steady myself. She was already squeezing me so good, her pussy preparing to clamp down the moment her orgasm hit.

"I'd like it if you talked less."

"Liar." I grinned as she hitched her legs a little higher, opening herself up to me. "Tell me if it's too much."

I didn't hold back. I couldn't. Not when Levana's pussy was already squeezing around me, and my balls were fucking aching. Not when she was presenting herself to me, letting me take the lead when we both knew she could kick my ass if she wanted to.

The bed creaked ominously with each rough thrust, but I was more fixated on the breathy little sounds Levana made. The occasional quiet moans of pleasure that escaped even though she was obviously self-conscious about them.

There had been something about Levana that I'd found impossible to ignore from the first moment I'd seen her. A *complexity* to her that I wanted to unravel; a delicate meal with so many flavors I wanted to investigate.

Usually, sex was the fastest way to cure me of my interest in someone. The mystery was unraveled. The thrill was gone. The spark of curiosity went out.

But the spark with Levana was only growing larger.

With a breathless, needy sound that I would hear every night in my dreams for the rest of my life, Levana clenched *hard* around me, strangling my cock and practically tearing my orgasm from my body.

It was fucking glorious.

My knot pulsed and swelled, and I began shifting my weight to one arm so I could reach between us and tend to it.

"Let me," Levana rasped, sliding a hand between our bodies. I grunted at the exquisite feel of her tight grip around my knot, squeezing and kneading in time to her own continuing waves of pleasure.

No one had ever done this for me before. Attending to a swollen, uncomfortable knot, desperate for pressure, was an incredibly intimate act.

“Feel good?” Levana asked, clearly torn between her own pleasure and what she was doing to me. “I’ve never done this before. Should I squeeze tighter?”

“That’s perfect,” I replied, voice shaky.

“For one night only. Don’t get any ideas.”

Too late.

Far too fucking late.



I closed my eyes and reminded myself to think calm thoughts as something crashed on the other side of the kitchen.

Torin, the latest addition to my kitchen staff, had spilled an entire vat of stock, set two small fires, and left an entire delivery of meat in front of the palace gate because he’d gotten distracted on his way outside—all in his first *week*.

But he had a good palate.

Perhaps hand-eye coordination could be taught.

“Everything okay, boss?” Katriel asked. “It’s just an empty pot, no damage. This time,” she added in a quiet mutter.

As my second-in-command, and often more directly responsible for the staff, Torin’s clumsiness was personal for her.

“You do seem more... agitated than usual though.”

I shot her my most impatient look, wondering when my staff had grown comfortable enough to pry into my state of mind.

Back when I'd first started working here, having been poached from one of the finest restaurants in Cartava, the staff had been scared of me.

I missed those days.

"You've been grumpy since the party the other night," Katriel continued, not at all concerned about the warning looks I was giving her. "Actually, didn't you leave with someone? I could have sworn I saw you dancing—"

"I suggest you stop talking."

That had clearly been the wrong thing to say. "Ooh, so you *did* leave with someone! Who was it?"

"None of your business."

"Are you going to see them again?"

Ah, and there it was. The crux of my bad mood. The source of the frustration I wasn't allowed to have because she'd warned me all along what to expect.

"No." I pulled out my favorite set of knives and a whetstone.

"No, I'm not."

Chapter 3

LEVANA

A knock on the door of my apartment only ever meant one thing.

Nyfain.

Fixing a pleasant expression on my face, I opened the door and gestured for my father's butler to enter.

"Tea?" I asked, going through the unnecessary song and dance we always went through.

Nyfain shook his head, folding his hands behind his back and waiting for me to sit down while he remained standing. This wasn't Erith and I found the formality of his behavior stifling, but in the seven years I'd lived here, I'd long since given up on telling him it wasn't necessary.

“How is my family?” I asked, sitting up perfectly straight on the too-soft sofa that was trying to swallow me up. The décor was older than me—possibly chosen by my great-grandmother when she’d lived in these apartments at court—but changing a single thing was absolutely forbidden.

I may be the only one who lived here, but these rooms *belonged* to my family.

“They are well and eager to hear how you’re faring, as always.”

“I’m fine.” We’d had this exact conversation every week for seven years—first at the Pit when I’d worked there, now at the palace—the words were meaningless at this point.

“Your sister has been trying to conceive a child with Andrion from Penrith for the past five years.” I nearly choked on my saliva. *That* wasn’t a conversation we’d ever had before. “He already has an eldest child and heir. Any child born of your sister will stay at Erith.”

“Does my sister know you’re telling me this?” I blurted, mortified on her behalf.

Nyfain looked down awkwardly. “Your father asked me to relay this information.”

“Right. Of course.”

“There are early signs that she has been successful, though it is too soon to know for certain. Your uncle is getting on in years, and nothing is more important to the longevity of the

family at this point in time than your sister's heir. If there is a baby, your father expects you to return home."

From the moment I'd left home, I'd known this moment was coming and yet I didn't feel any less unprepared for it.

Don't complain. Be grateful. You got longer than you thought you would.

To this day, I didn't know why that was. My only guess was that I'd risen higher in the Guard than my father had expected me to, and he was concerned about how it would look to recall me at this point.

"I see."

"Your father would like to remind you—"

"That I would return willingly and gratefully at his request, I remember."

For a brief moment, it almost looked as though Nyfain felt sorry for me, though I had probably imagined it. He was my father's right hand through and through.

"I will inform you once the pregnancy is confirmed."

I shot him a tight smile. "Thank you, Nyfain. Please give my regards to my father and sister."

"It would be my pleasure." He bowed slightly, backing away and excusing himself from the apartment. I supposed I should be grateful that my father hadn't summoned me home to deliver that news in person. Even Father realized that his mood

was foul whenever he requested I come home, though, because it meant me leaving again.

There was another knock on the door and I stood reluctantly, dragging my feet as I crossed the room. Nyfain had probably forgotten to deliver some other warning about my behavior and he'd never lie to my father and claim he'd done something if he hadn't.

“Did you forget— Oh. I'm sorry, come in, Captain.”



I bowed my head instantly, standing back for Captain Soren to enter. What could he possibly want with me? Aside from the king and the crown prince, he was the most powerful Shade in the realm. I was good enough to be stationed here at the palace, but hardly the most impressive member of the Guard and certainly not worth being singled out.

Unless I'd done something wrong.

Had I done something wrong?

Perhaps someone had complained about me. I knew I'd developed something of a reputation for being stuck up, though I hadn't *meant* to. Even after seven years away from home, I was still overwhelmed by the idea of casual socializing. It wasn't done at Erith. I'd never learned how.

“Are you well?” he asked, taking a seat at the dining table and looking mightily uncomfortable all the while. This was probably why Selene usually handled disciplinary issues.

“Um, yes. Thank you. Shall I make tea or—”

“No, that’s not necessary. Sit, this won’t take long.”

By the night, he was going to dismiss me from service and then I’d be *forced* to go home but with the added disadvantage of deep, deep shame.

Captain Soren was frowning, though he frowned a lot so that didn’t give me much insight. “A new role has come up. Having discussed it with Selene, we thought you might be best suited for it.”

Oh. *Oh*. He wasn’t dismissing me.

“Me?” I asked, curious about what possible role the Captain of the Guard could have been considering for *me* specifically. I took my job seriously, but I certainly wasn’t the most talented fighter or the most powerful among the Guard.

Captain Soren hesitated. “This isn’t yet common knowledge, but the king is to marry. The announcement will be made at tonight’s feast.”

“Oh, I see.” Though I didn’t, not really. Why did the captain look so worried about that? There had been mutterings throughout the kingdom for years that it was high time King Allerick got serious about producing an heir.

Unlike his father, this king hadn’t left a trail of offspring across the land.

“His bride is a Hunter.”

“... I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” I asked after a long pause, sure I’d misheard.

The captain grimaced. “She’s a Hunter. It’s a condition of the treaty the two councils are putting together.”

Who could have possibly thought *that* was a good idea? I doubted it was the king. Though I supposed it gave us a Hunter hostage. There could be advantages to that.

“Your role would be threefold; keeping this new *queen* safe from any Shades who take it upon themselves to rid the realm of a Hunter—that’s not their call to make—as well as monitoring her behavior for any signs of trouble. Most importantly, the king’s safety is paramount. The role would include ensuring his protection.”

“Undoubtedly,” I agreed, attempting to process all of these new developments. Quite apart from the absurdity of having a Hunter as our *monarch*, I couldn’t understand why the captain wanted *me* in the role of her personal guard. Even if it was because they felt it would be more suitable to have a female in the role, Selene was the Lieutenant and far more qualified than I was.

“You’re wondering why I thought you would be most suitable for this position,” the captain stated, reading the confusion on my face. “You are more than competent to protect her from Shades and protect the Shades from her, but so are many other members of the Guard. Why I thought you would suit the role is that you have a... *compassion* to you that I believe would endear you to her.”

“Oh.” Compassion? “No one has ever described me that way before,” I added with a slightly nervous laugh.

“Not all of us thrive in social situations,” Captain Soren muttered. “Which can lead to misconceptions, if those around us aren’t looking closely.”

I couldn’t tell which of us was more uncomfortable.

“I couldn’t agree more. And I’m very honored that you’d consider me for the role, but I’m afraid that I’ll likely be leaving the Guard soon,” I admitted quietly. “My family may need me home in Erith.”

The captain’s frown deepened. “Is there anything I can say to change your mind? There’s really no one else who compared when we were considering you for the role.”

That was very flattering, though I didn’t think that had been his intention. Flattery wasn’t the captain’s style.

“It’s not my mind that needs changing,” I replied tentatively, feeling immensely disloyal to my family as I did. At the same time, Captain Soren had given me a home here among the Guard and taught me everything I knew about combat. I felt a sense of loyalty to him too.

“I see.” Captain Soren sat back in his seat looking thoughtful. “It would be a very prestigious position, being the primary personal guard to the queen—even if she is a Hunter. A tremendous win for your family. Such an announcement could be... disseminated to Erith.”

Could that work? “It would need to reach Nyfain, my father’s butler. That’s the only way of ensuring it would reach... where it needs to reach. And I’m still not sure how long I’d be able to stay for.”

Father *would* recall me eventually, and I’d never leave Erith again unless I needed to feed. That was my future. It was already planned out.

And it’s what I wanted. Didn’t I? Of course it was. Anything else would be incredibly disloyal of me after everything my father had done for me.

This would just *delay* my return a little longer, and that was okay, wasn’t it? That wasn’t disloyal of me. It would be an additional benefit to my training which would serve me well when I returned home to my family.

Captain Soren nodded curtly. “To be entirely honest with you, I can’t see this arrangement lasting more than a few months at most. In all likelihood, the bride is an assassin sent to attempt to kill Allerick. Once she has been dispatched, the role will be obsolete. There will always be a place for you in the Guard, of course.”

“I’d be honored to accept the role.”

The captain seemed slightly surprised that I’d agreed so quickly, but immediately collected himself. “I’m glad to hear it. I do need you to be aware that if the need arises, you may need to kill the Hunter. Do you think that will be a problem for you?”

I swallowed thickly, shaking my head. I didn't relish the thought, but I'd seen enough Shades killed by Hunter blades to know mercy wouldn't be an option.

The captain's expression was grim. "Never let your guard down, Levana. The Hunters are manipulative, and they know what they're doing. Undoubtedly, whoever they send will be a dangerous opponent."

Chapter 4

LEVANA

“Don’t be nervous,” Verner said reassuringly, standing at his post opposite me at the entrance to the royal wing. “You’re going to be great. You’re a very formidable guard, she’ll see.”

“She might not even leave her rooms,” I replied, glancing down the silent corridor. My instructions had been to introduce myself and follow Queen Ophelia if she left the royal wing of the palace, but I didn’t really expect her to, not today at least.

Surely she’d be thinking over the events of last night and formulating her plan to attack the king, lulling us into a false sense of security by hiding away in her rooms.

Having watched her at her wedding feast, I thought she must be a very good actress indeed. She’d looked convincingly guileless sitting next to the king, and it was a far more

dangerous trick than any other she could have pulled. I'd need to be careful.

"They look far less intimidating in our realm, don't you think?" Verner mused. "Against our corporeal forms, they're almost helpless."

"That's what she wants you to think. Don't get complacent," I warned. "They're trained with silver weapons from birth."

"That's true enough. And this one is probably the most dangerous of all, even if she did a good job of *looking* completely helpless at her wedding." He paused. "I certainly hope she doesn't leave her rooms. If you leave your post, Andrus will replace you, and he's terrible company."

"You don't enjoy hearing him tell you about how wonderful he is for several hours straight?"

Verner snorted. "He doesn't do that with me. Probably because he can't breed me so I'm not worth the effort."

I bit back my laugh just in time as the door to the queen's room opened. Verner and I both straightened as the Hunter emerged. Unlike the bright white dress she'd worn for her wedding, today she was in a black flowing dress that very much looked like a Hunter's interpretation of our shadows. Did she think it would help her blend in? If anything, it made the *otherness* of her pinkish skin and reddish-brown hair more stark.

A combination of respect for her station and fear of her kind had me dropping my gaze to the floor, watching her feet

approach. The moment she passed through the archway, I fell into step behind her, leaving Verner to guard this wing of the palace alone until Andrus was summoned.

The queen startled, turning to look at me. Her oddly expressive face contorted into all kinds of shapes that weren't familiar to me, but if I hazarded a guess, I'd say she looked surprised. Did she think she'd be permitted to walk around alone?

"Hello," she said tentatively.

She's not tentative. It's all an act.

"Er, hello. Your Majesty," I added hastily, stumbling along the line between respectful and suspicious that I was trying to walk.

"That is... very unnecessary. Just Ophelia is fine."

Was this an attempt to make me think she was harmless?

"Queen Ophelia," I amended firmly. "My name is Levana. I've been assigned to accompany you today."

And however many days you're here, though I didn't want to state that outright lest she try to use it against us somehow.

"Anywhere in particular?" the queen asked, sounding slightly put out. Probably because I was trailing her.

"Um, well, nowhere in particular."

In hindsight, it probably would have made sense for someone to set at least a basic schedule for her. Showing her

around in a controlled way, exposing her to only what we wanted her to see, would be smarter than letting her roam—

Nope, she was off.

I hastened to keep pace a few feet behind as she wandered through the corridors, looking with interest at the curved walls and plain silver orb lights. Was she looking for a weakness in the structure perhaps? A way to smuggle more Hunters in here to ambush us? It would never work—the queen had a very distinctive scent, and it almost seemed that it changed with her feelings. We would *smell* any Hunters attempting to lie in wait.

Queen Ophelia followed the gentle breeze coming from the central courtyard that the palace was built around. Once in the covered walkway, she moved to the balcony, first staring up at the sky before turning her attention to the dark, overgrown garden that dominated the courtyard.

She looked so contemplative that I forced myself to look away, staring fixedly at a spot just over her shoulder. While it may have all been an act to weaken my defenses, it was proving to be a rather effective one.

Queen Ophelia cut quite a pitiable figure.

Eventually, she moved on, heading down another passageway until she came to a set of heavy black doors, her hand resting on the handle as she stared at the engravings of books on the wood.

“The library,” I said, since it didn’t seem like it would do any harm for her to know that. The pictures sort of gave it away.

With an absent nod of acknowledgment, the queen let herself into the dim, quiet space, swallowing so loudly I could hear her from a few feet back. Perhaps because of the reduced orb light here? The line of black candelabras down the middle row threw off enough light that no one could shadow walk directly into it, but perhaps that wasn't reassuring for a being who'd been raised to fear Shades in the dark.

It was difficult for me to stay focused and on task as she idly looked at the spines of the shelves closest to the main thoroughfare. So far, guarding the Hunter Queen of the Shades was a lot more tedious than I'd expected it to be. I followed her back out into the corridors, my awareness of my surroundings spiking as she headed into a more populated part of the palace. Shades stared openly, though remembered to dip their chins in respect at my glares.

She was still the queen, and she was carefully not giving us any reason to treat her poorly. The more I watched her, the more I wondered if *she* was waiting for *us* to instigate the first hostilities, and that wasn't going to happen on my watch.

"Where are the kitchens?" Queen Ophelia asked, startling me out of my musings.

Please no. Anywhere but there.

"Bottom level," I replied, hoping that the question was purely a hypothetical one. A just-out-of-interest question and nothing more.

The queen nodded, immediately heading down the sloping path that led to the kitchens.

I blew out a quiet breath before I followed along behind her. Perhaps I would be incredibly lucky and Calix wouldn't be there today. I'd been avoiding him so successfully for so long, avoiding even *thinking* of that night, and I wasn't ready for that good luck streak to end just yet.

It might mean a conversation.

And I wasn't sure I'd ever be ready for *that* conversation.



“What do you want?” Calix barked the moment Queen Ophelia pushed open the kitchen doors, making the queen jump. Whether it was his brash voice that did it or the giant cleaver, I wasn't sure.

Or perhaps it was the half-butchered carcass laid out on the bench in front of him. The goriness of it was an excellent cure for the panic I'd been feeling at the idea of seeing him again.

“This is the *queen*. Watch your tongue,” I snapped, wincing slightly at how quickly I'd failed at remaining aloof and distant. Then again, I'd also had that problem the night we'd spent together too. Something about Calix made my emotions suddenly feel too big for my body, and it was the most aggravating sensation.

Calix looked at me over the queen's head, dark orange eyes filled with irritation that sparked an answering wave of defensiveness in me. *You have nothing to feel guilty about. You were upfront and honest. You made no promises.*

He'd tied his hair back at the base of his neck in a messy knot that drew attention to his throat, and the muscles and veins in his arms flexed with every movement. I was surrounded by warriors day in and day out—physically strong males were an everyday feature of my life—but Calix had a raw physicality to him, unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

“She can be the queen outside this room. I'm the king in this kitchen.”

Arrogance is an unattractive trait, I reminded myself because apparently I needed it.

But my body wasn't getting the messages my brain was valiantly trying to send it, even though I knew getting further entangled with Calix would be asking for trouble. Already, there was a possessiveness to his expression that warned loud and clear that nothing with Calix would be casual. That maybe just one night had landed me deeper than I'd meant to get, and I needed to get myself out of it.

“That sounds fair,” the queen agreed with nary a shred of concern for her own safety, shooting me a placating smile. “In here, I'm just Ophelia. What shall I call you, sir?”

To think we'd all been afraid of her.

Maybe I was being too trusting, but it certainly seemed like Queen Ophelia would be completely defenseless against even the weakest Shade. That physical force might not be necessary at all if one wanted to hurt her. She looked like a few well-placed *words* would make her cry.

“Not ‘sir,’ that’s for certain. My name is Calix.”

“Call him ‘vermin’ for his attitude,” I grumbled, mortified at his flagrant disrespect.

“Careful now,” Ophelia said with a laugh. “The King of the Kitchen may exile you for your cheek.”

My tension eased ever so slightly as Calix relaxed, almost amused in spite of himself. Apparently, Queen Ophelia was not an easy person to be angry around.

Ophelia looked around the kitchen, perhaps searching for something familiar. I’d seen human kitchens through dark windows, and we were missing many of the buzzing, shiny features they seemed to necessitate.

“You’re here about that, I take it,” Calix said, waving his cleaver at the box of colorful food from the human realm.

Of course. She wasn’t a Shade. She’d have different nutritional needs.

If only I’d thought of that before I’d accepted this assignment. The palace kitchen was the last place I wanted to spend any amount of time.

“I am. I don’t suppose there’s somewhere cold I could store them if I cooked them in advance?”

Calix tipped his chin toward the door at the back of the room. “We have ice pits to keep food cold. You’re not going to demand I prepare them for you?”

The tension I'd lost came back with a vengeance. "By the night, if the king heard you speak to her like that..."

I may not have made Calix any promises, but that didn't mean I wanted to see him thrown in the Pit for idiotically insulting the king's wife. Then again, maybe the king wouldn't care. We hadn't seen him all morning.

"Not at all. I'm sure you're busy enough without needing to make special meals for me. I'll prepare some vegetables in advance and store them in the ice pit." Ophelia smoothed down the front of her dress, seemingly decided on this course of action.

Calix reluctantly slid a cutting board and knife across the counter toward her, and I guessed that meant I was stuck here for the foreseeable future. I planted myself against the wall, silently watching as she messed around with her strangely colored food under Calix's narrow-eyed glare.

As defensive as I was being, I didn't really believe Calix would *hurt* her. I didn't have that same absolute confidence in the other Shades at court. Physically, she was probably safer here than anywhere else in the castle.

"Should I help you?" I asked, somewhat reluctantly. Food preparation was not an activity I derived any joy from and certainly what I hadn't signed up for, but I supposed it would be the *right* thing to do. I was here to serve the monarch, after all.

"Is this not very new-queen behavior?" Ophelia teased.

Oh dear, had I inadvertently criticized her? “Oh, it’s fine—”

Calix’s sharp laugh cut me off. “Not particularly queenly, no. We all assumed you’d be a stuck-up Hunter bitch who’d expect us to wait on you hand and foot, and remind us of all the Shades you’d killed.”

“*Calix!*” I was going to kill him. Why had I been worried about him rotting in the Pit? It might humble him a little.

Ophelia fumbled the knife she was holding. “No, no, I would never... I *have* never...”

“Yeah, I think we’re seeing that,” Calix mused. “Unless you’re a very good actress, there’s nothing lethal about you. You’re squeamish over meat.”

“It’s very, uh, *squelchy* sounding,” Ophelia replied weakly.

“I’m thoroughly trained in combat and field medicine, and even I struggle with the gore in here,” I volunteered, hoping to put the queen’s mind at ease. “Calix revels in making everyone around him uncomfortable.”

“*Look at this pussy, shining with slick. It’s doing the begging for you.*”

Yes, he certainly knew just what to say to get a reaction out of someone.

“I don’t care to make others *comfortable*—it’s not the same thing.”

He shot me the same self-satisfied grin he’d given me *that night*, and there was an answering spark of *something* between

my thighs.

No. No repeats. Don't even consider it.

He already had an alarming level of influence over both my mind and my body as it was.

They made small talk about Calix's role at the palace while Ophelia filled the pot over the flame with small chunks of color. I never stopped watching her, not entirely. I was a professional after all, and I'd been entrusted with this job because I was good at what I did.

But my gaze landed on Calix's smug expression a few more times than strictly necessary.

Ophelia perked up immediately at Calix's mention of the royal family, and while I did my best to remind myself that it *could* all be an act to gather more information about King Allerick, her enthusiasm seemed so genuine in its awkwardness.

Why her? Why had the Hunters sent her?

Calix reassured Ophelia that he'd send her human food up with the meals he made, and I nearly smiled at the gratitude on Ophelia's face—as though he was doing it as an act of generosity rather than to keep the royal family out of his kitchen fiefdom.

“That's very kind, thank you,” Ophelia told him sincerely.

Calix looked as though he'd just swallowed something unpleasant. “I just don't want you in my kitchen every day.”

“I don’t want to accompany the queen to your kitchen every day, so if you could send it up, that would work better for everyone.”

I gave him a long look, hoping that I was conveying with my expression alone that it would be far better for both of us if we didn’t have to spend any more time together.

That was obvious, wasn’t it? So why did he look like he was ready to disagree?

Chapter 5

CALIX

O NE WEEK LATER

I didn't much like leaving the kitchens.

The kitchen was my domain. The rest of the palace was not. My skin always felt too small for my body when I had to deal with snobby courtiers, but I was braving the palace corridors today.

In the time that the queen had been here, she'd spent a large portion of her days in the garden, which meant that was where Levana was too.

For reasons I couldn't understand, there was an incessant itching restlessness under my skin that I was pretty sure Levana was the only cure for.

But *why*? Yes, I'd been obsessed with her on sight, but that should have eased off after sex, not worsened. And it wasn't as though she made it easy for me to lust after her. Levana mostly avoided me, and had raised her haughtiness levels up significantly whenever she had to visit the kitchens.

Why wasn't that off-putting?

I found Levana pacing at the very edge of the public gardens, near the walled-off bit that was exclusively for the royal family's use.

"Did you lose the queen?" I teased. "Isn't that your one job?"

She shot me an impatient looking, coming to a stop and crossing her arms over her chest. "Isn't your one job cooking? I don't see any kitchens around here..."

"I do see something delicious though."

I grinned as Levana failed to suppress a surprised laugh. "That was the worst line I've ever heard, I can't believe you just said that."

The queen must be out of earshot if Levana was speaking so openly.

"Is it a line if I'm speaking truthfully?"

Levana huffed out another quiet laugh, shaking her head slightly. "They're in there, by the way. The king and queen."

She gestured at the high walls of the private garden.

“You’re not going stand at the entrance? How un-guard-like of you.”

“You wouldn’t either,” Levana grumbled. “The smell is quite... overwhelming.”

“The *smell*?” I replied, choking on a laugh. I was already accustomed to Ophelia’s scent changing with her mood, and I’d heard through the chains of gossip that she produced something quite potent around her husband, though I’d assumed it had been exaggeration.

Levana wouldn’t lie though. She was loyal to a fault.

“I believe it’s a good thing,” Levana added hurriedly. “I was waiting in the hall while they discussed the details, but my guess is that it shows some kind of compatibility. I don’t know why I’m telling you this, it’s very unprofessional of me.”

I leaned back against a tree, watching as she resumed her pacing. “Who else do you have to talk to?”

She paused. “What?”

“Who else do you have to talk to about this stuff?”

“I could talk to Verner.” It sounded more like a suggestion than a convincing argument.

“Why don’t you?” I asked, keeping my tone as light and casual as possible. I’d watched Levana closely enough that I was *fairly* confident that there was nothing more than friendship between her and Verner.

But it didn't stop me from feeling a smidge jealous. Mostly that Verner got so much of Levana's time. I wanted that for myself.

"I guess we don't have that kind of friendship," Levana mused before shooting me a sharp look. "Not that you and I do."

"Of course not."

"We're not even friends."

"Just two Shades who happen to have seen each other naked —"

"That was an accident."

"Oh, you *slipped* and fell on my—"

Levana sent out a whip of shadow to flick my shoulder.

"Right, right, sorry. I forgot. We never speak of it." I grinned at her. "One night only, never to be mentioned again."

I'd thought that would get a laugh out of her—or at least another irritable sigh—but Levana was quiet as she came to lean against the same tree I was, angling herself to face the high-walled garden, our shoulders almost touching.

"You're a lot more fun than you let on. And you're a lot nicer than I expected."

"Blue, are you breaking up with me?"

She flicked another strand of shadows at me, and I caught it with my own, letting them intertwine for a moment before she sucked in a shocked breath and pulled it back.

“You’re just... more of a complication than I anticipated,” Levana muttered, turning away and firmly ending the conversation.

A complication to what?

“Allerick!”

We both startled at the sounds suddenly coming from the garden. Apparently, the king and queen had found a way to amuse themselves in there.

“You should go,” Levana said hastily, turning and shoving me up the path toward the palace. “They wouldn’t want you to hear this.”

“I doubt Ophelia wants *you* to hear this either,” I snorted, leaning into her touch and dragging my feet, enjoying the feeling of Levana’s hands on me. “What do you think their children will look like? I hope they get her hair.”

“I know you can walk faster than this.”

I slumped back a little more, languishing in her hold. “I’ve had a very long day. I find that I’m tired. Maybe I should sit down for a moment and rest.”

Levana spun me around, capturing my horns in her grip while I steadied myself, and reminding me that she was a trained and accomplished member of the Guard.

She leaned in, her face an inch away from mine, both of our shadows brushing against each other even if she didn’t want to acknowledge it. “You are such a distraction.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth, admiring the angular planes of her face that I so rarely got to see close up. “You need a distraction. You work too hard.”

“You work harder.”

“Then maybe this benefits both of us.”

She huffed out a quiet laugh, releasing my horns and walking backwards toward her post. “Nothing to offer, remember?”

“You won’t let me forget,” I called after her. Levana shook her head, smiling a little, but didn’t reply.

And maybe she was right. There was clearly more to it than she was letting on. Maybe we’d explored all that we’d ever get to explore.

But at least, for now, the incessant restlessness had eased.

Maybe that would have to be enough.

Chapter 6

LEVANA

FOUR DAYS LATER
I'd failed her.

It didn't matter that Ophelia was safely back in the shadow realm, tucked up in her wing of the palace with her husband. It didn't even matter that we'd not only returned from the human realm with Ophelia, but with other Hunters willing to work with Shades.

All I could focus on was the fact that I'd failed her in the first place. Ophelia may have chosen to leave—and the king bore plenty of responsibility for her ever feeling like that was necessary—but she'd been imprisoned by the Hunters the moment she'd gone back. She had *suffered* there after I'd sworn to the captain that I'd protect her.

After I'd *befriended* her.

The guilt was eating me alive.

Having gotten the other Hunters settled at Elverston House, I dragged my weary body back to my apartment with the intention of bathing and perhaps taking a long-overdue nap after an exhausting couple of days.

But I hesitated in the entry hall, looking down the corridor that would take me to the kitchens instead. I *was* hungry. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten.

That wasn't the reason I wanted to go down there, though.

I'd stuck to my word and avoided Calix whenever it was practical to do so—only seeing him when Ophelia needed to visit the kitchen or when he'd tracked me down in the gardens—but the *urge* to see him still hadn't gone away. It was probably just because nobody in my life had ever spoken to me the way he'd spoken to me, and there was a novelty in that, but knowing the *why* didn't make the want any less dangerous.

“Levana.” One of the palace staff—Ulyssia—approached, bowing quickly. “You have a guest from your family estate. Nyfain? He has been waiting for you in one of the drawing rooms as he couldn't access the apartment.”

My exhaustion pressed in on me a little harder.

“How long has he been waiting?”

“A few hours. He wouldn't leave without seeing you.”

That didn't bode well. Ulyssia led me to one of the smaller drawing rooms on the second floor, excusing herself as I forced my feet to carry me over the threshold. It wasn't wise

for me to meet with Nyfain in this state—I might say something I’d regret—but if he wasn’t going to leave, then there was nothing to be done for it.

“Levana.” Nyfain bowed. “Are you well? Your duties took you far from court.”

“That is part of the job sometimes.” Nyfain was standing as always, but I immediately headed for an armchair, needing to sit down for a few minutes. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

Rather, I was sorry *he’d* kept my father waiting. I doubted that would go down well.

“I was under strict instructions not to return until I’d spoken to you.” Nyfain straightened slightly, hands folded behind his back as always. “Your sister has confirmed that she is expecting.”

Dread hit me first, followed swiftly by guilt at my own selfishness. And then happiness, though nowhere near as much as I *should* have felt.

“How wonderful, she must be so pleased,” I replied, genuinely meaning it before second-guessing myself slightly. Was that what Sirena wanted? I had immediately thought yes, since she’d always mothered her dolls as a child, but this wasn’t a game of make-believe, and her child was no toy devoid of feelings. Before they were even born, their life would be planned out for them. “If she’s happy. Is she happy?”

Nyfain looked startled by the question. “Of course. She has wanted this for many years. Your sister feels that you are

better off remaining here, particularly given your recent elevation within the Guard. Your father disagrees.”

The fact that I was even hearing my sister’s dissenting opinion was interesting. Did Sirena have more say at home now? Or were Nyfain’s loyalties divided?

Nyfain shifted uncomfortably. “Your father feels that the debacle with the queen leaving the realm is an indication that you should return home. That the noblest course of action would be for you to publicly apologize for your failure, and resign to best restore the family’s reputation.”

“My failure,” I repeated flatly. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t thought about myself in the past few hours, but it was devastating to have my deepest regrets validated by someone else.

“He trusts that you will make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible.” Nyfain looked so desperately uncomfortable that I didn’t bother responding or delaying his departure any further as he inched toward the door. It wasn’t his fault.

Publicly apologize and resign.

My father was older and wiser than me. I’d almost always followed his instructions to the letter, trusting that his intuition was correct.

And it had gotten me this far.

But Father hadn’t been to court in *years*. He’d only met King Allerick when the king was a child, and he’d never met Ophelia. I couldn’t imagine either of them would *want* me to

do that—the queen would probably find it mortifying, and neither of them wanted to reflect on the time she'd spent in the human realm.

So, was Father *wrong*? Just asking the question in my head felt like a betrayal. A *dangerous* betrayal.

Because if he was wrong about this, then he might be wrong about other things. And that made the ground beneath my feet lose some of the steadiness it had always held.

Everything about my life had been predicated on the fact that Father knew best.

I couldn't accept otherwise.

Chapter 7

CALIX

The mood in the kitchen was painfully jubilant upon hearing that the queen had not only returned, but that she'd brought others like her back to the shadow realm too. Everyone was happy except me.

I couldn't relax—*wouldn't* relax—until I'd seen Levana with my own eyes. She'd been charged with ferrying the newcomers to a crumbling, abandoned mansion on the edge of the grounds, but I knew for a fact that at least one of those Hunters was the queen's deranged sister. Astrid Bishop wasn't just *a* Hunter, she was *the* Hunter. Her presence here had given the celebrations for Ophelia's return a distinctly cautious edge.

I hung around in the kitchen long after everyone else had gone, scrubbing every inch of the place to keep myself busy while I waited for... what? It wasn't like Levana and I were

friends. If anything, she actively disliked me. I usually only saw her when Ophelia needed something from the kitchens, and those trips wouldn't be happening anytime soon. Palace gossip was clear—the king wasn't letting the queen out of his sight. Or more specifically, out of his bedchamber.

Levana wasn't about to come down here and reassure me of her safety.

Shaking my head at my own idiocy, I finished cleaning up and let myself out of the kitchen, heading through the empty corridors back to my apartment.

Perhaps I could find an excuse to head up to the dining hall during tomorrow's dinner service—

I came to an abrupt stop a few feet from my apartment, meeting Levana's intriguing, dark blue eyes. My stomach swooped so suddenly, I could have sworn I heard it.

"Hi," she said lamely, standing in front of my door as though she'd been contemplating whether or not to knock.

"Hello." I was already scanning her body for signs of injury, wondering if she was disguising any beneath her shadows. I couldn't *smell* any blood on her.

She didn't look like her usual confident, unaffected self though.

"You look so worried." Levana laughed tiredly. "I'm fine. A little hungry—"

"Come, I'll make you dinner."

“That’s not why I came here—”

“I’d still like to feed you, Levana.” It was the one area of my life in which I had absolute confidence in my abilities. Whatever else was going on, I could always make delicious food.

I unlocked the door with my shadows, entering first when Levana hung back, looking torn.

“It’s just food,” I called over my shoulder.

It wasn’t and we both knew it, but *talking* about it would only cause us both to panic. There was nothing meaningless about Levana coming to my apartment of her own volition.

Eventually, she chose to believe my lie and followed me inside, closing the door quietly behind her. I’d already gotten myself set up in the kitchen, pulling out everything I needed to make a meat soup that didn’t take *too* long to cook but was long enough for me to spend some time with her.

More importantly, it was meant to be a cure for every type of physical and emotional ill, and it looked like Levana needed it.

“So, the queen came back?” I asked as she took a seat on the other side of the counter, watching me light the fire beneath the stove.

“She did. And she brought others back with her.”

“I heard. I doubt anyone at court will talk about anything else for the foreseeable future.” I pulled out a bottle of wine, pouring us each a goblet.

Levana laughed quietly though it seemed slightly forced, accepting the drink I slid across the counter. “No, I suppose not. It’s strange to think that a few hastily made decisions over the past couple of days could shape the future of the realm forever.”

“If they stay. I can’t see why they’d want to. Plenty of Shades will struggle with the presence of Hunters who may have been responsible for the deaths of their loved ones.”

I didn’t feel great about it myself. Just a few months ago, one of the young chefs on my team, Sorcha, had been killed on a trip to the human realm to feed. She’d been a smart kid and a fast learner and should have had her whole life ahead of her.

To Hunters like the queen’s sister, she was just a number. Another point toward their kill count.

“You’ll be careful around all these Hunters?” I asked gruffly, stoking the small flame.

“Of course,” Levana replied blandly. “I doubt I’ll see them all that much. The queen will likely go to them in Elverston House and no Shades are allowed to enter.”

She hesitated for a long moment, taking a sip of her wine before continuing. “And perhaps it would be better for Ophelia to have a new guard after everything that happened. A fresh start for her more permanent life here.”

I paused midway through reaching for my knife. It didn’t sound like a decision. It sounded like she was voicing the idea and seeing how I’d react.

“Did Ophelia suggest that?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No, of course not,” Levana replied hastily. She went quiet for a moment, twirling her goblet between her fingers. “Some Shades might see her brief return to the human realm as a failure on my part.”

I grabbed a cutting board and busied myself pulling down herbs from the drying rack hanging overhead. “Some Shades are idiots.”

“They’re not idiots. They just expect the best for their monarchs,” she shot back, immediately defensive. Ah, this wasn’t hypothetical. Someone had definitely suggested that this was a failure on her part, and Levana needed someone to talk to about it.

I was furious that anyone was criticizing her, but selfishly pleased she’d brought those criticisms to me at the same time. It was progress, wasn’t it? It was something.

“Do their opinions matter more than those of the individuals actually involved?”

Levana twisted the goblet again. “Maybe. Maybe looking at the situation from the outside has given them a better perspective.”

No one would ever describe me as sensitive, but even I knew to tread carefully here.

“Or maybe it’s easy to throw around opinions when you weren’t there and don’t have the full story.”

Levana shot me an exasperated look. Possibly that hadn't come out as sensitively as I'd hoped.

“Ophelia was held hostage by the Hunters Council in the human realm. I could have stopped that—”

“She *chose* to leave. It was an ill-advised choice, and probably the king's fault, but it was her decision,” I interrupted, a little more harshly than I'd intended, and I did my best to soften it, though it had never been a strength of mine. “It's infantilizing to suggest otherwise. No one could have known the Hunters would treat their own so poorly, and ultimately, she's here and safe now. Why punish yourself?”

If anyone should feel bad, it was the king. No wife of mine would be skipping off to another realm with the enemy, that was for fucking sure.

“It's not a *punishment*. It's more like a... Well, it doesn't matter now. I was never meant to stay in the Guard anyway. At some point, I need to return home.”

“You need to? Or you want to?”

“Both. Of course.”

I wasn't so sure I believed that. Levana's family had been a source of hushed gossip at court since I'd moved here. Where most heads of families spent at least part of the year at court being chummy with the king, Levana's father was *never* here. The heir didn't visit either. It was just her.

“You weren't joking when you said ‘one night only, don't get any ideas,’” I teased, managing to keep my voice mostly

light as I threw some bones into the bottom of a pot before covering it with water and setting it on the fire to boil.

“If it helps, *if* I was staying—”

“It doesn’t.” I gave her a tight smile, chopping the herbs a little more forcefully than usual. Nothing was ever gained from dwelling on what-ifs and might-have-beens. “What will you do when you return home?”

“The same thing I do now, but for the estate, I suppose. Second children often have protective positions on the family property.”

“Not at your age,” I pointed out. That was a retirement position from what I’d heard, and mostly ceremonial. This wasn’t the Dark Ages. No one was conducting raids on the neighbor’s estates anymore.

“My family does things a little differently.” There was defensiveness there, but confusion as well, despite her best efforts to hide it. I wouldn’t be surprised if Levana’s father had never told her they did that particular thing differently.

“What are you making? It smells really good.”

I let her change the subject, hating the tension filling the small space between us. It was huge that Levana had come here at all. I didn’t want to put her off returning.

“Just onurac soup,” I replied absently, arranging the herbs on a tray to toast over the fire before I added them to the broth.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had that one before.”

“You probably did as a child. It’s not exactly a trendy dish to feed to adults, but you’ve had a hard few days and sometimes comfort food is the best balm for the soul.”

“That sounds lovely,” Levana sighed, relaxing a little more as she watched me work. “I really don’t think I’ve had it before though. It’s so hot in Erith, we don’t eat much soup.”

“Are all of your family in Erith?”

Shades traveled from one side of the realm and back in a day all the time, such was the beauty of shadow walking.

“All of the family I know, yes. They’re all at the estate. What about you? Where did you grow up?”

“Kelna, by the river. I grew up above a pub that my parents ran. I spent my entire childhood in that kitchen.”

“Oh. So cooking was something your parents encouraged you to do?”

She was trying to draw parallels, and as much as I wished I could reassure her with them, I wouldn’t lie to her. “Not particularly. If anything, they were always chasing me away, trying to convince me to spend more time outside. Kitchen hours are pretty terrible. My parents didn’t want that for me.”

The pot was boiling and I threw in all the ingredients except the meat, stirring it until everything was fully submerged.

“And you like your life here?” she asked. I glanced up at her as I set up the meat on the cutting board to slice, and Levana grimaced. “I sound like I’m interrogating you.”

“You are interrogating me.”

“I know, but I don’t want to *sound* like I am.”

“It’s nice to know you aren’t good at everything,” I told her cheerfully. “And yes, I do like my life here. I’ll stay until I inevitably piss off someone important enough to fire me. Do *you* like it here?”

“Of course.”

That sounded genuine. But I couldn’t make Levana realize she’d be better off here. I could only do my best to remind her why.

Once the soup was done, I threw in the raw meat to cook for a few moments in the broth, serving up a bowl for each of us and taking them to the dining table. Levana grabbed my goblet, trailing behind me in a way that felt far more intimate than anything else we’d done together.

My shadows were rioting, desperate to reach for her. Fucking mortifying, it was like being an untried lad all over again.

Once Levana started talking about her work with the Guard, the conversation was easy. She had plenty of funny anecdotes from her training days—some of which she must have told a few times because her comedic timing was perfect—and she clearly enjoyed the challenges her job presented her.

I was more than happy to listen to this bright, cheerful Levana as we ate and cleaned up. She didn’t object when I

poured us both another goblet of wine, leading her over to the couch.

It felt like a seductive move, though I hadn't intended it to be. Or maybe I had and I was just lying to myself.

It was just really fucking hard to look at her and not remember how good she felt—how good *we'd* felt—when she was being all smiley and relaxed and massaging my knot. I wanted that Levana too, not just the sniping, scratching one who was lashing out because being attracted to me was a complication in her neatly planned out life.

I wasn't complaining, necessarily. I'd take both.

Except, the more I tried to ignore the tension between us, the more tempting Levana's scent got.

It was just a physical reaction. It didn't *mean* anything. Perhaps she was just horny and *happened* to be in my presence, but it wasn't really anything to do with me. Or perhaps it was everything to do with me, and she was remembering how good I'd made her feel that night we'd spent together.

I squirmed slightly in my seat, sucking back an errant shadow that had been creeping along the couch toward her.

She eyed the movement solemnly, the mood shifting in an instant.

"It's selfish of me to want you," Levana said quietly, reading my thoughts. "I suspect you want more from me than I have to give."

But.

It was there, hovering in the air between us.

“But you’re willing to offer me what you can?” I guessed. “Another night of pleasure with no commitments beyond that?”

“It’s all I have.”

“And there’s nothing I can do to change your mind?” I verified, knowing the answer but needing to hear it confirmed.

Levana shook her head. “My future was decided long before I came to court.”

Your future is yours to decide.

But the words were meaningless. That was something Levana had to choose for herself.

“Then I’ll take what I can get. Lie back. Spread your legs for me.”

Levana exhaled as though my command had taken an enormous weight off her shoulders, letting her shadows drop as she got into position. Her scent grew more potent the moment she uncrossed her legs, and I inhaled deeply, crawling up the couch to loom over her. Some Shades would have balked at being in such a submissive position, but Levana didn’t flinch. Undoubtedly, she was entirely confident in her ability to overpower me if she wished to.

“So slick for me,” I murmured, tracing her pussy lips carefully with my claw, making her shudder. “Is this just for

me, Levana?”

She writhed in her seat. “You already know it is.”

“Mm, but it’s nice to hear you say it all the same.”

“Your ego hardly needs the boost,” she teased, her shadows wrapping around my limbs, encouraging me closer. Levana hesitated for a moment, her expression growing serious as she looked up at me.

“What is it? Do you want to stop?” I asked, instantly putting more space between us.

“No! No.” She swallowed. “I wondered if you might... if you might give me your knot.”

My mind went entirely blank. If she’d asked me to bind her in shadows and fuck her in front of the entire court, I’d have been *less* surprised by the request.

Knotting was intimate. It required trust. For female Shades, if not done carefully, it could be incredibly uncomfortable.

“Never mind,” she said hastily. “That was an inappropriate request—”

“No, it wasn’t. You can ask me for anything, Levana.” I stared down at her, trying to read the nuances of her expression. “I’m more than capable of saying no. As for knotting you, it would be my honor, but we’re not doing that on the couch.”

She laughed unexpectedly, breaking the intensity of the stare we’d been holding. “Yes, a bed might be more comfortable for

this particular activity.”

I stood, pulling her up with me and half dragging her to the bedroom in my enthusiasm. Realistically, I probably *wasn't* going to knot Levana tonight. There was usually training involved, from what I'd heard. But just getting to try, to experiment together in such an intimate way, was a gift in itself.

“On your hands and knees,” I ordered, dropping to my knees on the floor at the edge of the bed, salivating with the need to lick her pussy.

“You're lucky I don't find your bossiness off-putting.”

“I think it might be your favorite thing about me,” I countered, watching with satisfaction as she did exactly as I asked, presenting her cunt to me for tending.

I wrapped my hands around her thighs, yanking her backward and delving my tongue into her slick. If we were even going to *attempt* my knot, I wanted her pussy flowing like a waterfall.

Levana instantly bucked backward, her ass cheeks pressed against the front of my horns. I was meant to be keeping my shadows contained, rationing them while travel to the human realm to feed was forbidden, but I didn't have any control over my instincts where Levana was concerned. They crept toward her on their own, pinning her in place while I ate her pussy like it was a gourmet meal.

As soon as her thighs started to tremble, I pulled back, encouraging her to move up the bed with a light pat on the ass.

Levana shot me a withering look over her shoulder, though she ran her tongue over the points of her teeth at the same time, like she *wanted* to dislike me smacking her ass more than she *actually* disliked it.

I grinned at her as I climbed onto the bed, angling my cock between her legs and rubbing it over her sensitive flesh, bathing it in her arousal.

“I’m going to go slow. Tell me if anything doesn’t feel good.”

“Don’t go *too* slow,” she shot back, lowering her upper body and lying her head on the bed, round ass high in the air and waiting for me. “And fuck me first.”

“Now who’s being bossy?” I teased, lining my cock up at her entrance and pushing forward with one hard thrust, cutting off her response. Levana’s claws immediately sunk into the sheets, her breathy moans mingling with the sounds of tearing fabric.

We found a rhythm together, both of us moving too frantically, too desperately, for a casual encounter. But then again, I never felt casual around Levana.

It was why I’d never approached her before the night of the party, where emotions were heightened and alcohol had made everything feel a little warmer and fuzzier. The idea of just *talking* to her, of trying to *flirt* with her, had felt so flimsy

before that night. With Levana, I'd always wanted more than I deserved.

Her walls clenched hard around me, ready to clamp down.

I pressed forward a little, testing the bulbous head of my knot at her entrance and nearly coming instantly from the pressure. *Fuck*. I hadn't contemplated that *I* might be the reason we weren't able to do this.

"More," Levana gasped, pushing back with her forearms to take more of me.

"You're good?" I asked, the words coming out as a garbled mess as I had an internal battle with the orgasm threatening to consume me. She'd taken a little more of me, though we were nowhere near the thickest part of my knot.

That wasn't happening today. I was losing my battle in a spectacular way, and judging by the intense *squeeze*, Levana wasn't going to last much longer either. And once she clamped down, I wasn't going anywhere.

I couldn't wait.

"A little more," she panted. "I have toys thicker than this."

"Do you?"

"Focus!"

I was finding it pretty fucking difficult to focus on anything else. With one final rock of my hips, I was done for. Levana clamped tight around the head of my still-swelling knot,

locking us together, and my vision whited out with pleasure as I came harder than I ever had in my life.

One of us moved first, I wasn't sure who, dragging us down to the mattress with me draped over Levana's back. Once my soul had mostly returned to my body, I rolled us slightly to take my weight off her, setting off another chain of pulsing clenches that made my knot feel like it was being strangled in the best kind of way.

And that was just the *tip*.

"You good?" Levana slurred. Fuck, I loved post-sex Levana. She was so relaxed and *messy* compared to her usual polished self. It felt like such an indulgence to see her this way.

"I'm very, *very* good. How about you? Any discomfort?"

"No. Ish good. Next time, I want the whole thing," she mumbled, face half-pressed to the mattress.

"There'll be a next time?" I raked my claws gently down her hip, relishing the feel of her warm skin against mine.

"I still don't have any more to offer you, Calix," Levana said quietly, though it sounded more like an apology than a reminder.

"I already told you, Blue. I'll take what I can get."

Chapter 8

LEVANA

“The queen will back to her regular schedule today,” Captain Soren told me wryly, pausing in the corridor where I’d taken Andrus’s guard position. “As much as he’d like to avoid them, Allerick has duties he must return to.”

“Of course,” I murmured, only slightly mortified with this whole conversation. It was well known that the king and queen had been confined to his bedchamber for days and it wasn’t exactly a secret what they’d been up to.

“There will also be a coronation for Queen Ophelia in the next few weeks,” the captain added. “Your father is still content for you to stay on in this position for now?”

“Not particularly,” I replied honestly. The captain and I hadn’t discussed it since he’d given me the job, and the question took me by surprise.

I didn't mention my father's suggestion that I make a big public show of resigning in shame. It wasn't Captain Soren's style at all; he'd hate the idea. Nyfain would come back any day now, and I'd be forced to make a decision either way, but it hadn't happened yet.

"Do you want to stay?"

"I don't want to leave." I didn't want to walk away from my life here even though I knew I'd have to eventually.

"Then don't. Direct your father to me if he complains. I'll happily tell him I can't spare you. I'm going to attempt to fetch Allerick for the Council meeting. The queen may or may not be joining you shortly."

It was difficult to tell with Captain Soren, but I was fairly sure he was at least a little amused beneath that mask of perfect indifference.

Eventually, the royal couple emerged, trailing behind the captain and both looking far less put together than usual.

"I need to siphon," the king announced, fairly radiating with excess power.

Captain Soren snorted. "I bet."

I gave Ophelia what I hoped was a reassuring smile as her face flushed as red as her hair. How strange to think that not only was her desire fueling the king, but also many of the Shades in the realm, until we were able to return to feeding in the human realm as normal.

“Where would you like to go?” I asked her once the king was done with his *long* goodbye and had vanished up the corridor with Captain Soren.

“Could we stop by the kitchens? I just want to check that accommodating the Hunters’ dietary needs isn’t going to be an issue.” Ophelia flushed red again. “Something I should have checked on a few days ago, of course, but I was a little...”

“Busy?” I suggested, mostly keeping the amusement out of my voice.

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Ophelia laughed. “After that, I should head over to Elverston House, but you won’t be able to come in with me.”

She sounded worried about that, as though my feelings might be hurt by the exclusion. Ophelia was so very *sweet*—not a trait anyone would have ever chosen for a Shade monarch, but a welcome one nonetheless.

“I’ll wait outside,” I assured her. “It’s no hassle for me.”

Frankly, I’d far prefer to spend an entire day waiting at the boundary of Elverston House than spend even a few minutes in the palace kitchen, having succumbed to my attraction to Calix yet again. For all his arrogance, he hadn’t thrown my decision in my face at all, but I was still embarrassed at myself. No, *frustrated* with myself.

There was no need to be *embarrassed* about being attracted to Calix. He *was* attractive. And he’d been so understanding

when I told him I had nothing more to offer, but that had the unfortunate side effect of making me like him *more*.

My desire was prone to overruling my good judgment when it came to Calix, and I was furious at myself for it.

“Everything okay?” Ophelia asked, falling into step beside me instead of walking two steps ahead as appropriate.

“Of course,” I assured her hastily, snapping out of my brooding. “Have you, er, eaten enough over the past few days?”

Ophelia snorted, though her cheeks were flushing again. “I could probably do with a good meal, though don’t tell my husband I said that. He’d feel so guilty.”

It was reassuring to know that the king cared for her, even if he was a little *too* greedy with her.

“Are the others okay? Have you heard anything?” Ophelia asked.

“I’m sure they’re fine, but I haven’t checked. You are my charge. The captain has assigned some other members of the Guard to watch over Elverston House from afar, and escort the Hunters to and from meals in the hall.”

“Good.” Ophelia nodded to herself. “Soren will take care of them, I’m sure. I hope Calix isn’t too put out by the extra mouths to feed.”

She shot me a sideways look, aware that Calix and I had history after a moment where I’d shared a little more than was professionally appropriate.

She didn't know about the second time.

“Undoubtedly, he'll be complaining,” I said drily. “Though you shouldn't feel bad about that. He complains about everything, and I think he secretly enjoys the challenge of cooking for Hunters.”

Ophelia laughed under her breath as we walked the final stretch of corridor that led to the kitchens, Calix's complaining audible before we'd opened the doors.

“What do you mean she doesn't eat *meat*?” he asked loudly. “What does she eat?”

“You're handling this new development well,” Ophelia said, pushing open the door and announcing her presence.

The kitchen staff immediately cheered, stamping their feet on the stone floor in welcome. Ophelia looked surprised, perhaps not realizing how very popular she was—not just with the highest-ranking members of the court, but with those at the very bottom too.

“Don't you all have work to do?” Calix grumbled, shooing them away. “Welcome back, Your Majesty.”

His bow was all sarcasm, but Ophelia seemed to understand that the welcome was genuine.

“Thank you, it's lovely to be back.” Ophelia beamed at him. “Have I made a lot of work for you by bringing my new friends back?”

Calix snorted. “It may be a lot of work for me, but I suppose you've saved the realm from starvation, so it all balances out

in the end.”

“Yes, those are two things of equivalent value,” I agreed, knowing without him needing to say a word that Calix was waiting for me to say something to him first. Waiting for me to set the tone.

And without him saying a word, with just the barest glance to give away his feelings, it was clear that I hadn’t got it right. I’d been trying to maintain the same dynamic we’d always had, but the other night in his apartment...

Things had changed, no matter how much I wanted to avoid that fact.

“Queen Ophelia,” Torin said, bowing slightly as he approached. “We have tried to prepare some human vegetables. Can I show you?”

“Oh, of course.” She moved around the counter to look, leaving Calix and me alone.

He gave me a long look before returning his attention to his cutting board. “Well, there’s something comforting in predictability, I suppose.”

I swallowed thickly, not needing him to clarify that *I* was the predictability in this equation. Predictably prickly. Predictably standoffish. Predictably disappointing.

“I’m managing expectations,” I murmured, reminding him in fewer words that I wasn’t sticking around.

He nodded. “I suppose one of us has to be sensible.”

We fell into an uncomfortable silence for a moment while he chopped a haunch of meat at an alarming rate.

“One of the Hunters doesn’t even *eat* meat,” Calix grumbled under his breath eventually. “Presumably, she’ll perish shortly which I suppose is one less mouth for me to feed.”

I laughed quietly in spite of the tense mood. “They’re not Shades. You already know they don’t need the same things we need to survive.”

He muttered something too low for me to catch, undoubtedly bemoaning the difficulty of the challenge he was clearly enjoying.

I couldn’t begrudge him that—it was a trait I recognized all too clearly in myself. Both Calix and I struggled to express happiness.

“Have you met any of them?” I asked.

“Where do you think I’m getting all this free time? I haven’t left the kitchen in days.”

“You could leave if you wanted to. You enjoy suffering.”

Calix grinned, the expression making my insides clench. His half-feral, grouchy demeanor was attractive to me, but his *smile* was almost impossible to resist.

“You’ve got me all figured out, Blue.” I glanced around subtly, making sure no one else had heard the nickname. “Relax, you know I’d never embarrass you.”

I did know that. I also felt strangely distressed at the idea of Calix needing to hide such a harmless term of endearment from the rest of the realm even if it was the smartest course of action.

“Anyway, I’m sure I’ll meet them at some stage. There’s been talk of social events to introduce them in a more relaxed environment, as well as the coronation, of course.”

Right. Introduce them in a more relaxed environment so they too could find a mate, the way the king and queen had.

“Are you going to... well, you know.” I trailed off, swallowing thickly around the question I wanted to ask. Then again, *did* I want to ask it? Did I really want to know?

“Am I going to what?”

“You know. Pursue one. As a mate.”

Calix reared back as though I’d struck him. “Am I being too subtle, Levana? Do you really think I’m capable of even *looking* at anyone else when I’m so fucking fixated on you?”

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” I breathed, too transfixed by the obsessive look on his face to even check if someone had overheard us. I shouldn’t want this. I shouldn’t *love* that he was so taken with me. I would inevitably leave, and even if I wasn’t... it wouldn’t *work*. We drove each other crazy, and spent more time bickering than anything else. That wasn’t what a good relationship looked like.

Was it?

No, no, obviously not.

“I’m going to leave.”

“You haven’t left yet.”

“It would be foolish to get attached.”

“It’s a little late for that, Blue.”

I wished I could argue with that, but the words died on my tongue. He’d made his position clear, but could I walk away from him right now and be entirely unaffected? No. No, I absolutely couldn’t.

“I shouldn’t have—”

“Yes, you should.” Calix set the knife down, turning the full force of his gaze on me. “Never apologize for coming to me, Levana. Never apologize for anything we do. I’m fully grown and more than capable of understanding consequences.”

“It can’t happen again,” I whispered, hating the waver in my voice, not entirely sure who I was trying to convince.

“I think we both know it will keep happening until you leave court. There’s something here, Blue. Something that doesn’t come along every day.”

“Levana, are you ready to head to Elverston—” Ophelia asked, craning her neck to see me.

“Of course,” I agreed hurriedly, practically tripping over myself in my rush to usher her out of the kitchen, more than a little unsettled by Calix’s words.

Because what if he was *right*? What if this wasn’t an everyday connection? Worse, what if it was a once-in-a-

lifetime connection?

What if Calix was my only chance at a meaningful romantic relationship, my only chance at building something that might actually *last*, and I was giving it up?

The thought was unbearable.

It was exactly why he couldn't mean anything to me. I couldn't allow him to. Otherwise, I'd never be able to let him go.

Chapter 9

CALIX

“Boss,” Torin called, the scent of his blood reaching me at the same time his voice did. I sighed heavily, gesturing for Katriel to take over stirring the cauldron of stew over the fire.

“What have you done, Torin?”

“I, uh, seem to have cut off the end of my finger, boss.”

Katriel shrieked, splattering stew against the wall as she took in the bloody mess that had once been Torin’s finger. At least he looked appropriately shamefaced about it.

“Come on then,” I sighed, snatching up a clean cloth and wrapping it around the wound so at least he didn’t trail blood through the whole palace. “Let’s go find a healer, though I’m sure all they’ll tell you to do is go to the stores and feed.”

He looked even more guilty at that. In the short time since the portals had closed, all of us young, healthy Shades had been taking the bare minimum from the power stores.

“I’m sorry, boss. I was trying to chop fast, the way you do.”

Damn it, he made it so hard to stay mad at him. “Torin, I’ve been cooking longer than you’ve been alive. What makes you think you should be doing anything the way I do yet? You’re young, and I’d like you to live long enough to get old. So stop doing stupid things.”

“Yes, boss.” He went quiet for a moment, keeping up with the quick pace I set through the corridors to the healer’s wing. “Am I fired?”

“No, Torin. You’re not fired.”

“My mother says you’re going to fire me soon.”

“Does your mother know me better than I know myself?”

“No, boss.” He was saying the right things, but Torin didn’t look like he believed them. There really was no criticism with more long-lasting damage than that delivered by parents.

“Torin, so long as you keep *trying* to do a good job, *trying* to learn, *trying* your best, I’m not going to fire you, got it? You’ve got a good palate for flavors—I can’t teach that—and a good work ethic. Stop trying to be Calix. Torin is plenty good enough. Alright?”

“Yes, boss.” He sniffed. “Thank you, boss.”

“I might fire you if you start weeping,” I warned. “This is as comforting as I get, don’t push your luck.”

He shot me a watery smile.

“I’m really glad I came to work here. You don’t need to come in with me,” he added, pausing before the enormous stone archway that led to the healers. “I’ve got it from here.”

“You sure?”

Torin winced. “I’m not sure I want you there when I describe how I did it. You might get annoyed again.”

“Probably,” I agreed, imagining him trying to flip the cleaver between slices. “Take some time off, no coming back to work until you’re fully healed. You cause enough disasters with all your limbs intact.”

Torin laughed, all signs of wariness gone. “That’s true. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

He headed cheerfully through the archway, perhaps not realizing that the healers were the scariest Shades in the palace and would have far more to say about him being irresponsible with a knife than I would.

Ever a glutton for punishment, I didn’t turn around and head back to the kitchen like I should have, but kept heading forward instead, toward some of the apartments that the crown had given to the wealthy court families.

I’d never visited Levana here, but I knew which door belonged to her family. Whether I was welcome was the bigger question. She’d been avoiding me again, but there was

a slim chance that it wasn't intentional. The queen had been busy with her coronation and getting the ex-Hunters who'd decided to stay permanently settled. And the captain had decided to take a Hunter mate of his own, which had undoubtedly created more work for the Guard as they took over some of his duties.

It could have been a coincidence that Levana had avoided me for weeks.

Or pointing out the connection between us might have sent her into hiding. Only one way to find out.

It wasn't long before Levana appeared, rounding the corner looking so utterly exhausted that every thought in my head was drowned out by the screaming demand to care for her.

Levana jumped when she noticed me standing opposite her door, turning to face me in a blur of misbehaving shadows.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Surprised I managed to sneak up on you, Blue?” I teased, pushing off the wall and crossing the short distance between us. *I* was a little surprised—I didn't have any of Levana's training.

She made a disgruntled noise of assent. “How do you know where I live?”

I gave her a disbelieving look, not bothering to dignify that question with an answer. These rooms had belonged to Levana's family for generations, even if they'd been mostly left empty during her father's tenure as head of the household.

“Stupid question,” she muttered, exhaling heavily before straightening, giving me her most imperious look. It was meant to scare me off and I had no doubt that her success rate with it had been one-hundred-percent before now, but I didn’t scare so easily. “What do you want?”

Everything.

“At this exact moment, I’d like to feed you a decent meal and tuck you into my bed for a good nap. You look exhausted, Levana.”

“I am exhausted,” she mumbled before exhaling heavily. “We’re not in a relationship, Calix. You’re not responsible for me.”

“So you keep reminding me.”

“You’re not under any obligation to feed me.”

“Debatable, I’m responsible for feeding everyone at court.”

“You know what I mean. I can eat in the dining hall with everyone else.”

“You could.”

Levana threw her hands up in exasperation. “What do you want me to say? It’s like you forget that we agreed on one night.”

“Which has already turned into two nights and besides, I don’t recall agreeing to that.”

“It doesn’t matter if you agreed or not. This is a two-yes situation, and you only have one.”

I tilted my head to the side. “What does that have to do with dinner and a nap?”

“You are being deliberately obtuse,” she shot back, looking flustered.

“Of course, I wouldn’t be opposed to a third night,” I continued, lest she think even for a second that I wasn’t desperate to feel her body beneath mine again. “But what I’d like most right now is for you to join me for dinner.”

“Are you attempting to court me?” she asked suspiciously.

“That would be pointless, since you’ve already decided you’re leaving. And I’m not sure my ego would be able to stand *attempting* to court you,” I added wryly.

“You’re probably the only one whose ego *could* handle it,” Levana muttered. It wasn’t meant to be a compliment, but I took it as one anyway. “We can’t have dinner. You and I don’t do well alone together.”

“I beg to differ. I think we both do *very* well when we’re alone together.”

If I thought she was flustered before, it was nothing compared to now. “We have self-control issues when we’re alone together.”

“Don’t trust yourself around me, Blue? I can keep my hands to myself.”

Levana gave a scathing look. I’d be fucking my hand to the memory of that expression later. I was *obsessed* with that petulant-princess face.

“I trust myself just fine.”

“Then join me for dinner.”

“No. It’s a terrible idea and you know it,” she replied, already unlocking the door to her apartment with a wisp of shadows.

I took a step back, inclining my head in acknowledgment. I could take no for an answer.

“You know where to find me if you change your mind, Blue.” I headed back down the corridor, leaving her hesitating on the stoop as I called back over my shoulder. “And stop avoiding me.”



It was three hours before I heard a quiet knock on my door, well past when I’d given up and eaten.

It’s probably not even her.

“Who is it?” I grumbled, reconsidering my stance on firing Torin if it was him showing up at my door in the middle of the night with another injury.

“Just let me in,” Levana hissed, filled with that irritable fury that I shouldn’t find so attractive.

I pulled open the door instantly, leaning against the doorjamb in an attempt to look slightly less desperate for a scrap of her attention. Though maybe she found that attractive? Further observation was required.

“Don’t even think about being your usual snarky self right now,” Levana warned. “You invited me. Let me in.”

I stepped back, gesturing for her to enter, and abjectly failing at keeping the smug expression off my face. She came. I invited her and she actually *came*.

“Have you eaten?” I asked. While I enjoyed Levana all fired up, I didn’t want to *upset* her.

My cock distinctly remembered what had happened the last time she’d shown up here and sat in my kitchen while I cooked for her, but I’d meant what I said. I was going to keep my hands to myself tonight. The chemistry between us was what kept scaring Levana away, and I enjoyed her company too much to allow that.

“No.” She huffed out a frustrated breath, following me inside as I headed for the kitchen, already pulling out ingredients. “I went down to the dining hall, but...”

“But?”

“Someone congratulated on my sister’s pregnancy. I guess my father has decided to disseminate the news.”

“Ah. An heir.” I knew the significance of it in an abstract sense, but mostly I found the way the nobility treated their children to be completely baffling.

“Yes,” Levana agreed. “I guess their comment reminded me that I’m needed at home.” She shook her head slightly. “I don’t know why I came here.”

“So I can feed you?”

Her expression softened slightly. “Well, you are a very good cook. For all your other faults.”

“You like my faults.”

“Like what?” she laughed. “Your absurdly unchecked ego? Or your commitment to being as grumpy as possible about all things at all times?”

“I’m not grumpy around you.”

Levana opened her mouth to argue before seemingly changing her mind, taking a seat on the stool across the counter from where I was working. “No, I suppose you’re not. Maybe because you make me grumpy enough for both of us,” she added under her breath.

I laughed, not objecting to that theory as I sliced the meat into thin strips to cook quickly. “So fast to blame me. I think your grumpiness might be who you really are. You just don’t let anyone else see it because you worry about keeping them happy.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Levana replied sharply—her response a little too hasty to be anything other than defensive.

“No? Tell me about yourself then.”

I uncorked a bottle of her favorite wine—a dark, aged wine from the Ballaeter region—making sure the engraved bottle was on full display as I poured it into a goblet and slid it across the counter before pouring one of my own. She eyed it

with resignation, perhaps realizing I knew a little more than she thought I did, if not nearly as much as I'd like.

The Shades at court all liked to bellow their intentions from the rooftops, reveling in their own perceived excellence. Levana was one of the few Shades I'd encountered here who possessed any kind of air of mystery to her.

“What do you want to know?”

“Let's start with your family.”

She choked slightly on her wine, perhaps not expecting me to be so blunt.

“Most Shades at court don't ask about them. Not to my face, at least.”

“I've noticed. Why is that?”

She shot me a slightly exasperated look, but didn't reject the question. “Our mother abandoned my sister and me right after I was born. Usually among the nobility, relationships are fairly stable, for the status if nothing else.”

“Right. They stay tethered to each other in misery, no matter what, for the land holdings and fancy houses.”

“That's a pessimistic way of looking at it.” Levana blinked at me. “But... well, yes. That's the gist of it.”

I hummed in agreement. I'd been at court long enough to see that for myself.

“As a second child of the nobility, surely it was always expected that you'd join the Guard.”

“It’s the traditional path, but wasn’t something my father wanted for me. He prefers that my sister and I remain close him in Erith. Thankfully he changed his mind after my eighteenth birthday and allowed me to temporarily join the Guard.”

“And what do you prefer?”

“I want him to be happy. My father gave up everything for us when my mother left,” she added hastily, sensing my objection.

“So you have to give up everything for him?”

“Well, yes,” Levana spluttered. “It’s the least I can do, really. My sister already has. We each have our responsibilities, and she’s fulfilling hers. It’s past time for me to do my part.”

I wanted to disagree, but I didn’t want to push Levana away. Not when we were finally making some progress.

“I suppose it’s difficult for me to understand,” I said slowly, pausing as the meat hit the griddle with a loud hiss. “My father taught me my trade at my request and encouraged me to travel the realm to hone it. My mother tells everyone she meets that I cook for the royal family.”

Levana was quiet for a long moment. “They don’t expect you to move home someday?”

“They’re not together. But neither of them have ever expressed that, no. They raised me with the intention of sending me off into the world to have my own adventures. If

anything, my father wishes I'd explored more before settling here."

"Oh. That's really nice." She looked briefly wistful before hiding the flash of emotion as though it hadn't existed.

I laid the strips of seasoned meat on a flatbread recipe I'd been experimenting with at Selene's suggestion. She'd come up with a few ways of supplementing the Hunters' meager dietary options here since she'd started babysitting a Hunter of her own. Peasant food and the grain we fed to the animals were clear successes so far.

"Thank you," Levana murmured, inhaling deeply as I slid the plate across to her. "You're not eating?"

"I've eaten." I smirked. "You took your time to accept my invitation."

"I was in a bad mood. And I had to talk myself into not immediately getting naked the moment I arrived," she replied easily, shooting me a grin before biting into the bread while I groaned. My cock had only just been reluctantly accepting that this was a strictly platonic visit, and now I was right back at the beginning.

"Stop trying to seduce me. I'm not dropping my shadows no matter how much you beg," I warned her solemnly, busying myself with washing up the dishes.

Levana hummed. "We both know you would if I begged, but don't worry. I'll be good."

"Starting now?"

She laughed. “Yes, starting now. This is really good, by the way.”

“Obviously.”

Levana scoffed at my arrogance, but I wasn't about to pretend I wasn't an excellent cook.

“So, if you need to be at home, why haven't you gone yet?”

“It's not quite as easy to walk away as I hoped it would be,” Levana muttered. “And I don't like the idea of leaving Ophelia alone.”

And. The queen was a reason, but not the only reason.

And I was a glutton for punishment.

“I'll make you dessert.”

Chapter 10

LEVANA

WEEKS LATER

I woke up to the sound of knocking on the apartment door. With a resigned sigh, I rolled out of bed and draped myself in shadows as I made my way through the apartment, trying to find some sense of calm with each step.

Nyfain was going to ask me why I hadn't done what my father said, and I was going to drag Captain Soren away from his mate for a few moments so he could tell Nyfain that I couldn't leave yet.

I had a plan. I had allies. I had a legitimate excuse to keep putting this off.

"Finally," Father snapped as I opened the door, striding past me in a swirl of agitated shadows. "Why doesn't this lock recognize my own shadows any longer?"

“It’s been awhile—”

“Why are you still here, Levana?” he demanded, whirling on me. “Nyfain relayed my very specific instructions *weeks* ago, and I have graciously not sent him to you since, waiting to hear news from court that you had done the right thing of your own volition before returning to us. What is taking you so long?”

“Father, I—”

“That sounds like an excuse and you know I have no use for those. Come on, pack your things.”

“I can’t just *leave*,” I rushed out. “I have responsibilities. The Festival of Shadows is today. The queen—”

“Deserves a guard who can actually protect her, if we must have a Hunter queen at all. I have written down your resignation speech since you are clearly incapable of doing it yourself. You will read it out at the festival. Pack. Your. Things.”



Fortunately for me, Ophelia was expecting me to meet her in her rooms before the festival so we could walk down together, and my father couldn’t enter the royal wing of the palace.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t leaving either. Instead, he’d taken over the apartment as though he was the one who’d lived there for the past few years, and announced his intention to join the festivities later to watch my speech.

Don't be ungrateful. He's given you everything. He is just looking out for you the best way he knows how.

Those words usually worked to calm my panic, but apparently they weren't enough today.

"I'm so excited," Ophelia gushed, barely able to sit still while Affra fussed with her hair, tutting impatiently at the queen as she bounced slightly in her seat.

"I'm sure it will be great," I murmured, sending balls of shadows between my hands, a nervous reflex I thought I'd long since grown out of. "The festival is popular across the realm."

Affra frowned at me before exchanging a long look with Ophelia in the mirror and silently excusing herself. Ophelia really had become like another daughter to Affra, and while Affra was far too old and frail to *protect* the queen, I felt better about leaving knowing that she had an emotional confidant in the palace. Astrid could guard Ophelia, undoubtedly with the assistance of another Shade guard. She'd be fine.

"Are you okay, Levana?" Ophelia asked gently, turning on her stool to face me and folding her delicate, harmless hands in her lap. "I hope I'm not overstepping, but you seem nervous."

"Forgive me." I bowed my head, partly to give myself a moment to collect myself.

"You don't need to ask for my forgiveness. We're friends, right? You can talk to me about anything."

“My father showed up today,” I blurted out, not letting myself second-guess my words or I’d never get them out. “To take me home. For good. He... he needs me at home.”

“Oh.” Ophelia’s brow creased, her scent souring dramatically. “You’re... moving away? Today? Does anyone else know? Does *everyone* else know?”

“No. The captain knew it was something my father wanted, but he has no idea that my father is *here*. I didn’t know he was coming.” I paused to find the right words, feeling flustered and annoyed with myself that I was explaining it poorly. “I don’t want to leave you. We *are* friends, and I’m going to miss you so much.”

Oh dear, that had made her scent *worse*, if anything. The king was going to be furious.

“I’m going to miss you too, Levana. Just to be clear,” Ophelia said slowly. “You *want* to go home?”

I’d said that, hadn’t I?

Hadn’t I?

“My father and sister really need me,” I said lamely, not quite able to muster up the enthusiasm needed to sell a lie. “My time with the Guard was only ever meant to be temporary.”

By the night, I was screwing this whole thing up. Ophelia looked more distressed by the second.

“Please don’t be upset. I’ve always known that this was the plan for my life. I’m just grateful for the time I had here, for

your friendship, and I'd hate to end it badly."

Ophelia's anguished expression smoothed into something closer to resignation, and she exhaled a long breath that helped with the tension in her posture, though not with her sour scent.

"I don't want us to part ways on a sad note either." Another shuddering breath and she shot me a small smile, busying herself with finishing the hairstyle Affra had started, turning back to the mirror. "I won't try to talk you out of it—you're more than capable of making your choices, and I respect them. But if you ever change your mind, for *any* reason, come back, okay? That's all I ask."

If only that was an option.

"Thank you, Ophelia. I'm sure once I'm home I'll be very happy." I swallowed painfully. "The scenery is very beautiful. I have missed it while I've been here at court."

"What's it like?"

"Lush. Hot. It's the most humid part of the realm, and it grows trees and plants quite different from anything found near the palace. The insects are so loud, if you haven't grown up there, it's hard to sleep at night from all the sounds." I smiled a little at the memories. "The ocean is warm year-round."

"Is it safe to swim in?"

"So long as you don't go out too deep." The tazreth were the most dangerous thing in the ocean, and they didn't venture into shallow waters. Then again, things that *I* wouldn't have

considered dangerous were probably life-threatening to a fragile Hunter body. “I don’t think *you* should swim in the ocean, though.”

Ophelia laughed, the sound a little more hollow than usual. “I would say I’d miss your constant worrying over my safety, but let’s be real. Every Shade I know is convinced I’ll perish if I’m exposed to so much as a light breeze.”

That wasn’t helping with my terror at leaving her. Who was going to watch over her? Between the king and Astrid, she was rarely alone, but she would still be down one guard.

“Will your father be at the festival?”

I winced. “Yes. And about that... There’s one other thing he’d like me to do.”



The palace gardens had been tastefully illuminated with additional orb lights every few steps to better highlight the artists who were showing off their shadow manipulation skills. Courtiers stood around in small groups, oohing and aahing at the right moments, helping themselves to the goblets of wine that were being circulated by palace staff.

They weren’t the only ones here, though. The palace gardens were open to visitors from all over the realm for this festival, which meant nearly every guard was on duty. I felt terrible knowing that I was leaving early, but King Allerick didn’t look inclined to let go of his wife anyway, so Ophelia would be in safe hands at least.

She took it all in with wide eyes, arm interlinked with the king's as they made their way down the paths, stopping to watch each performer. In the circular center of the garden, a small dais had been erected for the king and queen to give their welcome speech, and that was where we were slowly moving toward.

My father had set himself up right next to the dais, and he'd attracted quite the crowd after twenty-five years of self-isolation. I felt a stab of pity for Verner, who was stationed at the bottom of the dais and seemed to be making uncomfortable small talk—undoubtedly about me and the nature of our relationship.

Ophelia glanced back over her shoulder, shooting me a reassuring smile as we got closer to the dais, before her attention was dragged away by a Shade making swirling flowers out of shadows that seemed to dance in the air.

“Hi Levana,” Torin whispered loudly, almost making me jump. “Want one?”

He held out a tray with bite-sized versions of the meat-and-bread stack Calix had made for me. With a pang going through my chest at the memory, I shot Torin a small smile and plucked one off the tray.

“How's the cook today?” I asked, hoping my voice sounded conversational, still watching Ophelia's back out of the corner of my eye.

“*Very* grumpy,” Torin replied solemnly. “Possibly because I charred the first batch of meat for this dish. It's *so* hard to keep

track of all the things I'm meant to be doing at once. Anyway, I'd better go. Enjoy the festival!"

He disappeared into the crowd, offering up his tray to groups of socializing Shades. Perhaps Calix had banished him to serving duty to stop him from burning anything else. I didn't let myself reflect on it. Just thinking Calix's name made my chest ache.

Would I be able to say goodbye to him? Was I strong enough for that?

There was a sudden uptick in noise from next to the dais, drawing my attention. No one looked to be in imminent danger or preparing to fight, but *something* had upset my Father. His shadows flicked in agitation as he watched the royal couple, and Verner discreetly shook his head at me. The gesture was more 'don't panic' than 'there's nothing to worry about', though.

"This is amazing," Ophelia said to the Shade next to her—an older female I didn't recognize. "The performers are so talented."

The Shade turned to face the queen, watching her with awed dark blue eyes.

I'd only seen eyes like that on my sister and myself.

It was probably a coincidence.

I glanced back at my father, who appeared to be trying to send the female back to the shadows from whence she'd come with the force of his enraged stare alone.

Not *the female*. My *mother*. She hadn't seen me—would she recognize me even if she did?—so I took a moment to study her while she made small talk with the queen, searching for similarities between us and finding very little.

Her face was rounder than mine, with her features also softened by age, and her horns were far more angular than mine or my sister's. I thought her build might have been similar to Sirena's, though like many older Shades, my mother appeared to favor wearing her shadows in a long, sweeping style rather than the shorter look that was in fashion now.

Aside from the eyes, I couldn't see any resemblance between her and either of her daughters.

Though was it *either*? I'd never given it much thought, but perhaps she'd gone on to have more children.

Ones she hadn't left behind.

Someone banged loudly on their goblet, breaking my stare and reminding me with a jolt where I was and what I was supposed to be doing. With a heavy sigh, the king began making his way toward the dais, Ophelia chatting happily at his side. I kept pace with them, taking up position next to Verner, who'd managed to shuffle a few feet away from my still-fuming father.

“Are you okay?” Verner whispered, staring straight ahead at the crowd.

“Is that my mother?” He'd have heard Father's reaction, and aside from that, Verner was a few years older than me. Our

mothers had once been friends, he had more chance of remembering her than I did. I needed to hear it confirmed.

“Yes.” He glanced at me before looking back out at the crowd who were slowly growing quiet as they realized the king and queen had gotten up to speak. “Your father is not best pleased to see her.”

“I gathered that.”

“Are you going to talk to her?”

“With my father here?” I shot Verner an incredulous look. Maybe—*maybe*—if Father hadn’t been here, I might have approached her. If only to see how she’d react to me. Would she be happy to see me? Angry? Ashamed?

But it would be such a betrayal to Father to speak to her in front of him. Her leaving had caused him so much pain.

“Thank you for joining us for the Festival of Shadows,” the king said, surveying the crowd. “The queen and I are very grateful to the hardworking palace staff who have made this event possible, as well as the artists who have come to show their talents—it’s a pleasure to have you here.”

He didn’t *sound* like it was a pleasure, but after all this time, I’d come to learn that the king just never sounded particularly happy. I searched the crowd, finding my mother looking up at the dais from a few rows back. She appeared to be with friends, occasionally leaning in to whisper something to the group.

Did they know about the two children she’d left behind?

“I would also like to welcome Cassiel of Erith back to court,” King Allerick continued. Mother stopped whispering at that. She seemed entirely frozen in place. The king was still speaking, but my attention was wholly absorbed in my mother’s reaction. She’d shrunk back a little behind her friends, very much looking as though she’d prefer not to be seen.

“Wife, you wanted to say a few words?”

I blinked in surprise. Ophelia had told me that under no circumstances was I to make a self-recrimination speech, but I didn’t realize she’d planned to say something.

“I would.” I looked back in time to find Ophelia beaming at me, and it was impossible not to relax a little under the full force of her positivity. “As much as I wish I could keep her here forever, my incredible guard, Levana, will be leaving with her father. He’s had to come and drag her away because I’d never let her go otherwise,” Ophelia joked. To my surprise, the Shades in the crowd actually laughed, reminding me that this wasn’t such an emotionally fraught moment for everyone else.

Father did not look happy, but I found it easier to look at him now than I did to look at my mother. Maybe it was cowardly, but now the moment had arrived, I didn’t want to see her reaction to me.

“Levana has been such an important part of my journey here in the shadow realm. She made me feel safe, she made me feel welcome, and she was one of my very first friends here.

Saying goodbye is hard, but I know it's not forever. I'm sure we'll see each other again soon. Can we all show Levana some appreciation?"

"You didn't tell me you were leaving," Verner accused softly, his tone light, though hiding an undercurrent of hurt.

"I didn't know when exactly it would happen." I hesitated for a moment. "And maybe I was ignoring reality a little, hoping it would go away."

Father was already pushing the crowd toward me as Verner grabbed my arm, turning me urgently to face him. "Levana, if you don't want to go, then don't go."

"I can't say no—"

"Tell him we're trying for a baby."

"*What?*"

"It's what both of our families want anyway. We could make an announcement about it."

It was an incredibly generous offer, delivered in a very stilted, uncomfortable way for reasons I wasn't sure Verner was ready to admit to yet.

Anyone who was looking could see how smitten he was with one of the ex-Hunters. I wasn't sure Verner had ever approached her, or if she was even aware he existed, but he definitely *liked* her. Even pretending to show an interest in me might ruin the possibility of something ever coming of it.

And then there was Calix. The idea of him thinking for even a second that I was interested in someone else...

“We both deserve to be happy,” I told Verner with a weak smile. “You should talk to that ex-Hunter, you know. You’re very caring and it seems like she needs that—”

“Come on then,” Father clipped, shadows swirling around him in agitation. “You made an absolute mess of that, you can’t do any more damage now. This was an absolute disaster,” he added under his breath, shooting a furious look at the dispersing crowd. I couldn’t see any trace of my mother, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. I had enough going on.

Verner startled, looking between us, but I was already shooting him and then Ophelia apologetic looks as I followed Father away.

Ophelia watched with a sad smile, leaning heavily against her husband as I walked away, Father leading me toward the more private entry room near the training grounds, still muttering angrily to himself.

The queen had all but declared that Father couldn’t trap me in the house forever by saying she’d see me again soon, and I didn’t think it was an accident. Ophelia may have started out naive about this world and the power she wielded, but she wasn’t anymore.

“An absolute embarrassment,” Father was muttering. “We’re the laughingstock of the court. You’re practically the Hunter queen’s *pet*.”

“Father, the relationships at court might be different—”

“Do you think you know better than me?” he snapped, coming to a sudden stop and turning on his heel to glare at me. “I grew up at court, I lived here until Sirena was born. Do you think the few years you’ve spent surrounded by the rest of the *Guard* gives you more insight than me?”

“No, of course not—”

“Did you *know* your mother was going to be there?” he asked abruptly.

“I’d never seen her before in my life,” I responded calmly, remembering how Father could be when he thought someone was plotting behind his back. “I’ve never spoken to her, nor do I intend to.”

Little tendrils of shadows flicked out around him as though they were swatting away bugs, a sure sign of an impending angry rant.

Please not here, I thought slightly desperately. My mysterious family attracted enough gossip as it was.

“Find a discreet way back inside to collect your possessions then come immediately home. I expect to see you at the dinner table tonight, Levana. I cannot spend another second here.”

Father stormed off, slamming the door of the entry room, leaving me for a brief, blissful moment, alone.

Chapter 11

CALIX

“Boss,” Torin said, skidding to a stop in front of me and somehow knocking a plate off the counter he hadn’t even touched. It was truly a gift, the way he managed to destroy both everything he encountered as well as things he *didn’t* encounter.

“What is it?” I gritted out, gesturing for the dustpan and brush.

“She’s leaving. Levana is leaving.”

The whole kitchen fell silent, watching our interaction as though we were the finest court entertainers they’d ever seen.

“When?” I rasped, a stabbing pain hitting me square in the chest.

“Right now. The queen made a speech—”

I was already moving.

Leaving. She was leaving.

How was it possible that I was surprised by this and yet not at all surprised at the same time? The possibility of her leaving had always been there. She'd *said* she was going to go, and I thought I'd believed her.

But I hadn't. Not really. All this time, I'd thought that perhaps there was a chance she would change her mind. That because she hadn't gone yet, that meant that perhaps she didn't want to leave at all.

That maybe *I* would change her mind.

My steps faltered until I came to a complete stop. What was I *doing*? I was nothing to her. A fun little distraction, perhaps, but that was it. She'd basically said as much herself, in more polite terms, constantly reminding me that this couldn't ever go anywhere.

She doesn't owe you anything, I reminded myself. *She doesn't feel the same way about you. She's not obligated to.*

But at some point, I had to protect myself too.

Instead of heading left to the stairs that would take me up to the entrance hall, I veered right to my apartment. My staff needed me in the kitchens—it was selfish of me to take even a second to myself when I had none to spare.

But I couldn't face them right now. If Torin dropped a plate, I might actually murder him.

As much as I reminded myself that this had always been an inevitability, I didn't feel any better about it by the time I rounded the corner in the corridor that led to my apartment.

"We need to stop meeting like this," Levana whispered, standing in front of my door, shadows nervously flickering into shapes between her palms before dissipating again.

I grunted in acknowledgment, words suddenly hard to come by, unlocking the front door and gesturing for her to enter ahead of me. It took everything in me not to tell her to just leave. To tell her that I didn't want to hear it. I *didn't* want to hear Levana say goodbye. That was my temper talking, though. If I told her to leave, if I didn't have this last moment to study her face and breathe in her scent, I'd regret it forever.

Levana avoided the sofa, heading straight for the dining table and taking a seat, putting a physical barrier between us. I followed slowly, the chair scraping on the stone floor as I dragged it out and sat down, never taking my eyes off her.

I committed each of her features to memory—her dark blue eyes, her delicate horns, and her almost permanently guarded expression. Perhaps Levana would make appearances at court now and then on behalf of her father or sister, but I had no intention of seeing her at those. For my own sanity, this had to be the end. Watching her from afar, knowing she could never be mine...

No, I wasn't going to do that to myself.

In truth, I loved Levana. I'd loved her for months.

But I had to love myself too, at least a little.

“So, this is goodbye,” I said, breaking the uncomfortably drawn out silence.

“My family needs me.” The response was too fast, too practiced. But Levana wasn’t mine, and the tangle of lies she was telling herself wasn’t mine to unravel.

“And the queen doesn’t?”

Levana bristled—I’d obviously stumbled onto a sore spot. “The Ophelia who rules the shadow realm alongside her husband is very different from the Ophelia who arrived here from the human realm. She doesn’t *need* me anymore.”

I do.

“Perhaps you’re right,” I agreed. “After all, she has friends now. There are other ex-Hunters here.”

Levana looked at me sharply like I knew she would. It was petty of me to even mention them, but the vicious voice in my head that was telling me to make her feel just a fraction of the pain I was feeling was persistent.

I don’t want to hurt her.

I love her.

I want her to know that she’s hurting me.

Fuck, it was going to take me years to figure out these emotions. Actually, never mind. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“Right.” Levana swallowed thickly. “Ophelia has plenty of company among the other ex-Hunters. I guess you could too.”

I guess I could.

Maybe I will.

I’m not interested in any of them.

I only want you.

All valid responses—some more spiteful than others. None of them were what came out of my mouth, though.

“Are you really going to leave without letting me eat that sweet cunt one last time?”

Levana made a choked sound. “What did you just say? By the night, no one in my *life* has spoken to me like you do.”

“You like that about me.”

I stood up, pushing my chair back noisily, and strode around the table, dropping to my knees at her side. For as long as I’d known Levana, I hadn’t known shame—not when it came to her. If I had to crawl, beg, and plead for a scrap of her attention, for a small *taste* of what lay between her thighs, I’d done it without second thought.

Those days were over.

From tomorrow.

For now, I *needed* this. We both did.

“Give me a taste, Blue,” I growled, my cock already aching beneath my shadows. “If you’re going to walk out of here,

walk away from this, then it's going to be with my spit in your cunt. Better yet, my cum. One last time.”

Levana slowly turned her chair so she was facing me, not protesting when I pushed her thighs wide and dragged her to the edge of the seat.

“Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Calix.”

“It's not possible for this to be any harder, Blue. Drop your shadows.”

She did so instantly, her body relaxing for me even while her mind was reeling. That was always how it had been between us. Levana's body had always recognized me as hers. It was her mind that disagreed, and despite my best attempts to change it, her mind wasn't budging.

I pressed her thighs a little farther apart, inhaling her delectable scent for the final time. “You're going to come on my tongue, then on my cock, and then you're going to return to your family home with a sore, messy cunt.”

“And what will I be leaving you to remember me by?” Levana snapped, her arousal perfuming the air around us.

“A broken heart,” I told her simply, my claws digging into her thighs while I dipped my head, extending my tongue to devour the sweetest nectar I'd ever indulged in.

“Oh Calix,” Levana whispered brokenly, her hands wrapping around my claws, holding me in place. She may not want *me*, but she couldn't say no to the pleasure I offered her. A bitter part of me took solace in that, confident—perhaps wrongly—

that I could make Levana feel things that other Shades couldn't. That she'd always remember me for the way I made her feel, if nothing else.

Our shadows reached for each other, intertwining as I parted her carefully, my tongue immediately finding her slick center, my favorite flavor in the entire realm filling my mouth.

There was nothing soft and gentle about it. My movements were rough and desperate, torn between dragging this moment out and needing to give Levana everything all at once.

“I'm close—”

I sat up, pulling her off the chair and on top of me as my back hit the floor with a thud. She didn't hesitate, claws pricking my chest as she braced herself over me, sinking her slick cunt down on my aching cock.

Her thighs trembled, and I knew full well it wasn't because her muscles were protesting. Levana was stronger than me.

“Tell me how you're going to walk away from this,” I gritted out. “Tell me that it'll ever be the same with anyone else. Lie to me.”

Levana's claws dug into my skin with each roll of her hips, her grip somewhere between clinging and punishing. “You know I can't. And neither can you.”

“That's why I'm not the one walking away.”

I grabbed her hips, slamming her down on my cock, my knot preventing her from going any farther. Her pussy was gripping me tightly, already trying to clamp me in place.

My knot pulsed almost painfully, and I wanted more than anything in that moment to feel her walls crushing my knot again, but that wasn't going to happen. Not on my floor when she was leaving.

Not *ever* again. This was the end.

I pulled her down, wanting to hold her close for the last time, and Levana's hands found my horns, squeezing tightly as her spine arched, her orgasm ripping through her body.

As much as I wanted to drag out this moment, I couldn't help but follow. She felt so fucking good around me, on top of me. So soft and trusting in these moments when she was usually so cool and unaffected.

Levana relaxed, her body draped over me as she continued to squirm in pleasure, totally lost in her desire. Unfortunately, my orgasms didn't last as long as hers. The pain of goodbye had well and truly set in for me by the time Levana sighed, pushing herself up with her forearms braced on my chest.

"Let's not," I said quickly because it looked like she was about to rip my soul out of my chest with her words. I ran the tips of my claws down her sides, making her shudder. "It was good. We were good. Let's remember it that way."

"Okay," Levana whispered, rubbing soothing circles into the base of my horns with the pads of her thumbs. "I'll always remember you, Calix."

Chapter 12

LEVANA

As much as I wanted to leave Calix's scent on me, I couldn't face my family like that. I was already on the verge of breaking down as it was. Instead, I washed quickly at his apartment, clenching my eyes shut as he slipped out of the front door while I was in the bath.

The festival was still in full force. He had places to be. He'd already spent far more time away from the kitchen than he would have under any other circumstances.

Besides, we'd said all there was to say, and I was already running late for dinner.

I moved faster than I ever had to finish washing up and detouring via the apartment to grab my bag of hastily packed things.

Fortunately, everyone was too busy at the festival to notice my second exit. I didn't get so lucky when I emerged on the other side, immediately drenched in the sticky heat of Erith.

"You're late," Nyfain muttered, grabbing my bag and gesturing for me to go straight to the dining hall. "Dinner has already started."

I straightened my shoulders and dipped my head as I walked into the room, finding it unsettlingly easy to slip back into the role of second daughter. My usual seat opposite Sirena was free, and in many ways, it felt as though nothing had changed in seven years.

But it had. *I* had. Because acting powerless now *was* just an act, where it had once been my reality.

"Where have you been? My instructions were very clear, Levana."

My father's disapproval made it very easy to forget I wasn't an entirely powerless child anymore.

"From what you said, the queen was *very* unwilling to let her go," Sirena said sweetly, looking adoringly at Father. "Perhaps Levana had difficulty extricating herself from our needy monarch."

"She was very needy," Father grumbled, slamming his wine goblet down a little harder than necessary. "Though I suppose they're keeping the stores filled."

Sirena agreed, smoothly changing the subject to some gossip about the neighbors, and I realized belatedly that she'd taken

my father's ire off me without so much as blinking. Was that intentional?

“Levana, I take it Nyfain told you about the baby?” Sirena asked, her hand resting on her stomach, obscured by shadows.

“He did. Are you... well?” I asked, flailing for the right term.

“Very, thank you.” Her voice softened slightly, though she was straight back to her usual syrupy self when Father slammed his goblet down again. “The baby seems to be thriving.”

“Good. I'm glad.”

“You'll spend your days with Yestin from tomorrow,” Father interrupted. It had never crossed my mind before that my uncle never joined us at dinner each night. Was that to be my future too? Was he not invited, or did he stay away by choice?

This was the right decision, I reminded myself weakly. This had always been the plan. I could make a life for myself here. I could make myself be happy.



“So this is... it?” I asked Yestin hesitantly, looking around his small cottage on the outskirts of the estate. “You just... stay here all day?”

“I walk around a couple of times, make sure nothing looks amiss.” Yestin stretched out on the couch, eyes shut. “Boil

some water for tea, would you? It's nice to have some company."

"Why don't you ever join us for dinner?" I asked, heading to the small and alarmingly messy kitchen. "Mind if I clean up a little?"

"Go ahead. And my brother doesn't want me at dinner. You won't be there much longer either. Maybe until the baby arrives, but after that, you're getting a downgrade."

That idea didn't fill me with as much despair as it would have before I left. I could think of worse fates than not sitting through those awkward dinners.

I could also think of plenty of places I'd rather be. Not for the first time, my mind drifted to the palace. To Calix's small apartment on the bottom level near the kitchens. What was he doing right now?

Was he thinking about me as much as I was thinking about him?

I hoped he wasn't. Calix deserved to be happy.

After a long day of scrubbing the cottage while Yestin napped, I headed back to the main house, making my way up to my childhood bedroom. While I had conflicted feelings about being back here, the deafening sounds of the insects and the stickiness of the humidity were like a comforting hug. They were familiar and filled me with memories—some good—even if I had definitely gotten acclimated to the palace's milder temperatures.

I sensed my sister's presence before I opened my door, quickly closing it behind me so no one else saw her sitting on my bed.

"Hello," I said cautiously, leaning back against the door. "Everything okay?"

"What are you doing here, Levana?" Sirena asked flatly, staring at me like she couldn't be *less* pleased to see me.

"I'm home," I replied, confused by her question. If anything, she should be asking what had taken me so long.

Sirena sighed, sitting on the edge of my bed and rubbing her belly. It was eerie how little the room had changed in my absence. It almost looked like Father had instructed the staff to keep my room perfectly preserved in the state I'd left it.

Even the last book I'd read before I went to join the Guard—an epic adventure tale that I'd loved when I was young—was haphazardly shoved back on the shelf where I'd put it on my way out, not taking the time to line it up evenly with the rest. Had they been dusting around it for seven years? It was a slightly unsettling thought.

"One day, this estate will be mine. Unless you wish to challenge me for it," Sirena said flatly, blunt as she always had been when it was just the two of us.

"No thank you."

"Precisely. You don't want it. You never have. I got you out. All you had to do was stay away. I thought once you were out

from his direct influence, that would be easy for you. From the sound of it, you had allies at court. The queen herself even!”

I blinked, trying to comprehend her words. “But you told Father that I should train at home—”

“Knowing he’d never allow it. Knowing he’d rather send you away than have anyone in his domain,” Sirena interrupted, raising her voice slightly. “I’ll say whatever I have to say, that’s where you and I differ. Whether it’s out of some misplaced sense of honor, or just because you can’t remember what life was like when Mother was here and you think Father’s behavior is normal, I don’t know. You accept more than you should. You don’t take what you deserve. You were fierce enough to make it in the Guard, and yet you’re utterly incapable of standing up for yourself—”

“And you are?” I snapped. “Is that what you’re doing when you flatter his ego? *Standing up* for yourself?”

Sirena shook her head, disappointment rolling off her in waves, and an uncomfortably guilty feeling took root in my gut. “I do what I have to do to survive. I do what I have to do for *you* to survive. For my baby to survive. This will all be mine one day, I just have to wait it out. Do you think you’re better than me because you dance to Father’s tune resentfully and I do it sweetly? Does your bitterness give you moral superiority?”

She stood, her shadows moving with her in an astoundingly rigid fashion. She’d always had so much control—perhaps more than I’d ever realized.

I opened my mouth to say something. To apologize, even though my ego was throbbing from the wound she'd just effortlessly delivered to it. Sirena didn't give me the chance.

“Don't, I'm not in the mood to hear it. I have sheltered you as best I could, but you are fully grown now, Levana. Well regarded enough to be entrusted with the *queen's* safety, and apparently, far more righteous than I am. I have to focus my attention on my child. You'll have to protect yourself.”

I stepped aside so she could pass, the door closing behind her with a quiet snick that rang in my ears as though she'd slammed it; her disappointment in me lingering in the space she'd left behind, adding to the crush of what I was still feeling after I'd left Calix's apartment.

I thought I'd been doing the right thing. That this was the *only* option.

But no one was happy. Sirena wasn't happy. Calix wasn't happy. *I* wasn't happy.

And I was beginning to think that no matter what I did, I could never make Father happy.

So why was I here?

Chapter 13

CALIX

“**Y**ou can’t go on like this,” Katriel sighed, flinching as I brought the cleaver down with slightly more force than necessary, sending a smattering of blood from the carcass I was butchering around the kitchen.

“Torin,” I barked. “Clean up.”

He tripped over his own feet in his rush to grab a cloth, and that uncomfortable, tight feeling in my chest came back with a vengeance. It had been there since Levana left—a low-level ache that I was fairly confident was a broken heart, though I wasn’t about to tell anyone else that. The sharp moments of acute pain were something else though. An unwelcome reminder of how fucked-up I was, and how my fucked-up attitude was impacting everyone around me.

My problems were becoming their problems, and that was unacceptable.

“Fuck, sorry.” I sighed, clapping Torin on the back. I wasn’t mad at him.

“No worries, boss.”

“Perhaps I should take a vacation,” I muttered, resuming my slicing in a less messy fashion. “Visit my dad for a few days.”

“That’s a good idea,” Katriel agreed eagerly, not even attempting to hide her enthusiasm at the idea of getting me out of the kitchen. “And what better time than now? The king and queen are beginning their tour and all the important Shades at court are going with them. Who cares if the stragglers eat simple fare for a week? It won’t kill them.”

I grunted, mulling over her words, but mostly fixated on the reminder of the royal couple’s tour of the realm. Starting at Holbeck, the small seaside community closest to Levana’s family estate.

Would she go and see them? I couldn’t imagine Levana *not* wanting to see Ophelia—they had developed a genuine friendship throughout their time together. Then again, I never thought Levana would be able to leave Ophelia behind either, so what did I know?

“Or,” Katriel began hesitantly, taking a discreet step back from the table like she knew whatever she was about to say was going to be poorly received. “You could, perhaps—if you

wanted, maybe—spend some time with the other former Hunters who have moved here?”

My hand stilled, the cleaver hovering half an inch above the meat.

“It’s just that there are three of them who don’t seem to have formed any kind of meaningful connection yet, and some of the guards were saying that perhaps they’re not interested in the very fanciest of Shades the realm has to offer—look at Selene. She’s a nobody who came from nothing, and that male Hunter only ever had eyes for her. So perhaps it would be wise for some of us lesser Shades to make an effort to get to know them.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Calix—”

“No.”

I didn’t elaborate. I didn’t think I could without losing my temper, and Katriel had meant well. But I couldn’t be a *mate*. I didn’t want to be.

I wanted to be a husband, but the only Shade I wanted as my wife had up and left me days ago, and I hadn’t heard a thing from her since. *She’s probably happy. Perhaps she’s moved on. Found some other obsessed sap to moon over her all day and eat her cunt like it’s his favorite meal.*

Katriel winced as another spray of blood coated the kitchen.

“I’ll take the vacation.”



The remote hilly outcrop where my father had decided to make his home was a far cry from court, that was for fucking certain. The wind blew constantly, making the wooden structure creak ominously every second of every day. After the incessant chatter of the pub he'd run for thirty years, Dad found the sound of constant gales soothing—he was weird like that—while I spent most of my time contemplating the life choices that had led me to this uncomfortably loud moment.

I should have visited my mother.

She was flighty and unpredictable, and her kitchen was usually in a state of chaos I found completely untenable, but at least she didn't reside in a wind tunnel. Last I heard, she was in some flower-filled field in the middle of nowhere.

“Why are you here, son?” my father grunted, chopping up bitter root vegetables to make the base of his sauce. I'd learned everything about cooking from him, and while I was pretty confident I was now a far better cook, there was no way he was letting me touch a single thing in his kitchen.

“A vacation, I told you.”

He snorted. “Well, you look miserable. Perhaps you should have picked a more luxurious destination.”

“I wanted to see you.” I hesitated, not having broached the topic of relationships with my father... ever. “I have a question about you and Mother.”

He looked at me curiously, nodding in assent.

Having brought it up, I was almost immediately lost for words. How was I meant to ask him why they weren't together? Mother had moved on, though her relationships were always short-lived. Father hadn't.

"You want to know about our relationship?" he confirmed gruffly, reading the expression on my face. "There's not much to tell. There's no villain in the story. Your mother has always been an adventurous soul. Raising you *was* her adventure for many years. Once you were independent, she wanted to rediscover independence of her own. She was clear about that from the beginning, and I was fine with it."

"Did you... love her?"

Even my shadows curled in on me in embarrassment. My father and I had discussed many things over the years, often around a fire late at night after a few too many goblets of wine. Nothing had ever been off-limits, but we'd never talked about *love*.

He stared at me for a long moment, though he didn't seem uncomfortable. Contemplative, if anything. "Well, sure."

I coughed on the sip of wine I'd just taken. "*Sure?*"

"I cared for her well-being. I enjoyed her company. She was nice to be around. Pretty, too." He grunted, gesturing vaguely as if to say *what else is there? What more could you want?*

But I wanted a lot more than that. I'd *had* a lot more than that. I didn't just *care* for Levana's well-being, I *lived* for it. To

say I *enjoyed* her company seemed ludicrously insufficient. And even when she wasn't nice to be around, she was the only company I ever wanted.

And *pretty*? I could never describe Levana as *pretty*. It seemed like such an insubstantial descriptor. Flowers were pretty. Delicate and soft and unobjectionable.

Levana wasn't pretty. She was magnificent.

"I don't think I've experienced love the way you have," Father said quietly, watching me closely.

A pained noise escaped me before I could swallow it back, dredged up from the depths of my chest. Or perhaps my soul.

"It doesn't matter now. She left."

"Ah. Is that why you're here?"

"And I wanted to see you."

Father snorted. "You can stop in and see me whenever you like. You wanted to *stay* because you needed a break. And I'm glad you came to me, even if I know you aren't fond of this place. You're always welcome."

I nodded, briefly too overcome with gratitude to speak. If only Levana had a father like mine.

"Do we hate her?" Father asked casually. "I don't want to say the wrong thing."

I barked out a harsh laugh—the first since Levana had gone.

"No, we don't hate her. I wish I could. It would make it easier."

He hummed. “Perhaps it would make *this* part easier, but I think you’ll be glad in the long run that the memory of your time together isn’t poisoned by animosity. One day, you’ll be old and gnarled like I am, grateful to be able to look back on your life with an appreciation for the good times and the good souls you encountered along the way.”

Maybe that was true, but I wasn’t ready to hear those words yet. The idea of Levana becoming nothing more than a happy memory wasn’t comforting when the wound of her absence was still bleeding.

“Come on, you can help me make this sauce. Let’s see what bad habits you’ve picked up in that swanky kitchen,” Father grumbled good-naturedly, giving me an easy way out of my own head.

“See if you can keep up with me, old fella.”

Chapter 14

LEVANA

I fussed with my shadows, looking at my reflection in the mirror. Usually, I didn't bother with anything beyond a very basic covering, but I was bored out of my mind.

Yestin mostly napped and ate, though I'd been explicitly commanded to stay with him regardless.

Sirena was busy with nursery preparations and seemed to find my presence at home so frustrating that she didn't even want to be in the same room as me.

Even Father was avoiding me now. Or he had been today, at least. I could hear his booming voice from the dining hall as I gave up on fussing with my shadows and headed downstairs for dinner.

"An absolute farce," he was telling Sirena heatedly. "A royal *tour*, can you imagine such a thing? It's been centuries since a

monarch did that. If anyone wants to see them, they know where the palace is. I don't see why they have to traipse around the realm. It diminishes any sense of mystery.”

“A royal tour?” I rasped, taking my seat.

“Yes, they were here today, that queen of yours and King Allerick.”

“They were *here*?”

“Well, not at the estate, clearly.” I should stop asking questions, he was getting agitated. “They were at Holbeck, meeting with their subjects. I went, of course. Represented the family.”

And you didn't tell me?

“She asked after you, you know. The queen. Even suggested coming here for a visit. I told her that you couldn't possibly accommodate that—unlike your role at court, your position here isn't something you can pick up and drop off whenever you like, it isn't based on *friendship*—”

It was as though something in my mind took over. Perhaps it was my guard training, or perhaps it was just the quiet inner strength I'd developed over the course of the past seven years without realizing it, but *something* in my head clicked into place.

Sirena flashed me a look of approval as I silently stood before returning her attention to her meal.

“Where do you think you're going?” Father said harshly, his own chair scraping back loudly as he rushed to stand.

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly. Ophelia had said I was welcome to my old job whenever I wanted it, but she wasn’t even there right now, and perhaps she’d found a replacement she really liked. The family apartment in the palace certainly wasn’t going to be available to me anymore.

Of course, there was an angry cook I wanted to see more than anything, but was that selfish? Hadn’t I messed with his feelings enough?

“But I’m leaving.”

“To go *where*?”

That was the question, wasn’t it?

I didn’t answer. I just left. I walked away as though I was in a trance, and then I kept walking, right out the front door into the sticky heat, shaded by the enormous fronds of the trees that were planted along the walkway that led up to the front of the house.

Could I have argued with him? Tried to make him see things my way? Perhaps.

Would it have been worth it?

No, I didn’t think so. I could have *tried* to change his perspective, but my chances of success were slim. Ultimately, it would have only caused me more pain, and I was done with that. I was overdue for some happiness.

Each step into the heart of the jungle where the entry room was buried in the foliage had me feeling a little lighter.

I'd been playing an unwinnable game, trying to appease someone who could never be appeased, and I hadn't even realized it. Even with all my years away from home, the strings he'd used to keep me tethered to him had just pulled taut, they hadn't disappeared.

But now I'd cut them. Now I was free.



“Oh no,” Katriel murmured, watching me appraisingly as I walked through the doors to the palace kitchen. “He’s not here.”

“He’s not?” I asked, my voice wavering ever so slightly. I’d tried to brace myself for whatever I may find when I’d returned to the palace. Told myself that perhaps Calix had changed his mind about getting to know one of the ex-Hunters and that I’d find a way to be fine with that.

Apparently, that had all been a lie.

“Levana!” Torin called, skidding to a stop and grinning at me. “We missed you. The boss is visiting his father in Kelna.”

“Torin!” Katriel hissed. “I was going to interrogate her a little first. Find out why she’s back.”

“She’s back for the boss,” Torin replied, frowning. “Right, Levana?”

“That seems like a conversation I should have with him first.” Though I couldn’t help but smile as I said it. Did Calix

even know how loyal his team was to him? He had a gift for cultivating friendships, though I wasn't sure he realized it.

“Well, Torin has already told you he's in Kelna,” Katriel sighed, shooting him another disgruntled look. “The house is right up the hill, on the cliff edge. You can't miss it.”

“Right. Thank you.” I hesitated. Going to Calix's apartment was one thing. Going to his *father's* home was an entirely different matter.

“Calix will want to see you,” Katriel said, watching me closely. “He was miserable without you. Just don't hurt him again.”

“I won't,” I promised. “Never again.”

Chapter 15

CALIX

“There’s someone outside the house,” Father said, looking up the hill as we lugged our purchases from the market back to his place.

“Friend of yours?”

“I don’t have friends. Who *is* that?”

“Fuck,” I murmured, coming to a stop halfway up the path, half wondering if I was hallucinating.

“Oh. *Oh*. Is that... her?” he whispered, so fucking loudly I wouldn’t be surprised if Levana heard him.

“It... yes. That’s her.”

Levana hesitated for a moment before starting down the path toward us. Father grabbed the basket of ingredients off me, all but shoving me forward to get me moving.

“She came all the way here to see you!” *Don't be hopeful.* I'd been hopeful before. I wasn't going to make that mistake again. “I think she loves you,” Father added, extremely unhelpfully.

“Hi,” Levana breathed, coming to a stop in front of us. “Um, I'm very sorry to barge in on you like this—”

“Not at all,” my father interjected, falling all over himself to make her feel welcome. “My name is Altair, I'm Calix's father. You're most welcome here. I need to get these things into the ice pit, I'll leave you to two to talk.”

Levana shot him a slightly bemused smile as he hurried off up the hill, perhaps not expecting such an enthusiastic welcome. Frankly, I wouldn't have either. Perhaps my father was more concerned about my lack of serious relationships than he let on.

“How are you?” I asked, the silence growing slightly stifling without my father there to break it.

“I'm...” Levana laughed lightly. “Actually, I don't really know. I had this whole speech planned and now I'm here I just want to...”

“You just want to what?” It was too late. The hope bubble was back in full force.

“I just want to hug you,” she whispered.

My shadows had been straining to get to her from the moment I'd seen her, and I let my control go, engulfing her in

my arms and my shadows. She smelled like home and *felt* like home and I'd missed her so fucking much.

"I'm so sorry," Levana whispered, wrapping her arms around my waist. "I shouldn't have left—"

"You don't have to apologize for that."

"I *do*."

"No, you don't." I pulled back just enough so that I could look at her face. "You left your family home."

"I did."

"Are you going back?"

She snorted. "No. I'm pretty confident I wouldn't be allowed on the property even if I wanted to."

My chest swelled with pride. "Then you have nothing to apologize for. There was no other path that could have gotten you to this point, Levana. *You* had to make the choice to walk away. No one could have convinced you otherwise."

She swallowed thickly. "I wish I'd figured it out earlier."

I squeezed her shoulders. "Don't be too hard on yourself, it didn't take you too long."

Her expression softened slightly. "Does this mean we can pick up where we left off?"

I scoffed. "Oh, Blue, do you really think you get to show up here at my father's house looking all adorable and contrite and then just continue swanning in and out of my life, appearing at my front door whenever it suits you?"

Levana laughed. “The irony of finding myself standing outside your father’s front door was not lost on me. What are you saying?”

“I’m just letting you know that I’m going to marry you and you’re going to live in my apartment, and I suppose you can leave sometimes—if you really have to—for your illustrious career, but that you’ll be dealing with a very needy, clingy husband when you return. I thought you should know what you’re getting yourself into—I’m generous like that.”

“Oh so generous,” Levana agreed, her body melting against mine even if her expression was closer to bemused. “You want to marry me?”

“I’m *going* to marry you,” I corrected.

“What if you get bored with me?”

“I know that to be impossible.”

Levana’s arms banded a little tighter around my waist. “Do you love me?”

“I probably should have led with that.” Her face lit up, shadows intertwining with mine like a dance. “Yes, I love you. *Of course*, I love you. I’m not sure how half the court hasn’t declared their love for you, and I live in constant fear that they will someday and you’ll realize you have far better options.”

“Impossible.” Her voice was filled with so much vehemence that I couldn’t help but believe her. Even if they were all going to realize how fucking amazing she was and try to steal her

away from me eventually. It was inevitable. “I love you. Only you.”

Ah well, let those fuckers try. For reasons beyond my understanding, it seemed as though Levana had chosen *me*.

“We should probably go up to the house. Your father—”

“He’ll be fine.” I was already dragging her back down the hill, straight for the entry room. “It’s a small house and I don’t want him hearing the things I have planned for you.”

“But won’t he be waiting for you?”

“He’s definitely been watching out the window this whole time, don’t worry. We can visit him tomorrow. Right now is about us.”

Epilogue

CALIX

“Are you sure about this?” Katriel asked, assembling a tray of bite-sized meatballs. “Not about the marriage,” she added hastily, sensing my ire. “I just mean it’s not a lot of time to pull a wedding together.”

Two days was a tight turnaround for any event, but it was the only rest day on the royal tour for the next few weeks. Not only did we want the king and queen—mostly the queen—to be able to attend, but after a short romantic getaway of our own, Levana would be joining the tour, resuming her post as Ophelia’s guard.

What did Katriel expect me to do? Wait *weeks*? Absurd.

“It’s not a big wedding,” I pointed out. “Though you all insisted on coming, so it’s bigger than I had intended.”

Katriel smirked. “Is it so hard to believe we like you, boss?”

“Yes. I don’t know why. I’m not cultivating your good opinion on purpose.”

“You’re also not nearly as mean as you pretend to be.”

“Come on. Let’s get these upstairs and get you to the temple. We don’t want to keep your bride waiting.”



“There is usually a speech—”

“We don’t care about that,” I told the priest. “Just do the vows.”

Levana shook with silent laughter, her shadows stroking teasingly against mine. *Beneath* mine. The tease.

“Can he do that?” Torin whispered loudly.

“Fine,” the priest snapped. “Levana, do you take Calix to be your husband in a union recognized by the shadow realm?”

I was pretty sure there were usually some lines in there about the old gods and emulating the perfect balance between the divine and the mortal in marriage or something, but he’d clearly thrown all that out with the other ceremonial stuff.

“I do.”

One of my shadows wrapped around her thigh, rewarding her with a gentle squeeze.

“Calix, do you take Levana to be your wife in a union recognized by the shadow—”

“I do.”

—*realm?*”

“Yes, yes, I do.”

The priest huffed, slamming his book shut and shuffling off the dais. “Congratulations.”

Levana was shaking with silent laughter. “I think you upset him.”

“He was going to waffle on for hours and you know it. The meatballs would get cold.”

“A travesty.”

“I’m glad you appreciate the magnitude of the issue.” I dragged her closer, my shadows seemingly exploring her body of their own volition.

“Excuse me,” Katriel called, voice filled with amusement. “Are you going to come down and join us or should we just leave?”

“Don’t ask him that!” Torin replied, slightly panicked. “If you *ask*, he’ll say leave. Don’t bring it up.”

“Come on.” Levana grabbed my arm, dragging me behind her toward our guests, who were already congregating in the back of the temple where Katriel had set up a food table and wine. My parents had greeted each other like old friends, and were ushering Torin out of the way so they could take the covers off the dishes.

I hadn’t warned them that Torin had absolutely no sense of coordination—they must have figured that out on their own.

“Half an hour,” I warned my brand new wife. “Then we’re leaving. We have a *honeymoon* to get to.”

It wasn’t a Shade concept, but Ophelia had kept calling our vacation that and it had stuck. My mother had found us a beachside house to stay in for a few days, enough to give Levana a taste of home with the heat and ocean but nowhere near her actual home. It was perfect.

“These are so good,” Ophelia said, holding up a meatball before popping it in her mouth.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Calix,” King Allerick agreed, speaking to me though his attention was wholly on his wife.

“Where are you going next?” I asked, pouring Levana a goblet of wine.

The king grimaced. “Lindow.”

Ah. That was a conversation killer. Lindow was where one of the king’s brothers lived. And as of the Festival of Shadows, where one of the ex-Hunters lived too.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Ophelia offered weakly before turning a stern look on Levana. “Don’t look so worried, I’m perfectly fine. Damen is very personally invested in this particular stop on the tour, he’ll be there the entire time. But I can’t wait until you join us again, I’ve missed you so much.”

The Shades around us broke into smaller groups, quiet chatter and laughter echoing around the high-ceilinged, crumbling temple.

“You haven’t, er, heard anything?” Ophelia asked Levana gently, keeping her voice quiet. “From your family?”

Levana smiled, her shadows still pressing against mine. “My things were delivered to the palace, all in perfect condition, including some of my favorite books from when I was a child. I suspect my siser had some hand in that. Hopefully, we’ll be able to rebuild a relationship someday.”

“And your mom?” Ophelia pressed. She’d turned spectacularly red when she’d learned that the female she’d been talking to at the festival was Levana’s runaway mother.

“Sent a letter. I haven’t opened it yet,” Levana added. “My focus has been on the wedding, I didn’t want anything to detract from that. And I’m not sure I’m ready to read it yet, anyway.”

“You’ll know when you are,” I assured her.

Ophelia was looking ready to deliver a particularly sappy response, but Torin saved us all the awkwardness by loudly knocking over a candelabra.

“I think that’s a sign. Ready to get out of here?”

Levana’s smile was fucking radiant. If I could make her smile like that every day of her life, then I’d die happy that I’d done some good with my time in this realm.

“With you? I’m ready for anything.”

Also By

Also By Colette Rhodes

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Run Riot

Silver Bullet

Wild Game

Dare Not

Saving Grace

Shades of Sin:

MF monster romance series

Luxuria

Suberbia

Gula

Avaritia

Ira

Invidia

Acedia

On the Shelf:

Scheme

Excess

Three Bears duet:

Gilded Mess

Golden Chaos

Little Red duet:

Scarlet Disaster

Seeing Red

Knotty By Nature:

RH omegaverse with T.S. Snow

Allure Part 1

Allure Part 2

Empath Found:

Empath Found: The Complete Trilogy

Deadly Dragons:

The (Not) Cursed Dragon

The (Not) Satisfied Dragon

Standalone:

Dead of Spring (*MF - Hades & Persephone retelling*)

About the Author



Colette Rhodes is a paranormal romance author from New Zealand. She loves to write about love in all its forms, and adores imperfect heroes and heroines who find perfection in each other. You'll often find her trying to justify her degree by including ancient history and mythological influences in her work.

If she's not writing, then you're almost certain to find her reading—ideally with a cup of tea in hand and a scented candle burning to match the mood.

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