

FRACTURED GLORY

LOREN HART & YD LA MAR

Fractured Glory

RISE OF THE DREADS

LOREN HART

YD LA MAR

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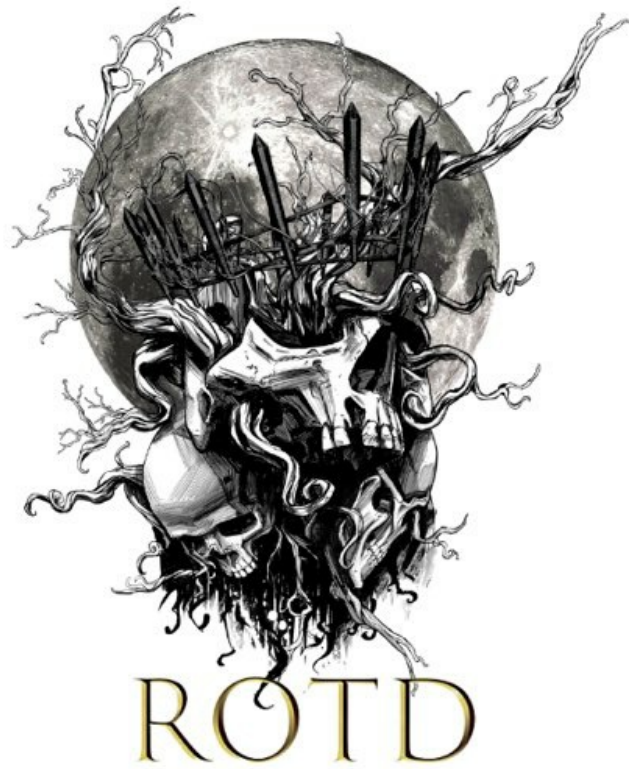
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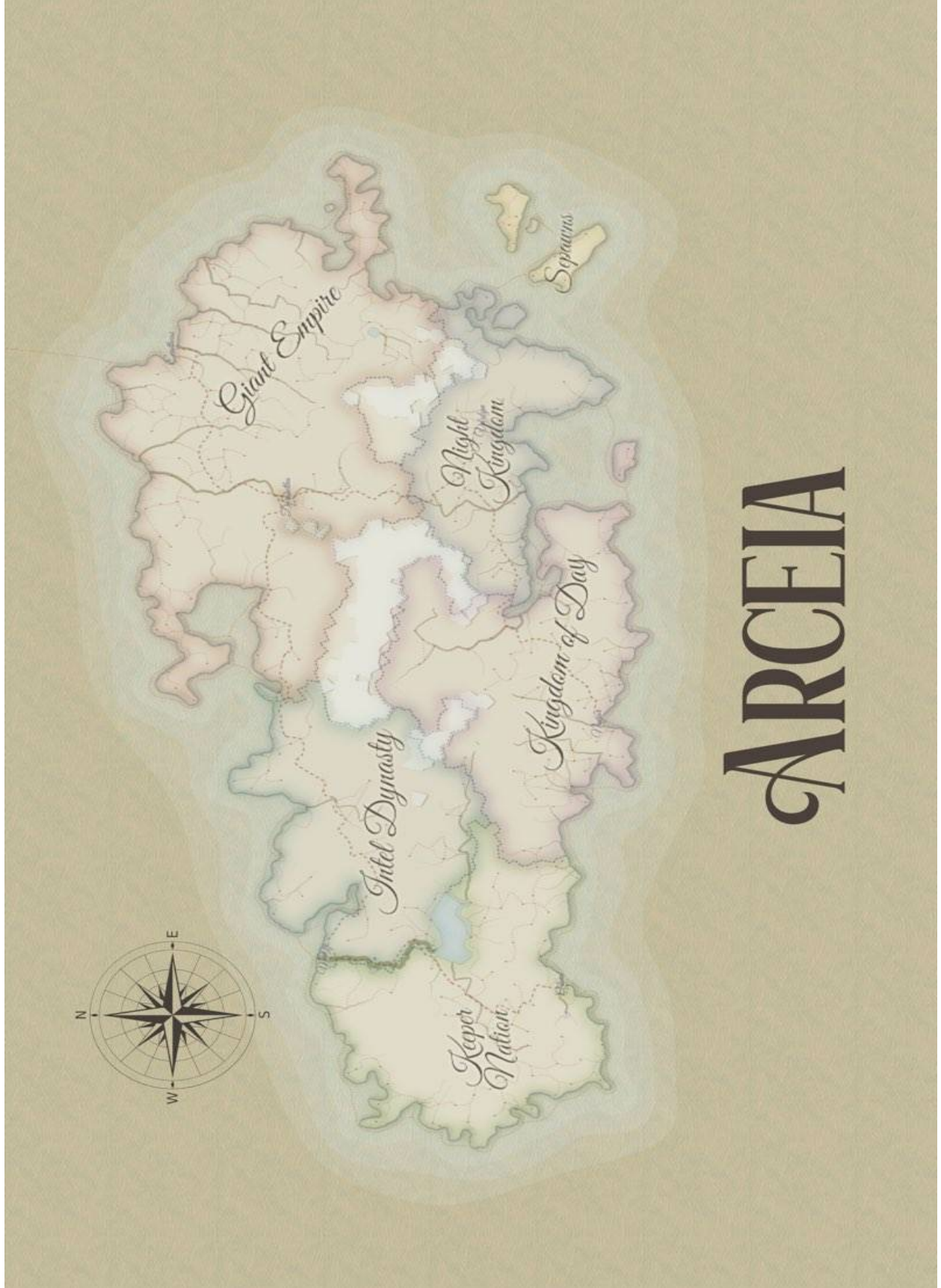
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To my good friend YD La Mar, the hardest working woman in romancelandia. Thanks for coming on this journey with me. To all the authors in Rise of the Dreads, you are amazing creators and I can't thank you enough for all the hard work you've put in to make this something special.

-Loren

What she said.

-YD



ARCEIA

Blurb

There's a war coming. Six kingdoms struggle for control of the world while wrestling with their demons within. Alliances are formed and lovers betrayed, while leaders plot and scheme. It is a world in which fear germinates like a seed in the ground.

But seeds bear fruit.

And when the fruit of fear bursts from the ground, everything will change.

Six kingdoms. When it's done, only one will survive to tell the tale.

These authors have teamed up to bring you, *Fractured Glory*, six dark fantasy standalone novellas contained in one remarkable volume. Featuring stories from heroes to villains, each tells their version of the lost history of the Rise of the Dreads. Dangerous and exciting, experience one thrill ride after the next, as you find all kinds of morally gray characters living between these pages. Readers are invited to go deep into this fantastic world and experience the heart-pounding account of the Midsummer Festival, the event which will forever change the world!



ROTD

Do Not Bypass

There are some scenes in Fractured Glory that may be triggering for some readers. This is a dark fantasy. If you are sensitive, please do not continue. Or at the very least, proceed with caution. Again, this is a dark fantasy with multiple points of view, and things happen within these pages that may be off-putting to some.

You've been warned.

NIGHT KINGDOM

— ❖ —
RIDLEY AXTON



Chapter 1

Ridley Axton

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO...

“**A**gain,” I declared.

Deochaju was a defensive martial art focused on exhausting my opponent by dodging attacks and thus both exhausting them and causing an exploitable opening. The primary focus relied on quick movements and the speed and stamina of the defender, and I’d become a master.

The biggest strength of Deochaju was the speed with which an opponent could be overpowered. By causing my opponent to be in a constant mode of chase, they’d become infuriated or just frustrated, which helped defend my weaknesses more. On the other hand the biggest weakness of Deochaju was opposite styles. Martial arts focused solely on attack tended to gain the upper hand more easily since those fighters would have a tremendous amount of stamina. Even though I’d achieved master status, I would not rest on my laurels. A master trained harder, faster, and better every time.

“If I face an opponent in the festival which rivals my own ability, I cannot allow them to gain leverage over me,” I explained and extended my hand.

Petre used the back of his hand to dab at the corner of his bottom lip. “You drew blood,” he observed.

“Again,” I repeated. “I will be perfect. I have no other choice.”

Petre nodded and clasped my hand. Out the corner of my eye, I caught movement and shifted my gaze toward it. Gianna had entered the courtyard with a pitcher in her hands. Her wide eyes settled on mine and as we locked, I was reminded of how the color of her eyes always made me think of summer leaves. Her curly, auburn colored hair fell to her neck like an unstoppable storm, and her rich black skin, slender build, prominent cheekbones and full lips had caused me to have many a restless night. Her smile was uncomplicated, but left me completely paralyzed.

“You going to leave me down here all night?” Petre scoffed, bringing me

back to the present. I pulled and he sprang to his feet from off of the one knee he'd been on. "Just go talk to her," he nudged. "She's right there."

I shook my head and blew out a breath. "And so are the games," I sighed. "There's too much at stake for my mind to become distracted."

Petre flinched his head back. "Love is a distraction?"

"At this moment, I'm not in love, I'm in preparation. But...yes. It could cost me my life."

"Or," he countered, "it could give you life. The heart is a muscle as well, my prince. You never know unless you try."

"Then, I shall never know."

"As you wish," he acknowledged with a slight bow. He and I separated a good ways before we turned and faced one another and assumed our fighting stances.

Petre always proved to be a great training partner. He reminded me of a menacing tornado. His deep-set midnight black eyes saw everything, and his tanned skin belied the strength in his broad-shouldered build. If anyone would get me prepared for what I may face, it would be him. But I needed him to do better than he had been.

"There's no way for me to know the weather of the day," I yelled. "I must be prepared whether the light is my friend or not."

"My prince, you will be ready," he answered with surety in his voice and a smile on his busted lips. "Because I'll whip your ass every day from now till it's time to make sure of it. You will be *thoroughly* prepared."

"One of us currently bleeds," I shot back. "And one of us does not."

"I took it easy on you, my prince. I needed you to gain your confidence. But I see you are a glutton for punishment, so I'll be your daddy."

I glanced over to Gianna and saw her giggle. I smiled, raised my hands in a guard and bounced on my toes. "Bring it on, my friend."

"Come get this *perfect* beatdown," he dared. Petre stretched out his right hand, closed his fingers into a fist and pulled it back into his chest. The

shadow nearest to him on that side caused by one of the larger training dummies lining the interior of the courtyard, morphed and formed a Colest at his command.

“Very ominous looking,” I observed with a slight nod.

“Only the best for you, my prince,” he answered with snark.

The shadowy Colest had restless blazing eyes that sat tightly within the creature's long, thorny shadow skull. Two enormous black horns sat atop its head, above its tiny, pointy ears. Several rows of small tendrils ran down the sides of each of its jaw lines. Its nose was wide with two short, curved nostrils and horns on its chin. Two huge teeth poked out from the side of its mouth and showed a glimpse of the terror hiding inside. Horrendous wings from its shoulders flapped and in conjunction with a push of its massive tail ends launched the beast into the air.

“Dodge this, my prince!” He goaded me from across the field.

My breath hung in the air, but the freezing air chilled me to my core. A sense of relief sprang from these horrible conditions. The constant danger this beast represented was unwelcoming, but reminded me of what I could face in the games.

The shadow Colest began its aerial assault, and I dashed forward, straight toward its controller. Petre's half Night Stalker and half Ground Keeper blood empowered him with Shadow Conversion, but every powered person in this world had limits. Powers were like muscles. No matter how fearsome, there was a point of fatigue for every one of them. Understanding this emboldened me to fear none of it.

I just have to stay ahead of the beast and get to him, before it gets to me, I reasoned.

Petre saw my modified strategy, turned tail, and sprinted in the opposite direction. Shadow Conversion was a strong power, gifting him with the ability to turn shadows into whatever creature he desired, make them real, and control its every movement. Even now as he fled, he willed the Colest to

act. The behemoth plunged and attempted to snap me up in its massive jaws, but I dove head first and rolled, passing under its belly, and returning to my feet to continue the chase. I felt Gianna's eyes on me and smiled. It must've been an incredible sight to see—Petre running for dear life, my giving chase and a deadly Colest made of nothing but shadows following in a close third.

The blades of grass under my bare feet spurred me on as I increased my speed. The Colest had lost the close distance it'd gained on me when I ran forward. It adjusted its flight to pursue, but would overtake me in moments. Chasing Petre until I was devoured by his creature was no longer an option.

I planted my lead foot hard into the ground, spun on my heels and faced the beast head on. Once again the shadow Colest tucked its wings close to its body, and entered into a fast dive. I balled my fingers into fists, bent my knees and tensed my muscles. As the monster screamed through the air at frightening speed, I slowed my mind. The breeze of the wind kissed my face. The softness of the grass under my skin. The echoes of the distant animals serenaded me. The warmth of sun. I felt everything and nothing. I was one.

The Colest opened its mouth and lurched. Even though it was comprised of nothing but shadow, it was as deadly and dangerous as one made of real flesh and blood. Its shadow fangs were as razor sharp as anything born of this world.

I used the stored tension in my legs to dart hard to my left, missing the powerful snap of the jaws. The Colest beat its wings hard and caused a raging tempest to knock me off balance. I crossed my arms in front of my face and steeled myself against the fury of the wind. The Colest landed on its two long limbs and stood mighty and proud. With one final jerk of its long, thick neck, the Colest opened its jaws and attacked. Its mouth surrounded me and closed, pleased to feed on its real world snack.

Except, when the enormous reptilian lips closed, the beast dissipated into a puff of black, billowy smoke. I uncrossed my hands and scanned the horizon. Petre, only a few feet away, leaned against one of the training

dummies. I narrowed my eyes and charged.

“Wait!” He huffed and held up a hand. “My prince, I—”

I delivered a straight right hand to the bridge of his nose, and the sound of his bone cracking under the blow foreshadowed my imminent victory. Petre staggered backward off the dummy, and I followed with a front kick to his groin. He dropped to his knees in a heap of curses which ended with my elbow strike to his temple. Petre splayed out on the field in a mess of flesh, gasping and fighting for air through his broken nose and burning lungs.

I lowered myself to the ground, sat on my ass and folded my legs in front of me. “Petre,” I sighed. “You didn’t even make me use my power this time.”

“Sorry, my prince,” he huffed. “Your stamina is otherworldly.”

“It’s alright,” I said and patted his head with an open palm. “But you should mind when creating a creature of that size. Powers have limits. I knew you wouldn’t be able to hold it for long.”

“It’s why I ran. I figured if I avoided you long enough, I’d win.”

“Solid plan, except I reasoned holding a monster that large together for such a long time would exhaust your power sooner than later.”

“Prince Ridley,” he sighed as his breathing became more measured. “Most people would have been overwhelmed from the fear of the Colest in the first place. Your mental acuity is incredible.”

“I fear nothing,” I answered and dropped my eyes. “I can’t afford to.”

Petre eased himself up to a seated position and pinched the bridge of his nose. “My prince, allowing yourself to feel nothing is to imprison everything which makes you human. Fear, love...these are the things which drive us to be our very best. Don’t fight them, embrace them. And don’t worry. You’ll win.”

“I shouldn’t have to, Petre,” I sighed and looked to the sky. The sun’s rays had painted it a brilliant red, reminding me of what was to come. I dropped my chin and met Petre’s expecting gaze. His eyebrows, unmarred from my attack, had drawn together. “I shouldn’t have to,” I continued and

shook my head. “A needless display of blood.”

I rocked slightly until I could plant my feet under me and rose, bringing myself up to my full height and extending my hand. Petre looked at it, and in a similar scene from a few moments earlier, grasped it and together we lifted him to his feet. “Go get that nose looked at,” I directed.

“Yes, my prince. What will you do in the meanwhile?”

Chapter Two

Slim braziers encircled each of the six limestone columns. Their light lit up most of the throne hall and wrapped it in a warm radiance. The tapestries depicting the Night Kingdom territory hung from the askew ceiling and danced in the flickering light, while sculptures looked down upon the obsidian floor. An orchid rug ran from the throne down the center and looped back from both the left and right while burgee banners with gilded borders hung from the walls. Between each banner, stood large candlesticks, almost all of them lit, and in turn illuminated the artistic depictions of past winners and leaders below them.

Grand, colored glass windows were concealed by draperies and were colored the same as the banners. The curtains had been adorned with intricate embroidery and burnished corners. My father, King Sello Axton, sat on his grandiose throne of porcelain amidst two large statues and adjoined by four almost identical seats. One for mother the queen on his left, and one for myself beside her.

And one empty chair to his right.

In remembrance.

Always in remembrance.

“Where were you?” He asked, his voice low yet booming and full of presence as I entered.

“Preparing,” I answered and bowed.

“Preparing,” he repeated and rubbed his chin.

“Yes,” I responded. I gave my mother a quick bow and assumed my spot beside her.

As always, Mother’s appearance impressed any who would visit. Her dress left the top of her shoulders uncovered, but covered the sides and flowed down into a modest court neckline. A relaxed fit which covered her, but did so without making it look awkward or messy. Her arms, completely covered with sleeves that were a tight, but comfortable fit from top to bottom, allowed for enough movement while still looking stylish. The dress' waist was thin, but loose with a bow wrapped around her which rested gently on her lower back. An ornate necklace and several jeweled bracelets worthy of a queen completed her look.

But as I approached and took my place beside her, using her presence as a physical impediment between me and the king, her eyes told the truth.

“Petre went a long way toward helping me today,” I informed Father as I stared blankly ahead.

“Hmm,” he grunted and continued the chin rub. “How’s that?”

“His Shadow Conversion is quite strong,” I answered. “It allows for more unpredictable opponents.”

“And you think unpredictability is the key to this victory?”

None of the guards in the throne room moved. Mother looked upon me, and as her head shifted, I returned the movement, meeting her gaze. Her face was puffy, and her red eyes told the story her mouth tried to hide through silence.

She’s been crying again, I reasoned. The queen who cries.

I reached out and placed my hand on hers as she quietly sat beside her husband. I looked out and surveyed the grand hall, wondering where it all went.

The love.

The joy.

As marvelous as the throne hall was, and as warm as the lighting made it appear, it never felt colder.

If you ever wanted to know why I cannot allow myself to feel, Petre, look no further than the royal family.

I should be used to this by now, but how does one get used to the room caving in? My own turbulent emotions bubbling in my chest could never burst forth and see the light of day. Though I often wondered if my chest would explode from repressing them for so long. Father won the games three decades past. He'd ruled the world as one kingdom with an iron fist—the same way he'd fought in the arena. He had bloodlust in his veins. Veins he'd passed onto Conrad.

Conrad.

The thought of him caused sharp, stabbing pains to impale my innards and I wondered if this would be the moment of my spontaneous combustion.

Conrad.

My older brother. The heir. Father's successor and protege.

And the occupant of the empty chair.

Conrad had died a decade ago in the last games at the hands of a Sepawn champion. And now, the time had come for another chance. I'd finally reached the age where I would represent us. The Night Stalkers. Success would allow me to rule and keep our dynasty intact. Failure meant my family would be removed in favor of my uncle's. There was so much at stake. The final chance to right the wrongs of the past rest with me, and all I could feel was the chill of the throne hall.

And see the empty chair of my brother.

In remembrance.

At what point does reason rule the day? So much bloodshed. So much violence. So much loss and so needless.

I wanted to make my father proud. I wanted to make the kingdom proud.

I would reign with honor. I trained through blood, sweat, and tears each day. I beat the sun as it rose and stayed long after it went down. If I did not win, my entire family would be removed from the throne, and my uncle would take our place. The toll of it all weighed me down each time I closed my eyes. And when I finally found rest, he was there to greet me in my dreams.

Conrad.

The brother I was robbed of. The relationship I never had. All because of the games, and the pressure to win. I would often question him when he met me as I slept.

Why do the nations insist on continuing these games? Weren't they tired of the bloodshed? Why not just go to war? The simple idea that a single individual should champion for an entire nation was ludacris. Each individual harbored both strengths and weaknesses, and even then, it involved a tremendous amount of luck to determine a person's final opponent and their chances at survival.

Yet, you drew a Sepawn. A Sepawn! It came down to you and him, how did you let a Sepawn beat you? How were you not good enough to run roughshod over an individual with no powers? How were you not enough?

No. You were enough.

You were enough for me.

And then you left me.

Alone.

Now, it's my turn. Am I doomed to repeat your failure? Is it a curse? Am I enough? Is my chair next to remain empty in remembrance.

Father walked off the throne and came around to face me. Mother flinched back in her chair and closed her eyes. I kept my mouth shut and gave him my attention, casting my gaze just beyond his ear. I had grown a few inches taller than him during my youth, which only encouraged him.

“The tournament is in two weeks time,” he began. “You will train as you've never trained before. Train until your body gives up and collapses on

the ground, my son. You are the prince, and the heir apparent. You will be the last man standing and bring our kingdom back to its rightful place above the other nations, and with it," he spoke and placed a hand on my shoulder, "bring this family a decade of peace."

I nodded and blinked hard and rapidly to fight back the pain. His eyes trembled as they met mine, and I knew what I had to do.

"I hear you, Father," I said in a low tone.

He nodded. "I know what a strain this has been on you. I have not been the best, and your mother..."

I dropped my head.

"But soon," he continued, "this will be behind us. You will lead us to victory, and claim not only your place among the greats, but perhaps even the hand of a particular maiden as well."

I shot up and straightened in my chair. He had a slight smile on his face and I wondered when the last time I saw any joy in this room was.

"Did you not think I knew?" He asked.

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. There's no time for that."

"Win, Prince Ridley, win," he said. "And you shall have it all. Everything you've ever wanted is within your grasp if you are strong enough to reach out and take it."

Father pivoted and returned to his throne.

"I need to get back to training," I continued solemnly.

I excused myself from Mother and stepped off my chair. As I moved, I caught a glimpse of my brother's chair and the sharp stabs morphed into something else. My hands clenched and my nostrils flared as I breathed in so deeply it seemed I sucked in all the air in the hall. The stabs changed to a pounding in my ears, and a sensation of increased strength. Sadness gave way to anger. Remorse removed itself in lieu of rage. This situation had simmered beneath my skin long enough. Circumstances were out of my control from the position of my birth to my older brother christening the ground with his

blood.

Gianna.

I'd been denied too long. I would suffer this tournament. Father's victory had cost us in more ways than anyone knew. It rendered him sterile from a wayward strike from one of his opponents. It cost my brother his life as he returned to the games to keep the family in power. It cost my mother her happiness, with the loss of a husband's loving touch and a son's warm embrace.

And it cost me the chance to love a woman of unsurpassed beauty.

There was more in that empty chair than my brother's memory.

It was time for the chair to pay the cost.

My uncle, the duke, living his life somewhere to the east of the area, yet hovering. Awaiting the tournament's results with baited breath. I envied him. I couldn't fathom what a simple life held but I yearned for it, for her, while he couldn't wait to abandon it.

No.

In the tournament, crowds jeered for the massacre of human life, but I knew how *these* games would play out. A plan formulated in my mind. If there was more at stake than anyone could imagine, then it was time to introduce something that no one would remember.

I will use these training sessions to the point of madness. I will force my body to move by sheer muscle memory as my own mind becomes lost. I will ensure my victory one way or another.

I will force this world to come to understand that the age of the games of the Midsummer Festival had come to an end.

I'm going to honor you, Conrad, and I'm going to love you, Gianna. I'm going to win.

I'm going to win and bring it all down.

Chapter
Three

Located behind walls built into old ruins on a forgotten, fortified island, exists an isolated area of pain and suffering. Constructed by the decree of a previous winner of the games centuries past, Ravenhold Prison housed the worst humanity had to offer. The prison complex was a sprawling maze of narrow passages, surrounded by a moat filled with thick, boot-sucking mud.

Inside, cells able to accommodate up to four prisoners were crumbling and decrepit. Prisoners were treated like feral beasts. They received poor quality meals and only enough healing to keep them alive to serve the remainder of their term. The worst of the worst was housed here, with no way to escape. If a prisoner made it outside their cell, and if a prisoner had the energy to make it past the walls, the sea was there to serve as a final impediment. The winner of the past games decided it would be best to position himself to go down in history as one of the most heroic leaders the world had ever seen, so he commanded this monstrosity to be born. The story has it, the people cheered him for his forward thinking, but why would an impenetrable fortress need to be constructed, unless something truly awful was to be tucked away inside it? The inescapable truth about stories, is this. The best ones at their core aren't stories at all, but simply rebranded truth.

The only way on or off the island was by boat, and there was only one place on the island to dock. The only ones allowed on the boat were guards

and incoming prisoners. Guards rotated every eight hours, and each shift change brought a new contingency made up of people from one territory. If an escape happened, all of the guards from that territory and their families would be severely punished. Compliance was a surety as no guard wanted to be responsible for the downfall of his and his fellow countrymen's families. It was an unbeatable system, because according to the story, deep within the bowels of the prison's walls lay the end of the world.

"Or so, they would have you believe. Isn't that right?" His voice was cold and hard. It matched the darkness which permeated his cell.

"That's not what I heard," I answered. I swallowed hard and ignored the chills which ran down my spine as the voice spoke to me.

"Oh?" He said. "Do tell, my prince. What have you heard about me?" Within the frost of his words existed a hint of intrigue.

"You know who I am?" I asked with a raised eyebrow and my head tilted. Sounds of a chair as it scraped against the floor came from the darkness of his cell.

"I'm not afraid of you," I commented.

"Then why do your hands shake?"

I clasped my hands together and placed them in front of my waist. "I'm not afraid of fairy tales, which means I'm not afraid of *you*. I fear nothing."

"Ah," came the cold voice. "Then you're a fool."

"Because I stare into the darkness and admit I'm not in fear of it?"

"Because you attempt to hide your fear. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the will to strive in spite of fear. All fairy tales are useful tales of fear to keep the masses in line, yet grounded in some truth, are they not? Tell me, my prince...what truths do you think you know?"

"This place wasn't built by some heroic king. I've studied the histories. The past winner who commissioned this place was by all accounts, an evil tyrant. A winner of the games who used his power for his own gains instead of the betterment of the world."

“Go on.”

“This evil tyrant had sick, twisted experiments done to gain power because he didn’t want to lose his grip at the next games. So, he entered again, so he could win. But that broke the rules. A winner can only win once, and never enter again. They rule as the Emperor Supreme for ten years with the world at their fingertips with the understanding that at the end of their decade, they step down and there’s a peace transition of power to the next winner. But this winner refused. He didn’t want to relinquish his hold on the world. He’d gone mad with power. When he didn’t back down peacefully, he was removed forcefully and doomed to spend the rest of his days in the very place he created. His laboratory to be his prison for all time.”

“That’s a good story.”

“It’s a fairytale. From the age of Thoron, centuries ago.”

“Centuries? Has it been that long?”

“You are not that king.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. There’s no way you’ve lived that long. As I said, it happened centuries ago, and passed down by stories mothers tell their children to coerce them into good behavior. You’re not immortal. You’re not that thing that goes bump in the night. You’re nothing but a man who got caught doing an evil deed and is facing the judgment for his crimes.”

“If I’m nothing but a man, then why are you here?”

“Because you’re just what I need. Insurance.”

The rustling of fabric, followed by footsteps preceded him before he finally stepped out of the darkness and we looked at one another, eye-to-eye. “You asked me if I knew who you were. Of course, I do. You’re the reason the world is about to end.”

“Not the world, just the games. It’s time for this age to come to an end and a new one to be born in its place.”

“Hmmm.”

“Here’s what I propose. I’ll free you from this place, and you will join me in the tournament, thereby doubling my chances to win. Should I fall, you will use your wish as I will it.”

“And if you don’t fall? If it comes down to you and me as the final pair? Am I to just lay down and let you finish me?”

“I have a plan for that, but you will not be harmed. In exchange for your willing participation, if it comes down to the two of us at the final, I will see to it that you gain a full pardon for your crimes.”

“A full pardon?”

“Yes. You will be free to live your life, absent persecution.”

“Would I not be free to do the same if I just kill you instead?”

“You can try, but you’ll find me a difficult out. And do not think for a second you’re the only one in my employ. Should I fall at *your* hands, I guarantee you’ll be the next to face the afterlife.”

A half hearted laugh echoed in his cell. “Ha! You have no idea, do you? You stand here in your princely outfit of fine clothes and pressed linens, and make threats. Yet, you come to me, when I’m in the muck and mire, and tell me *you’re* not an easy out? You understand nothing about easy. But, I admire your confidence.”

I set my jaw. “Do we have a deal?”

“Let’s say I’m aware of the fairytale you speak of. Let’s say your version is closer to the truth, and that this place started off as a laboratory *instead* of a prison. That cruel and unusual experiments were conducted here in an effort for the king to gain power. He was a Sepawn after all, did you know that?”

I pressed my lips in a firm, straight line.

“Yet, somehow as a Sepawn, he’d won the games. Perhaps he was the very *first* Sepawn to ever win the games, overcoming all odds and achieving something no one ever thought could happen. That would be something you’d have in common, right? You, of all people, know it’s possible for a Sepawn to win. Wasn’t your brother decimated by a Sepawn?”

My heart began to dance in my ears. “Careful.”

“But let’s say this Sepawn Emperor Supreme indeed wanted to win the next games. That he secretly didn’t believe he’d deserved to win and considered his victory greatly affected by chance. He wanted the opportunity to prove to himself he could do it again, but considered it unfair to go into the arena games at a considerable disadvantage. So, he took measures to ensure his victory instead of hoping for it. Isn’t that the same as what you’re doing now? Would that make him wrong? Does that make you wrong, *now*?”

“If the account of his experimenting on living people to imbue himself with power is true, then yes, he was wrong.”

“Powered people. Why should those *with* powers be the ones *in* power? Hasn’t life given them enough?”

“We all do the best we can with what we have.”

“Spoken like a true person who’s had everything, and never wanted for anything. Well, this Emperor Supreme knew what it was like to struggle. Knew the life of a nonpowered person. Knew what it was like to not know where his next meal was coming from. This king knew that life, and when he entered the games as a dark horse and won it, he swore he’d never know that life again. To have to return to the depths after a decade of experiencing the highest of highs would be worse than death itself. People are such small thinkers, but not him. No. He’s one of the few who are truly gifted.”

“He sounded like a madman.”

“It’s funny how history records that man with the courage to challenge the status quo and dare to change history as mad.”

“Jeebus, man. Am I wasting my time? How long have you been locked away in here? Do we have a deal or not?” I was getting irritated from all this yammering.

“Are you a small thinker, my prince?”

“No.”

“Children are fed the fairytale lie to ensure cooperation. They’re taught to

fear the thing that goes bump in the night. If people are afraid of something, they learn never to challenge it.”

“You think the story is used to control the people?”

“I think there’s more truth to the story than you care to admit.”

“I don’t fear it.”

“Because *you* understand it. You see the beauty in it. The power. How one person has the power to shape the entire world. It’s not fair, is it? When the power is unevenly distributed. It would be better for everyone to have powers so no one can. The power of the collective. How would you do it, my prince?”

“Do what?”

“End it all?”

“I will use my wish to end the games as we know it.”

“And then what?”

“What?” I echoed.

“You wish to end the games, but then what? With so many people vested in the games, with society built upon the very foundation of the festival, how will you ensure your wish is honored?”

“It’s the rules. Whoever wins, gets whatever they wish. One wish. This king broke the rules by entering in again to reinstall himself as head. You only get one wish, and I will use my wish to bring it down. It’s in the rules.”

“Rules are made to be broken.”

“Do. We have. A deal?”

Chapter

Four

“**A**re you sure you want to do this, my prince?” Petre asked.

“There are other ways to get to the games, son,” Father added.

We stood on the side of the road and waited. The Powerdrop Wagon had rounded the curve and grew larger by the second as it approached.

“If I am to win the Midsummer Festival, then I need to know as much about who I’m to fight as I can. The best way to do it is to travel with these men and women and observe them. Deochaju is more than a style of fighting, it’s a philosophy. A way of life. To better understand my opponents, I need to be close to them.”

The horse drawn carriage slowed to a stop in front of us. One armed guard sat in the front with the driver, while three heavily armed guards rode on their own horses behind. “Prince Ridley?” One of them called from his horse.

I nodded an acknowledgement, and pivoted to my father and Petre.

“Be great, my prince,” Petre encouraged.

“He *is* great,” Father corrected. I reached out and Father enveloped me in an embrace. “I’ll see you again,” he whispered in my ears. “And so will she.”

His words almost made me collapse. I sucked in a large amount of air and released it into a deep bow. “My King. I will not fail you.”

“I know,” he asserted.

I gripped the hilt of the sword at my waist and walked to the back of the Powerdrop Wagon, where the rear doors had already been opened by the guards. I had no other possessions than my weapon and the clothes on my back. There was no need. Either I survived and walked away the winner, in which case I would be able to command legions and have my every whim catered to, or I didn't and would be carried out in a wooden box. Multiple sets of eyes met mine as I stepped up and in, and moved to the rear. An unconscious man lay on the bench to my left, and a disheveled woman sat on the right, surrounded by men of varying sizes and builds, including a very large one. Some had been chained down, which meant they were prisoners given the opportunity to win not just their freedom, but the chance of a lifetime. I took my seat in the back of the wagon, placed my sword across my lap and let my mind focus on the task.

The Midsummer Festival was a three day affair, culminating in The Dreadful Arena, an ancient stone structure which circled around a dirt ring. The dirt ring held The Chaos Games, a tournament where only one winner would be declared. The sands inside on the arena floor were almost white, to highlight the spots of blood. The crowd sat at an elevated level so everyone would be able to have a view as the winner was crowned, for he or she would be the new Emperor Supreme and lead our world for a decade.

The festival was traditionally held in the city of O'lind. Our ride was mostly uneventful, with a bit of bantering and posturing between those who were chained and those who weren't. The jockeying for positioning and intimidation factor had begun in earnest. I wasn't of the mindset to engage in their histrionics until one of them was identified as being a member of the Warden Troopers, the royal militia and peacekeepers. He'd been identified as a Lieutenant Tattersall, which was intriguing as Troopers weren't normally included as participants.

The largest of the men in chains had proven to be the most boisterous, but he also asked the question on my mind. "What the fuck is a lieutenant of the

troopers doing on a transport like this?”

“Waiting for my turn to die, like all of you,” Tattersall answered.

“What are you talking about?” The large man scoffed.

“We’re slaves,” the woman observed. “Are we not to be sold at market?”

“You may be a slave,” I said and stared at her. “I’m not.”

Everyone in the wagon looked at me. I responded by looking each in their eye.

I fear nothing.

“No,” Tattersall explained.

He went on to inform them of the arena and promised glories. I tuned him out and let his words drift away into the background like white noise. I needed to refocus my mind. There was too much at stake for distractions of any kind.

Conrad.

Gianna.

I must win, and in so doing, forge a new story for the generations to tell. The story of the prince who would be Emperor. The man who dared to change the world.

Chapter Five

The Powerdrop Wagon slowed until it came to a wooden, screeching stop. The accompanying guards opened the rear doors and instructed the prisoners to exit. They did as commanded, stood to their feet, and made their way out. I was the last to exit since I was in the farthest seat, and also because I wanted to observe the way they moved. Some were graceful, some moved as if their bodies would collapse under their own weight at any moment. Tattersall moved like a man who'd been well trained, and with the air of authority wrapped around him. I purposed to keep an eye on him.

Warden Troopers were not powered people, but he was a lieutenant, which meant he'd seen his share of battles and had experience. He was also a Sepawn. The others may underestimate him, but I wouldn't. With his formal training and the firsthand knowledge of how a Sepawn could win the games, I prepared myself in case history repeated itself.

How ironic would it be, Conrad, if it came down to me and a Sepawn?

We were led through the back of the enclosure and down a long hall to a closed gate which led to the arena floor. As the prisoners were freed from their shackles, I looked past them and focused on the white sands. All of our outcomes were about to be determined upon them.

“Listen to me, all of you,” Tattersall called. He tried to do it in a quiet whisper, but failed. “When the trumpets blow, we go out and we face them

together.”

“Why?” The woman asked.

Tattersall locked eyes with her, and I shook my head. With death staring them down, they somehow had found a connection. “Because we fight together, or we die alone,” he told her, though the message was meant for us all.

A familiar chill crept up my back as a pair of footsteps approached. “You’re all going to die, anyway,” the hard voice proclaimed.

He hadn’t been on the wagon, and reports of an unknown prisoner’s escape had flooded Father’s throne room. Father had dismissed it since he wasn’t the Emperor Supreme.

“I’m the king of the Night Kingdom territory, not the ruler of the entire world,” he dared. “Let the Emperor Supreme worry about an escapee from Sepawn Island. It’s his land, he can care for it.”

He refused to acknowledge the escapee might bear any threat to the Night Kingdom territory, but I knew. This fairy tale affected us all. He stood beside me, shoulder-to-shoulder and whistled.

“Glad you could make it,” I said through gritted teeth.

He didn’t acknowledge me, as we agreed. He was here, throwing his name into the arena pool of combatants, and holding up his end. Whatever reasons had driven him to be placed in that hole, were irrelevant. I’d doubled my chances to change things. I was committed. The crushing weight of the throne pressed my chest.

“I’m going to win this,” I blurted out. “I have to.”

“What is your name, friend?” Tattersall asked in my direction.

The seconds ticked down till we’d face each other. “Ridley,” I responded, giving him the courtesy.

“Well, Ridley. We all have our reasons for wanting to win this, but we must stand together, to increase our odds to—”

I’d heard enough and raised my hand, showing him my palm. “Let me

stop you right there,” I declared. “I don’t *want* to win this, I’m *going* to win this. I *need* to win this. It’s so much more than a want for me. You have a reason? I have a purpose.”

You have no idea. I need this like I need the air.

Conrad.

Gianna.

“Why?” The woman asked.

“I’m going to end it all,” I vowed.

“Then our reasons align,” she said and drew herself to her full height. “I’m as determined as anyone. When I win, I’m going to end it all.”

I blew out a breath but gave her a nod.

“Bhif has a reason to end it all,” the large man from the wagon stated. “These games breed nothing but greed and lies, and Bhif is not a liar. Burn it all, and the lies go with it.”

I nodded my head and wondered. *He must be Bhif. Odd that he refers to himself in such a manner.*

“Is there anyone here who fights for a reason *other* than to end it all with their wish?” Tattersall asked.

No one answered, and I tilted my head in curiosity. If each person had a reason to end the games, perhaps another opportunity would present itself. I would need to keep watch. I needed more information, and I needed to break down potential walls. Lieutenant Tattersall was a man used to issuing commands, I needed him to be able to heed them. “What is *your* name, friend?” I asked.

“I’m Torrin.”

Good. He’s used to receiving as well as demanding.

The cold, hard voice beside me joined in. “Hunter,” he added.

I looked at him through narrowed eyes. What game was he playing? Once Hunter spoke, the rest followed suit with introductions.

“John.”

“Amira.”

“I’m Bhif—”

“We all know who you are,” Hunter rudely interrupted.

“What is your gift?” Torrin asked me.

He’s fishing.

I pressed my lips together and stared beyond the gate to the white sands ahead.

“I’m a giant,” Bhif stated.

“Yes, we know Bhif,” John needled. “You’re a giant.”

Bhif’s entire demeanor changed. The others discounted him as one who thought slower than the rest because of his size. Their miscalculations could prove to be fatal.

“What’s your *power*, Bhif?” Tattersall repeated. “You’re big, but I’ve seen bigger giants, so gigantism can’t be it.”

He’s fought giants. I knew he had experience. I must watch him closely. I cannot allow another Sepawn to stand in the way.

“Ice generation,” Bhif answered sternly.

Interesting.

“A distance fighter?” I asked.

“They’re pretty nasty,” Torrin added with a nod.

Bhif raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. “What does that mean?”

“Just a hunch,” Torrin attempted to shrug off. “You fight with tenacity, right?”

“Bhif doesn’t fight with teeth,” Bhif answered.

I couldn’t hold back the smile. “That’s not what tenacity means,” I informed him.

“Bhif knows what teeth-nasty means,” Bhif growled. “I can get up close and personal. I’m quite comfortable in close proximity. I don’t use my teeth to fight.”

“But?” Amira asked.

Bhif dropped his shoulders. “But...if Bhif is honest with you all, distance fighting is my greatest weapon. Bhif is not weak, but he’s strongest fighting from distance.”

I rubbed his chin. “I’m a practitioner of the Deochaju arts.”

“A defensive fighter,” John observed.

I turned to John and folded my arms across my chest.

“I’m a sailor,” he explained. “I transport cargo throughout the world. I’ve seen your kind before. You probably have something like Shadow Marrisonette as your power.”

Astute.

“Figured as much,” John continued, and pointed his finger at me and Bhif. “You two are a perfect match for each other. He fires from a distance while you defend looking for weaknesses. You’re probably looking for our weaknesses right *now*, and we haven’t even faced each other on the sands yet.”

Very astute.

John chuckled. “Heh. The only way for your opponent to do anything against you would be to get close. Except, if your enemy somehow made it past the ice projectiles, you’re both very comfortable fighting on the inside. Hell, by that point, *you* probably already figured out their weakness. It’s almost an unbeatable combination.”

“Almost?” Amira asked.

Got you.

“Replication,” I figured. “He’s a replicator. How else would he know so much? Because he’s a sailor? I’ve known too many of them to know most are nothing more than drunkards trying to get through a job so they can get to their next drink. No, he’s something more than that. He replicates himself so he can be in more than one place at one time for a few minutes. Probably uses it to spy on people. That’s how he knows.”

John scrunched his forehead into a scowl.

“*Figured* as much,” Hunter ribbed.

“And you?” Torrin asked Hunter.

Hunter responded with his damn whistling.

Amira shrugged. “I can dull the senses of others at will. Kinda my own personal suit of armor.”

“Another defensive and offensive combination,” Torrin proclaimed.

“How so?” She asked.

“Well, he can create replicas of himself. Think about it. You can dull your enemies’ senses enough to let his replicas get close enough to do damage. If the enemy isn’t able to keep up, it’s over for them.”

The walls of the hall rumbled and shook through the tunnel’s opening. A signal for those within.

“We fight together,” Torrin declared. “You all will use your gifts—”

I glowered. “Why do you keep saying, ‘gift,’ Torrin?”

“Can’t you tell?” Bhif said with a chuckle. “He’s a Sepawn. He has no powers. That’s why he thinks of them as gifts.”

“Sepawns,” John spat. “I’m not fighting beside a Sepawn.”

“I already figured that, Bhif, but I had to put it out there to gauge the others. Now I know,” I mused.

I stepped into Torrin’s space and stood toe-to-toe with him. He needed to know. “Your kind killed my brother. How? How can someone with no power beat one of us? You’re dead as soon as you walk through that hole.”

“By you?” Torrin asked through narrowed eyes.

I sighed and shook my head. “No. I have no quarrel with you outside of winning these games. But Sepawns won the last tournament and ruled for a decade. How?”

I had to know, and in doing so, end the torment. The sleepless nights. The endless training sessions. Conrad. How was it possible?

“We won, because we’re underestimated. To be discounted *is* a gift.”

A warning. I understand.

“To be discounted *is* a gift,” Hunter observed. “To be forgotten is a curse.”

I nodded and went to the gate. “We all have the same end goal, to end it all. Our powers seem to be complementary to one another.”

“And we all wound up on the same wagon,” Amira added. “This is no accident.”

“No,” I sighed. “This is providence.”

“Then we fight together,” Torrin acknowledged, “so that none of us die alone.”

“And in the end?” Bhif asked.

I bring it all down.

Chapter

Six

We walked out of the arena tunnel and onto the white sands of the floor. The crowd filled the sky and cascaded us with an honest mix of cheers and boos. The heavens were lit with sunlight, but the amount of clouds prevented its rays from raining down on us, robbing me of the shadows. No shadows meant no Shadow Marionette.

Thank you, Petre.

Even though the clouds stole a strength, I was far from weak. Torrin and Amira had gravitated to each other, clearly already partnered. A smart move by both of them.

“Bhif doesn’t like this,” Bhif growled and moved up beside me.

“Stand strong,” Torrin commanded. “As long as we stay together, we have a chance.”

Hunter chuckled. “You’re all going to die.”

“And you’re not?!” Torrin shot back.

Hunter whistled in response.

“I’m not going to die,” John countered. “And I’m certainly not going to fight beside a Sepawn. You’re on your own out there, and if it comes down to me and you in the finals? Well, rest assured you won’t win this contest like the last fucking Sepawn did and subject us to another decade of this madness.”

“My brother lost in the last games to a Sepawn,” I informed him.

“Then your brother was a coward and incompetent,” John retorted, “and the reason this world has gone to shit. The best thing a Sepawn can do is be put in the ground.”

And now, you're going to die.

“I agree,” Hunter added. I scowled until he continued. “But be careful what springs from the ground. It can potentially heal you, or poison you. It can be death or life all at once.”

The trumpets signaling the final event blasted. Everyone shifted their attention to the dias in the center of the arena, but I looked at the sands surrounding us. I wasn't here for the pomp and circumstance. I was here to win. The sand was littered with red from the earlier contests and could possibly signal poor footing. I noted to avoid them if possible.

“It was written into our laws by the first of us,” the royal herald called from above, “the Midsummer Festival is to be every ten years and culminates in a test of strength and will. Combatants and competitors from all walks of life will enter the arena with only one winner.”

I lowered my head and inhaled. This was it.

I have to do this.

“Listen to me,” Torrin whispered. “When he makes his move, partner up and protect each other.”

“You've already partnered,” I responded.

“The pompous prick is milking this till the end,” John observed.

“And you can continue to bear your hatred for Sepawns, or you can take a look at the men and women who encircle you, all with the same murderous intentions, and work with me and live,” Torrin answered.

“What would you have me do?” John snarled in question.

I looked up. The man who verbally assaulted all Sepawns had decided to join with one. Tragedy makes for strange bedfellows.

“Bhif fights alone mostly, but even he recognizes when a different option

should be considered,” Bhif observed.

“We’re with you,” Amira said softly and grabbed Torrin’s hand.

“I’m in as well,” I added. “We can resolve our differences once it’s down to us, and only us. There are too many here to battle without a solid plan. You seem to have one, Torrin, so I’m in. Regardless of our motivations, we’re all striving for the same thing, and that’s to end this madness. There’s honor in that. There’s beauty in that. There’s a chance for victory in that. I’m in.”

Torrin nodded. “Here’s what we do. When he gives the signal, Ridley, you and Bhif go left. Protect each other. Make your way to that side of the arena and with your backs to the wall and at a distance. Ridley, when you see the opportunity, you cut the bastards down. Bhif, follow his lead.”

Astuted.

Bhif grunted an agreement.

“Hunter,” Torrin directed, “You and—”

Hunter whistled and glanced at me. “I never said I’m part of your party. Do not count on my aid. I’ll be there in the end, and I’ll see whichever one of you makes it there, but rest assured, I am not your *ally* in this. I am a titan.”

“Fine,” Torrin said with a glare. “Have it your way. John, you, me, and Amira will head to the right. Amira will cover for anyone who gets in close. With your replication and my fighting, we’ll cover that side. Bhif and Ridley, we’ll meet you in the middle.”

I nodded and studied Bhif. He’d begun to bounce on his toes and closed his eyes. The way his muscles flexed, I knew he was as prepared as anyone.

“The Sepawn’s plan has merit,” John stated. “There *is* strength in numbers, and I provide the greatest numbers you’ll find. Care to team up?”

Hunter chuckled. “Heh. Your hatred of Sepawns will be your undoing. Sure, I’ll team with you, only so I can be there when you crash and burn at his hands.”

The Emperor Supreme’s loud clap sprang us to action.

Chapter
Seven

“**B**egin!” The herald shouted over the roar of the crowd.

There were thirty combatants by my count, and once the Emperor Supreme clapped his hands, it was everyone for themselves. To honor my brother—my family—I would have to be the last one standing. The Sepawn had come up with a brilliant idea. Allies. In the thousand years since the games had begun, it’d never been mentioned of strategic alliances within the fight. “To our left,” I reminded Bhif.

“Bhif needs no reminders from you, little man,” he countered.

This is off to a wonderful start.

Bhif circled his hands and formed an ice shield tall enough to cover us from head-to-toe, just in time to counter and absorb a solar blast which screamed through the air in our direction from a day walker. The shield melted from the blast but did its job.

“Nice,” I shouted over the din of the fracas, and drew my sword.

“Bhif told you he needs no reminders,” he responded. “Bhif knows what’s at stake and agrees with the plan. We all make it to the end and decide from there.”

“Let’s get to the wall.”

Bhif nodded and gestured to create another large ice shield. I pivoted on my heels so we stood back-to-back, with my sword in hand. Since I

voluntarily joined the festival to participate in the games, I had been allowed to bring a weapon of my choice, and I knew the perfect weapon to join me in this fight.

A short, thick, jagged blade made of steel held by a grip wrapped in extremely rare, green wolf leather. A fine, sharp point made it the perfect choice to puncture my enemies to death with ruthless speed and precision. The blade had a narrow, warped cross-guard with a jeweled miniature sword on each side, ensuring it was both balanced and capable of protecting my hands against any sliding sword. A wide pommel marked with my family's symbol, a symbol I could be proud of. The blade itself was fairly simple. No decorations of any sorts are on it. While the hilt was elegant, the blade had to be as strong as its owner.

Worldbreaker was the sword's name, and it was a weapon used by my brother. It was his sword before me, and my father's sword before him. An exceptional weapon for exceptional fighters. And before the day was done, I would see it live up to its name. It would be the sword to end it all, and break the world as we all knew it.

I had no idea what the weather would be on the day of the games, but this was a worst-case scenario. The sun was obscured by heavy clouds which severely limited any shadows. The playing field had been somewhat leveled for any Sepawns in this fight, as they would be used to fighting without powers, and those whose powers relied on the sun would be greatly reduced.

The fighting began in earnest. Blood gushed from open wounds staining the sands and ten combatants had been felled at the declaration of the start of the games, too slow to counter, too inexperienced to survive. Those who remained were strong, and would not bow out quickly. While the Emperor Supreme observed from my left, and Bhif at my back, a man who reminded me of an impenetrable fortress, with narrow eyes the color of fresh roses, charged my right side.

He had no weapon, but came in swinging with his fists. A strong right

hand came crashing down, and met the sharp edge of my blade. Worldbreaker should have sliced through his arm with ease, instead it parried his attack.

“A Ground Keeper,” I gritted out.

His smile was ruthless. A Keeper with Skin Manipulation would be tough, but not omnipotent. He would be able to toughen his skin to form an innate armor and absorb an obscene amount of physical punishment without injury. But even he would have his limits.

I hacked and slashed at him with fury, keeping my back to Bhif, while pressing my attack with downward, horizontal, or vertical cuts. Deochaju is a defensive martial art focused on exhausting my opponent. Mostly by dodging attacks, but even the best defense has to have an offense. The main thing is finding and understanding how to cause an exploitable opening. By keeping the Ground Keeper focused on the defensive, he never noticed the person coming behind him. But I had.

As I continued to force him to deflect my attacks, a person moved behind and sandwiched him between us. He had beady orange eyes like two chunks of amber, and cream skin. The man inhaled, focused, and threw forth their hands like a spider would a stream of webbing. Nothing visible was seen, but as the Ground Keeper in front of me began to shake, I knew what was going on.

The person behind the Keeper was a child of a Day Walker and Night Stalker parent combination, so they had the Invisible Light Absorption power. They manipulated microwaves and were cooking the Ground Keeper inside his own hardened skin. The Ground Keeper made the fatal error of not being aware of his surroundings, and as he screamed in agony, I dashed forward and collided with him with a loud crash, shoving him forward and into the hybrid.

The Day-Night mix also miscalculated. He hadn't realized the Ground Keeper's ability shielded me, as he tried to unsuccessfully eliminate us both

with one attack. As the internally-fried Keeper fell into the Day-Night man and pinned him to the ground, I swung low with Worldbreaker and sliced the hybrid man's neck, spraying blood into the air and ending his evening.

"Let's go!" Bhif bellowed.

I spun around. Bhif had another large ice shield and charged forward with it, using it as a battering ram to clear a path in front of him. I sprinted behind him and as he rammed into combatants and shoved them aside, I followed with a slash from Worldbreaker. Arms and legs went flying, removed from their homes as I used Worldbreaker to severely limit their continued participation in coordination with Bhif's monstrous charge.

We reached the left wall of the arena and pivoted, keeping it to our backs, and surveyed the scene in front of us. The Emperor Supreme on our left was on his feet, eyeing us in an effort to determine what we would do next. Our alliance must've provided a grand spectacle for them all.

"What's next, little man?" Bhif asked. His tone had a humbleness to it which hadn't been present in our previous conversations.

I looked at his ice shield which he had positioned in front of us. It was much thinner than the first and would only be able to withstand one attack before it would shatter. Bhif stood beside me on my right and panted, gasping for breath as he spoke. He'd reached the limits of his powers and was searching for air and respite. It would be so easy to remove him as a threat, and he knew it. His question wasn't to ask about a strategy, but of my intentions.

"We fight," I informed him. "Together."

He nodded his head and turned his attention to the arena floor in front of us. "Honor, huh?" He heaved. "It's something that seems to be in short supply these days."

"Perhaps it will come down to you and I in the final fight," I answered, "but at this moment, you are my ally and I will not have you die at my hands before then."

“Some would say you are a fool,” he responded and then shifted his gaze to me. He placed his left hand on my shoulder and nodded. “But Bhif says to hell with them. Another may call you an enemy, but Bhif shall name you friend.”

“Then Bhif is the fool,” I said with a sly smile.

“Ha! Bhif has been called much worse than fool in his life,” he patted my shoulder with his large hand then roared, delivering a stinging blow to another opponent. “Come now, let us get back into the fight. Bhif yearns for blood and cunt, and he cannot have the latter until he has satisfied the former.”

“Bhif is a strange man,” I responded.

“Any man who doesn’t yearn for blood and cunt is the strange one,” he countered with a laugh.

Bhif lifted his ice shield while I gripped Worldbreaker, and together we charged into the narrowing field of flesh. And then my heart froze in my chest. I looked at Bhif who lost all color in his face and I knew he saw the same thing I did.

Hunter had split into a large number of replicas. Those who remained were easily outnumbered three-to-one.

“Kill them all,” he commanded as he glared at me.

Chapter
Eight

They charged the field, screaming with destruction dripping from their throats as they ran. Bhif and I made it to the center of the arena and joined the other wagon passengers before the first replicas pounced.

“Back-to-back!” I commanded.

“Don’t let them touch you!” Torrin bellowed. “Amira! To the center!”

“Give her space!” I declared.

Amira moved into the center of our circle, while I, Bhif, Torin, and John surrounded her. Our backs were inward to her and Worldbreaker was the barrier between me and death.

“What do you see?” I called to Torrin.

“Amira, use your Sense Manipulation to blind any Hunter that comes close. Bhif, make an ice moat in front of us to rob them of their footing. Maintain it as long as you can. Ridley, you, John, and I will cut the bastards down as they get close.”

Bhif formed a long, sharp ice sword and tossed it to Torrin.

A torrent of Hunters attacked us from all sides, while the others either rushed the other combatants, or began to scale the walls to get to the crowd. The original Hunter’s body vibrated in an otherworldly way and separated, creating an additional host of Hunter replicas. The Hunter replicas who bore down on us came within striking distance. Bhif whipped his hands around his

head in a wide circle and then pushed up. A wide, thick, ice moat emerged from the ground and circled around us, appearing in their path. They couldn't slow their speed in time to avoid the ice and each one stepped and stumbled as they plunged forward.

A wave of nausea came from behind me, pushed through me, and then past me and slammed into the staggered horde of Hunters. It sickened me briefly, but as soon as the wave left me, so did the illness.

“Now!” Screamed Torrin.

With Worldbreaker in my hand, I darted forward, stabbed the nearest Hunter replica in the chest, and ripped upward through his neck and out the side of his jaw. I couldn't admire the painting of blood I'd composed as one on my left wobbled at me. I dropped to one knee and delivered a horizontal slash, punching through his leg and felling him. As he sank, I rose and drove Worldbreaker through the underside of his chin. The tip of the blade exploded out the top of his head, spraying blood like an upward geyser, and his eyes rolled back as his body twitched and quaked.

“Ridley, find this bastard's weakness,” Amira called from behind me.

“Already know it,” I answered. “Powers are like muscles, remember this. The more he uses it, the more fatigued he'll be. Eventually, he won't have the stamina to make new ones, and when he does—”

“I'll kill the cunt!” Bhif hollered.

“No, you won't,” John yelled. “He...eats death! I saw it! He absorbs it and gets stronger!”

Damn. With all this death around him, he'd have a virtual inexhaustible source of energy.

Another Hunter rushed forward and slipped on the ice. A quick diagonal slash across his neck separated his head from his shoulders in an explosion of red.

The Hunters swarmed the stadium like ants. Safety no longer existed as the original created wave after wave.

“Somebody better figure something out quick!” John shouted as he decapitated a Hunter replica. “At this rate, we’re going to be overrun.”

“Bhif doesn’t like the sound of that,” Bhif said as he motioned and pulled, reinforcing the ice moat in areas it had thinned.

“Ridley,” Torrin called as he fired the remainder of his ice sword into the heart of a replica. “Give us something, man. Or we’re all dead. Bhif!”

Bhif tossed him another ice sword, but as it flew through the air, I noticed it was shorter and thinner than the other. Also, the ice moat had thinned from the fallen impact of the replicas, and was far from as effective as it had been moments ago.

I looked at Bhif. His forehead was covered in sweat and his clothing was drenched. He huffed and wheezed, but continued to reinforce the ice and create weaponry as fast as he could.

I ripped Worldbreaker a distance across my face and cut through the neck of a replica as it charged, adding to the stains on the sands, and glanced over my shoulder to Amira. She had one hand on her knee and flicked her wrist with the other. The fatigue of our two defenders showed. John also showed the effects. He’d been creating his own replicas, though not at the same rate as the original Hunter, and his replicas had held their own before dissolving into puddles of gray goo, but their quality was diminishing along with his speed at forming them.

I scanned the chaos before me, searching for one particular person. When I locked in on the original Hunter, it was as John had warned. The original walked through the rivers of flowing blood from the bodies strewn throughout the arena and would kneel when he came to one. He touched the body, closed his eyes, and his hand would glow as he absorbed the death of the person he knelt over. A few seconds later, he rose back to his feet and appeared taller and stronger than before.

“We’re fucked,” I moaned and shook my head, watching the replicas take down the rest of our original opponents.

What have I done? I unleashed this chaos. I'm responsible for the carnage. This is all on me. In my thirst to win, I lost sight of what I was fighting for.

“Snap the fuck out of it!” John blustered. “What happened to all that defensive martial arts shit? Are you a master or a fucking coward?”

I slammed Worldbreaker through the right eye of a replica, bursting the organ like a grape as it pushed forward. It ran right into its death, blinded from Amira's manipulation.

“Ridley,” Amira called. “You said something about having a brother. Something about how he was beat by a Sepawn?”

“Yes,” I answered. The fatigue in my arms made Worldbreaker heavier than a boulder, but I continued to swing and stab with abandon through the ache of my muscles.

“What would he think if he was here?” Amira asked. “Would he want you to give up, or would he want you to fight? He lost to a Sepawn, but I don't think he did because he wasn't a good fighter. I've watched you fight your hardest, watched all of us give our all. I think if your brother was here right now, he'd be proud of how you're pushing through your weakness. He'd want you to fight on!”

Conrad.

“If anyone is going to get us out of this, it's you, Ridley,” Torrin remarked. “I was at those games with your brother, watching from the crowd. I remember them keenly. He didn't die because his Sepawn opponent was better. He died because the Sepawn fought without honor.”

Conrad!

“The Sepawn stabbed your brother in the back before he had a chance to do anything about it. Your brother had just killed a bunch of combatants. His back was turned, but the Sepawn,” Torrin pointed the remaining piece of ice to the dias, “*that* Sepawn drove a sword in him before he could even turn around. He never saw it coming.”

The clouds in the sky parted and gave way to reveal the sun. The light streamed down from the sky and flooded the field, bathing me in a celestial spotlight and coating the field in shadows. The air around me grew hot, but not from the heat of the sun. No, my blood boiled from Torrin's revelation. Conrad never had a chance, and his killer's been basking in the glory of a hollow victory for the past decade.

Fuck him. I know what I have to do.

"Bhif!" I shouted, "form an ice path from us to the original Hunter. Put us in a direct line and on a collision course."

"Whaaat? Bhif doesn't like the sound of that," Bhif complained.

"Do you like the sound of your own death instead? Do it. Everyone else, when Bhif makes the path, climb on board. John, make a couple of replicas. Their job is to push us down the path and get us to the original as quickly as possible. If they die along the way, that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

"Fuck you," John spat.

"Do it! Amira, keep the Hunter replicas off balance and when we reach the original, focus all your strength on the original. He's strong right now, probably stronger than you since he's been renewing his strength, but do the best you can."

"Got it," she declared boldly.

"Torrin, call out any incoming traffic to us. Point out any attackers, and any that get through Amira and John will deal with us."

"And what happens when we get there? To the original Hunter?" Torrin asked.

"I'm going to end it," I answered.

"Bhif likes the sound of that," Bhif roared. "Everyone, climb aboard."

Bhif waved his hands and pushed out, forming a solid path of ice cutting across the arena and directly in the path of the original Hunter. Bhif then stepped on the ice and raised his hand, locking his feet in the ice. I slid in behind him and grabbed hold of the back of his shirt. Amira, Torrin, and John

followed suit, each holding onto the one in front of them. John vibrated and split into two John replicas, one for each side. Bhif raised his other hand and locked John's feet in the ice.

"Fuck that's cold!" John screeched.

"Let's go," I thundered.

The replicas grabbed hold and pushed, hurtling us forward. I held Worldbreaker aloft while Bhif steered us down the path, moving his ice locks as we went and keeping us straight. Amira disoriented any Hunter replicas that came close while Torrin and I cut them down. We were on a red macabre rollercoaster of blood and gore, speeding towards our death.

The original Hunter looked our way and we stared at each other in challenge. The smirk on his face only infuriated me further. Seconds later, Bhif split his hands wide and the ice path melted into the ground. Because of the speed at which we traveled, our pack tumbled, but I used the momentum.

Thank you, Petre.

As I did with Petre's Colest, I dove head first, rolled into my fall and came up on my feet and in front of the original Hunter.

"Very dramatic," he snarked.

"Dodge this," I fired back and slammed my hand into the ground. The sun was at his back and had pushed his shadow toward me. I placed my hand on his shadow and grabbed it, forcing his body to succumb to my commands.

"Argh!" Hunter exploded.

He was strong. All the death he absorbed had strengthened him beyond what I'd ever experienced. "Amira!" I shouted.

Amira waved her arms and flicked her wrists toward him, sending wave after wave of Sense Manipulation into him. The combination of my Shadow Marionette, and Amira's Sense Manipulation was enough to hold him.

"Bhif! Torrin! John! Do it! We can't hold him," I commanded.

Bhif created two sharp ice swords and tossed one to Torrin, while John vibrated and split into one final replica. Torrin caught his ice sword, as did

the John replica. Bhif made two more, tossed one to the original John and in unison the four men drove their ice blades into the chest of the original Hunter, Bhif and Torrin from the front, and the two Johns from the side.

Hunter dropped to his knees, threw his head back and roared to the sky. I released his shadow, held Worldbreaker and ended his caterwaul by driving the tip of Worldbreaker into and through his brain. The crack of his skull was louder than the resounding cheer from the crowd. Hunter shook with violence and each of his replicas screamed as they dissolved, filling the arena with the agonizing cries of death.

Chapter Nine

The royal herald faced me with the Emperor Supreme by his side. “You fought with honor today, and on this, the darkest of days, we forgo the normal rules and declare five winners of the The Chaos Games, and bring the Midsummer Festival to an end. The five of you will be given charge of your individual territories, establishing them as sovereign kingdoms in their own right for the next decade.”

“The four of them,” Torrin corrected.

“What?” The herald asked. “What did you say?”

“I said, ‘the four of them,’ will be given charge of their own kingdoms. I’m going with Amira.”

The herald shrugged. “As you wish.”

“And him?” I asked and pointed Worldbreaker to the Emperor Supreme.

“Since there was not one clear and definitive winner, and your Sepawn representative is abdicating, the Emperor Supreme will not be removed from power completely. He will continue to rule, however, as he is a Sepawn by nature, he will assume your friend’s responsibility and rule over Sepawn Island.”

“That’s bullshit,” John spat. “That cunt did nothing to help in this fight except cower in the dias with the rest of you fucking cowards.”

“Be that as it may,” the herald remarked sternly. “This is the best we can

make of the situation. There has been enough bloodshed on this day of death.”

“Agreed,” Torrin shot. I stared at him with a raised eyebrow, and he winked back. “What of the wish?”

“Wish?” The herald asked.

“The wish. Each winner gets one wish to be granted.”

“We’re not giving you each a wish,” the herald scoffed. “That’s insane!”

“No need,” Torrin answered. “Because we all have the same wish. So in essence, you’re only granting one wish, and in doing so, fulfilling the Midsummer Festival traditions.”

“Oh?” The herald asked. He looked at the Emperor Supreme and the other pompous pricks who considered themselves the caretakers of the festival. With each head nod, his smile grew wider. “I think we can do that. Sure, why not? What is this one wish the five of you would like to see granted? Riches? Glory? More women than you could ever possibly hope to dip your stick in? How can we fulfill the traditions and in so doing, bring the Midsummer Festival to an end?”

I spat on the ground beside me. “That’s just it,” I snarled. “To end the Midsummer Festival.”

“What?!” the herald wailed.

“You heard him,” Torrin declared. “This is to be the *last* Midsummer Festival ever.”

“Our wish is to end it all.” I commanded with my brothers and sister in arms.

Epilogue

“**T**ell it again, my king.”

Petre’s laugh was boisterous and full as he held up his goblet. “Tell us all how it was *me* who saved the world.”

I chuckled and shook my head. I grasped the hand of my beautiful wife and kissed it gently, inhaling her scent and devouring her softness.

“Petre,” Gianna said. “You did *not* save the world.”

“Uh oh, Petre,” I warned. “She’s got that tone in her voice. You’d better watch out.”

“But my queen,” Petre protested, “if it had not been for my Colest, King Ridley would never have developed the Roll of Doom and been able to deliver the final blow to the dreaded Hunter.”

My eyebrow shot up to the top of my head. “Roll of Doom?”

Gianna leaned close, bringing her delectable scent with her. “It’s what the youth of the kingdom are calling it as they play. They fight off the dread replicas by rolling a ball towards ten gray pins hoping to knock them down in one collision.”

“Huh,” I remarked, partly distracted by her breasts pressing against my arm.

“But, if my king doesn’t find enjoyment in a game named after him,” she whispered, “I know something my *husband* will find enjoyment from. Or

someone he'll find enjoyment in."

I instinctively rose to my feet, and guided my wife to hers as I addressed our guests. "We have other matters to attend to. Petre, please continue to regale our guests with your heroic deeds."

The dining hall guests stood to their feet as Gianna and I made our way out of the room celebrating my coronation as the Night King.

"Goodnight, my king. Goodnight, my queen," Petre answered.

It would be. After I fucked the love of my life harder than any other could, I would finally be able to sleep.

A very good night indeed.

KINGDOM OF DAY

——
JOHN WARWICK



Courtesy Warning

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to non-con, dub-con, violence, torture, psychotic break, themes that may be disturbing to some readers.

Chapter 1

John Warwick

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO...

I rolled her over onto her stomach and continued to slam my cock into her from behind. Her cunt was slick and warm, and her ass soft and perfect for grabbing. Her pale white skin reminded me of the froth from the waves as they fell against the shore. Her moans as I pushed deep into her fed my insatiable appetite.

“You’ve got me so hard,” I growled in her ear.

I fisted her hair and pulled, driving her back until she was on her hands and knees. Then I grabbed her hips, dug my fingertips into her flesh and pounded her harder than before. Her squeals of delight were delicious. Looking over her side, I caught a hint of her pert pink nipple as her breasts swayed to the rhythm of my thrusts and it inflamed my lust even more. I leaned back, so my cock could drive upward, making sure to hit her inner walls as hard as I could.

The bed we were fucking on was made of feathers. It was soft, comforting and the exact opposite of my desire. My thrusts were fierce, angry, and not meant to ease into her. I wanted this bitch to not be able to walk for a month afterwards. I wanted her to limp for a year following her encounter with me. I wanted my name to be on her lips for the rest of her days.

My name.

I withdrew my cock and lowered my face to her core, lashing against her pussy lips with my tongue. She wiggled and squirmed, but my hands held her in place by her hips and I began to state my name, using the deepest part of my voice to vibrate against her clit.

“My name is John Warwick,” I hummed. “This pussy will forever belong to me.”

“Saying your name against another cunt, eh?” Máel grunted. “When are

you going to get over that? You're not really marking your territory, you know?"

I removed my face from her dripping wetness and gripped the base of my cock. With my free hand, I reached around and grabbed her by the throat before I plunged my dick back into her. With her back on my chest, I glanced over at Máel. His bitch had a full figured build, with massive tits, dark skin, and an ass which seemed to go for days. He too had her on all fours and banged her from behind, holding her long, dark hair high in one hand, while the other slapped at her ass relentlessly.

"And what is it...you think...you're doing?" I groaned as my cock continually found the depths of her.

"Tenderizing," he answered.

"Fucking hell," I said with a laugh. Máel had a particular desire he loved to see fulfilled. His wench had used the Illusion Generation power to the light waves around herself to appear as something entirely different. "Mermaid?" I asked.

"Mermaid pussy hits like no other, my friend," he remarked seriously.

"No, my friend...*this* pussy, hits like no other," I grunted and released my seed, busting deep within her warm, wet cunt and mixing our juices together. I collapsed on top of her and used my weight to drive her down and pin her to the bed. She wiggled her hips and moaned as I exploded again, her cunt milking all of the cum from my cock and swallowing it whole.

"What did you say your name was?" I breathed in her ear.

"Valerie," she whimpered.

"Valerie. Best pussy I've had this week," I growled and nipped her ear, sucking in her earlobe and flicking it with the tip of my tongue. "What's your power?"

"Power?" She mewled.

"Yes. Your girl over there has Illusion Generation, feeding my friends desire, but you only offered up your body to me. What's your power?"

She breathed in deeply and exhaled in a satisfied gust. “Why? You don’t need powers to enjoy pussy, do you?”

The air around me began to boil. I leaned back and placed one hand on the side of her face, mashing it into the mattress. “Bitch, I’m going to ask you one more time.”

The sound of Máel’s balls slapping against his woman’s flesh stopped filling the room.

“Hey,” Máel’s woman called. “What’s going on over there?”

“Mind your fucking business,” I commanded and pressed down on my cunt’s face harder. “Now, I’m going to ask you again. What’s your fucking power?”

She struggled against my pressure, but couldn’t move as I held her in place with my body weight pressing on her back and my hand smashing her face down.

“Hey, get off of her,” Máel’s woman demanded. “What’s your fucking problem? She doesn’t have any powers, you bastard.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” I heard Máel say.

It was the last thing I heard. All I could see was red, and all I could feel was the flesh in my hands. I didn’t hear her screams, or the sound of the bones in her neck cracking as I twisted her head into an unnatural position.

Chapter Two

I leaned over the bow and took a deep breath of salted air. We hadn't docked in a while, and I yearned to have my feet on dry land in a well deserved break. Fulfilling this contract with one of the biggest local merchants in the Kingdom of Day to deliver trade goods to the Sepawns Island might have been distasteful, but it was business. Kraynor Exports specialized in the distribution of Limta pelts, a creature known to mostly inhabit the southern regions of our lands.

Máel edged up beside me and rested his elbows on the bannister. "Almost seems unrecognizable when you're out at sea for so long, am I right John?"

I looked over to my partner and grinned. "You mean you're tired of fucking the fishes?" He glared at me and I let out a booming laugh. "Oh right, they were tales of a half human half fish woman, was that it?" I leaned to look at Máel a little closer, unsure if he had lost his sanity with the crashing waves on our way back home. "You never did tell me how one fucks a fish. It was her bottom half, am I correct?"

"You blasted prick, shut your trap!" he growled with hidden mirth. "I need a fucking drink."

I did too. We all did. But it would have to wait. The motor car pulled around to the front and its occupants unloaded. I gave Máel a nod and we disembarked from the ship. A few moments later we stood toe-to-toe with

Evaristo 'The Reaper' Caswell, a man not known for his patience. His plain shirt, left unbuttoned at the top, and slacks gave a more casual look, but he was here for business. The three other men with him were not as friendly.

“Reaper,” I said with a nod in greeting.

“Do you know why they call me that?” He asked.

Máel and I remained silent as the three men with Reaper opened their jackets to reveal pistols in holsters resting on their hips.

“Reaper, let me explain,” I answered with my palms up.

He folded his arms across his chest. “This should be good.”

“The Midsummer Festival is upon us,” I started.

Reaper curled his lips downward. “So? Please tell me you have more than that.”

“So, that cunt, Emperor Supreme, is trying to ‘clean up’ his image before he has to relinquish control.”

“I’m about two seconds away from having my boys here shoot you in the face.”

“He’s cracking down on my...shipping. I went from five ships down to one in this past month alone. It’s getting harder and harder to move cargo.”

“I don’t care!” Reaper roared. “I’ve paid you a hefty number of gold coins to get those Sepawns. You took my gold coins in exchange for moving them to where I need them to go. Now, you come back with excuses for why you didn’t do as you agreed to do, yet I don’t see my gold coins in your hands as a refund for services failed to be rendered.”

My muscles started to tense. “I lost *four* ships. Did you not hear me?”

“Watch your tone with me, War. Unless you want to go to war.”

Máel cleared his throat and took a step forward. “We’ve all been affected by the Emperor Supreme,” he said in a lowered tone, “and we’ve all been injured as a result. But we understand how this has...inconvenienced you. So, we’ve decided to give you a discount on our next run.”

I shot Máel a look, but he remained firmly engaged with Reaper.

Reaper jutted his chin. “How much of a discount?”

“Twenty percent,” Máel answered.

“Thirty,” Reaper countered.

“Twenty-five,” I interjected. “And a free gift for your trouble.”

Reaper tilted his head as I whistled back to the ship. A second later, two of my men emerged from the ship with a woman in tow. Dressed in a tattered wedding dress, the white fabric was dirtied from her time onboard, her hands were bound at the wrists by rope and her head covered with a black sack which robbed her of her sight. My men roughly escorted the gift down the ramp and up to us where they forced her down to her knees. A sly smile formed on Reaper’s face as he studied her.

“What’s this?” He asked as if he didn’t know.

I inhaled and spat onto the ground. “A bitch from the Kingdom of Day I picked up after that cunt, the Emperor Supreme passed his latest decree. I was down to two ships at that point, and he cost me one of them. His Naval Defense Service seized my other ship, leaving me with one. I thought it only right to take payment.”

“And now?”

“Now, she’s yours,” I answered. “If this squares us away? She’s a virgin. Completely untouched. And she’s got the Illusion Generation power, so she can bring any fantasies you have to life.”

The woman grunted and squirmed on the ground. She tried to speak, but the gag in her mouth under the hood prevented any coherent words from springing forth.

Reaper closed the distance between us and bent at his knees. He brought his nose close to her breasts and breathed in as she continued to squirm on the ground. “How do you know this?”

“Because we crashed her wedding. We were sailing off the coast when one of my men spotted them. A fairly quaint and romantic affair—a wedding on the beach. In her vows, she declared her love for the groom and how she’d

resisted all others, saving herself for only him. After I ran him through with my sword, I stuck two fingers inside her to see for myself. Tight and sweet, just as I like them. And now she's my gift to you."

"Will anyone look for her?" Suspicion laced Reaper's voice.

"Afraid of a little Day Walker revenge? Possibly, but I doubt it. Of the fifty people on that beach who'd come to see the lovely couple, she's the only one left to tell the tale. Anyone looking for her will have to be able to raise the dead to get answers."

Reaper fisted the back of her head through the black sack and pulled. Her muffled yelp made my cock harden.

"Tell me, now," he growled in her ear. "Is it true? Are you untouched?"

She only whimpered in response.

"I'll take that as a yes. But even if it was a no, I don't think I care." Reaper released his grip on her and extended the same hand to me. I clasped it and shook, confirming our agreement.

As they drove away with Reaper's gift sitting beside him in the back seat, images of what was in store for her flooded my mind and my cock jumped against my pants. Máel moved beside me and watched as the motor car grew smaller as it traveled down the dirt road.

"I was prepared to go as high as thirty percent to get his compliance," he remarked.

"Really?" I asked and chuckled, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I would have gone up to forty."

"Ha!" He laughed.

We turned and headed back to the boat, renewed by our prosperity.

Máel chuckled. "Well played with adding that dirty wedding dress we found. Perfect cover story for her."

"I had that ready for a rainy day. Reaper is a stone cold killer, but even he can't turn down a thick, warm body. I knew he wouldn't be able to resist a powered virgin snatched from her wedding, as opposed to a Day Walker

prostitute we forced to stay with us after I broke her friend's neck.”

“Yeah, I think that plays better. Do you think he'll figure out the second boat wasn't captured?” Máel asked as we boarded.

The sun's warmth lay on my skin like a woman fresh from climax. “No,” I answered and lifted my chin, sucking in all the sun had to offer. “But the Emperor Supreme's latest decree is a problem. We need to get rid of the rest of the Sepawn cargo we have and quickly. The Naval Defense Service is sure to question any ships they come across before Emperor Cunt is forced to abdicate his position. All this time, he didn't care anything for our trade while he basked in his wealth and now that his time is up, he wants to ruin *my* business? No, we proceed with our plans, we just have to accelerate our timetable.”

“Do you think another Sepawn will win?”

“Fucking Sepawn rising up to rule,” I fumed. “I was on the seas when Emperor Cunt won it, so I don't know how he prevailed in the first place. Sepawns are scum, and should never be given any place of authority. To have one lead the entire world is an insult to every powered nation.”

“Ha! You know what?”

“What?”

“You should enter the games.”

“Me?”

“Think about it. If you win, you set the tone for the next decade. And with your power? No one could stop you.”

I signaled the crew to get us underway. As we began to set sail, Máel's words rang loudly in my ears.

Me? Emperor Supreme.

“Máel, my friend. You are truly a genius.”

Chapter
Three

As the men exited off the port side, the bantering of my crewman could be heard above the sounds of the merchants selling their catches on the fisherman's wharf.

“Get fresh striped Eron here! Best catch of the season!” one of the vendors called out.

“We'll be resting for a short period, men,” I told my crew before we separated too far for conversation to carry. “We'll meet back before the next season begins. For now, enjoy your time home, fuck your women and fill up on good food.”

“Aye!” they all yelled in unison before breaking into laughter and conversations about what they missed the most being out at sea.

“Máel, what are your plans for the rest of the day? You still going for that drink?”

Máel had a concentrated look on his face as he took in the other merchants on the wharf. “Yes, I think I will. No wife to go back to and my old ass can easily pay for a good night with one, so I might as well.”

I shook my head and rubbed my stubbled jaw. Staring at my long time partner, I wondered if I mirrored how tired he looked. Máel was a man in his fifties, devoted to the sea and to the ship. His curly gray hair peeked from his knitted cap, framing an aged and sun-kissed leathered face that had been

exposed to the elements for too long. His lips had a perpetuated chapped look no matter how he tried to grease it. His eyebrows were overgrown and it only added to his grandfatherly aura. I never understood why he chose the sea time and time again when he could so easily root himself back home with a loving and dutiful woman to take care of him until his final days.

He's a free spirit. And free spirits cannot be tied down. You know this because you are one and the same.

A woman's frantic, shrill voice echoed off the ships and stabbed a nerve in the back of my neck like a knife. "I need to see him dammit! It is important! I told you that you blasted buffoon!"

I pivoted in time to see Aramil Netyoive, a slightly bowlegged woman with a sweet ass, mousy brown hair and a forgettable face being held back by one of the members of my crew.

"Aye, you ain't getting through here, lady. Captain don't need no extra drama from anyone today."

"It's fine," I sighed and flicked my hand. "Let her through."

She flipped off my crewman and made her way to me with a child in tow. His face was dirty with snot running down his nose. Her child stared at me, and I suddenly had the need to hope he was an assassin instead of what I suspected was about to happen. Women were the most cunning kind, giving the false pretense they were innocent, but instead they were cold, calculating, cows. I kept my senses up, begging for there to be something fishy about her. Her child blankly stared at me, then to my crew who held back to watch the show.

"John, you need to fire that man. He was rude and inapprop—"

"Who are you?" I cut in.

"Fuck you, you asshole, who am I? Who am I?! The mother to your blasted child!"

I stared at her and then the child. He looked nothing like me and everything like her. He could be anyone's bastard. "How can I be sure when I

can't even remember you?" It was a low blow but I didn't give two fucks. I had gone through my fair share of women during my travels and during my time back on land. I belonged on the sea, not tied down by some heifer.

She dramatically pointed to the boy who stood there with frightened eyes. "He looks just like you! He even has your glare when he's pissed."

"So *you* say," I scoffed. "You, boy, come here." I crooked my finger to beckon him forth. His mother grinned in triumph while the boy hesitantly took a few steps forward. "What's your power?"

"M-my power?" he stuttered.

"He doesn't have any yet. But that's not the point, you're his father."

"Oh, bloody hell," I heard Máel say.

The air around me began to boil, and my vision began to fill with red. "How old is he?" I growled at Aramil.

"You fucked me nine years ago, which makes him eight. Don't you remember? You had just come back from trading—"

My hand shot out and I gripped her neck, walking her backward a few steps. "Quit your yammering, you stupid cow, and listen closely. No boy of mine would be a Sepawn. Do *not* try to pass your bastard as my own when we clearly know your legs have spread for more than one man during those nine years."

Her face turned an ugly shade of red but I didn't let up on my grip, as her bastard son cried out and began to hit my leg with his tiny fists. Her voice annoyed me and grated on my ears. "I suggest you take your bastard off my wharf and never return. One more accusation about me being his father, will be the last breath you ever take. But first, I'll throw him over a cliff and make you watch as his body shatters into tiny pieces on the rocks below. Do you understand me, you fucking cow?"

She nodded her head frantically and I threw her to the stony ground, blood rushing in my ears as I watched her son run to assist her. I turned to look at my crew and gave a loud, clear command.

“If you see her within ten feet of any of my ships, kill her and the boy.”

The crew looked at me with questions but nodded in understanding.

I grinned at the thought. Throwing Sepawns off a cliff would be a wonderful way to eliminate many of this world’s issues. Less Sepawns meant less of a drain on resources, and less of a chance one of them wins the games.

I’ll have to keep this in my back pocket for a rainy day. If another fucking Sepawn wins the games, I’ll murder the world.

Máel approached and put his hand on my shoulder. “Well, that went better than I expected,” he chuckled. “So, about that drink?”

This was probably why we got along so well. I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and pulled him along, weaving through the crowd of customers. “Let’s go finish our business and get our coin. Then we find a different woman. That’ll be exciting, eh?”

We walked along the pier, leaving the crew, the boat, and the lying Sepawn bastard child behind, and made it to the heart of Kraynor Exports. The exchange was quick. Having worked with them in the past, our reputation gave us the advantage of less questions after they received our signed receipts.

With a loud slam of their stamp of approval, bags of coin were handed over to both Máel and I. We tipped our heads and asked them to keep us in mind for next season before exiting the warehouse.

“Máel, I heard about a new drink that’s been imported from Keeper Nation. Says a shot of it will grow hair on your chest,” I teased.

Máel laughed as we rounded the corner and continued on our way toward the north side of the docks and away from the wharf. “I don’t need more hair on my chest, I need the legs of a fine woman wrapped around me.”

I gagged and he punched me.

“Máel, I don’t need your details. Watching you fuck was the lowlight of my life. Plus, I still can’t imagine how she wrapped her legs around that belly of yours.” I tapped him in the gut and dodged his next swing.

We made our first pit stop to our usual spot. A street food vendor that sold the best Gnani sandwiches. The rest of the crew was there, all of us men of routine.

“That was quick, yeah?” Jorl, our youngest member called out.

“The quicker *we* get paid, the quicker *you* can spend, eh?”

The men jeered as I distributed their pay and grabbed a Gnani sandwich for myself and Máel.

“You make fun of my gut and then you feed me this trash. It’s why the gut was there in the first place!” Máel complained with a bellow. We all laughed and stuffed our faces, savoring the taste of fine dining on the Calgamie Pier.

“It’s your old age. Quit accusing me of things,” I said as I stuffed the last bite into my mouth and chewed. “Now, let’s make a trip to the northwest and see what kind of taverns we can haunt for the rest of the evening.” I turned to the rest of my crew and cocked my brow, silently asking if they wanted to join us.

Corey lifted up his hands and indicated a no. “My wife would have my head. She’s back home with the kids and since we made it back a day early, I wanted to surprise her.”

I nodded in understanding and told the rest of the men where they could find us if they decided to change their minds.

Chapter

Four

“**M**áel, is that the only piss water you’re going to drink? Here, come on, don’t be shy. Try a taste of this.” I pushed my cup toward him, spilling some of the contents over the side and onto the counter. The barkeep was busy helping other patrons. I grabbed some napkins and cleaned it up before he could catch me.

“I told ya, you blasted prick! I like what I like.”

I shook my head and drank the rest of what I had left in the cup. Placing the cup back down, I turned and surveyed the room. I must have been out at sea for too long because the women in this bar seemed mighty young. Perhaps, the sea had warped my perception of things.

I leaned back on my elbows and caught sight of a particularly beautiful woman whose slender figure would put my fantasies to shame. She bent over and played a table game with another female opponent. It gave me the perfect view of her round, delectable backside.

It was an ass made to be ridden. My hands went clammy as if calling her ass to them. I rolled my shoulder and stared into her back, willing her to look my way. But she never did. Too busy playing the game and bending over in front of me. My dick pressed against my pants painfully.

“It’s a good thing your fly is closed, else you’d poke an eye out, son. Go take care of that before you truly do.” Máel mumbled as he continued to

drink his piss water.

“Right,” I said and patted the counter.

I straightened on my feet and made my way in her direction. A few feet away and I opened my mouth to give her my best pickup line when her head snapped to the side and a smile broke free. She squealed and ran to another man who just entered the tavern and wrapped her arms around him. His hands went to her ass and I groaned in frustration.

“You wanna play me?” came a feminine voice across the table. The first woman's opponent. Her body was more shapely than the other one. Curves that could kill a man as he came from seeing what she looked like beneath her dress. Quickly forgetting about the last cow, my attention focused on the eye candy before me.

I tilted my head to the side and licked my bottom lip. “What kind of game are we talking about?”

She trailed her finger on the table as she made her way over to me. Standing toe to toe, she came to my shoulders. Long waves of brown hair cascaded down her back, silky and glistening beneath the dull illumination of the room. Her overflowing cleavage rose and fell with her breathing. She looked up at me through her thick lashes and bit her bottom lip, mirroring me and giving an invitation.

“The kind where we take off our clothes,” she cooed.

Her hand skimmed across my bare arms and goosebumps rose. I grabbed her full hips and lifted her to the edge of the table, slamming my lips on hers. There was no need for words beyond this point. It was strictly instinct and animalistic communication. She gasped and I swallowed it down, invading her mouth with my tongue the same way I planned to invade her pussy. Our mouths dueled until our breathing increased. My body heat rose like my cock as it got pressure sores against the zipper of my pants.

As I ground myself against her hot center, the bartender called out from across the bar. “Get a fucking room!”

I chuckled against her reddened and pouty lips.

“No, don’t stop,” she whispered, grabbing onto the scruff of my shirt and pulling me closer to her.

My hands traveled down and grabbed her ass before I picked her up and led her toward the room I’d already rented out on the upper level of the tavern. Máel and I knew we weren’t going anywhere after getting influenced by drink tonight.

“What’s your name sweetheart?” I asked. Not that I’d remember it later, but I found it was a wonderful way to lower any remaining resistance a woman had. Feigning interest in them was a sure and easy way to make their panties wet.

The beauty in my grip gasped and wrapped both her arms and legs around me, burying her face against my neck. “You’ll drop me! I’m not that light.”

“You’ll be fine. I got you. Are you going to tell me your name?” I tried again as we began to ascend the dark wooden steps. The boards creaked but continued to hold both our weight.

“Magis.”

The softness of her breasts against my chest made my mouth water. I needed to get her naked soon or I’d bust a nut right there on the steps.

As if she read my thoughts, Magis lost her shyness about her weight and grabbed my face, continuing where we left off. She was soft and pliable in my arms, and my mind wandered to debauched thoughts. I almost stumbled trying to kiss her passionately and look for my room at the same time. By the time my mind cleared enough to find it, sticking the key in was a whole other problem.

“I’m going to have to put you down, sweetheart. Give me a second.”

She reluctantly moved her lips from mine as I unlocked the door, shoved her inside and slammed it shut, relocking it.

Her eyes were clouded with hunger as I slowly began to divest my clothes. “So what was this little game you spoke about, hmm?”

I ripped my shirt over my head and her eyes zoomed in on my build. Years out at sea manning the sails have put on muscle. Fighting against the sea was unlike anything that could be found here. It both tortured my body and worked it to its best shape.

Her mouth ran dry and I chuckled. “How about I take the lead. Take off your dress, Magis. Let me see the body I’ll be worshiping tonight.”

For all her bluster, her courage suddenly disappeared at this very moment. It was curious. Maybe it was part of her game and I just wasn’t catching on.

I brought myself right up against her, my hands caressing her shoulders and gently guiding the straps down.

She shivered and I leaned in to kiss her behind the ear. “Be a good girl and strip naked for me. It would make me very, very happy. My dick is rock hard right now and all I want to do is bury myself in you but I’m trying my best to savor you.”

Dirty talk, another woman’s weakness.

Her hands finally came up and unfastened the front of her dress, dropping it entirely to pool at her feet. I groaned and shook my head. There was no possible way she was hiding all these curves beneath that fabric.

Pale nipples stared at me from the most beautiful, full breasts I had ever seen. She had the perfect amount of weight on her. She was the better choice for tonight as I was not the gentlest of lovers.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I croaked out.

Her eyes shimmered as she picked up her face and looked at me again. There was an innocence about her that drove me to nothing but primal lust. *Was she untried?* The thought drove me to madness. I didn’t know what it was about an untouched woman that made me want to break her and then recreate her to crave me like her very last breath.

I dropped to my knees and told myself I deserve to suffer a little longer while. I needed to lull her into a false sense of security with me, I needed her to be willing to give all of herself over to my control. I grabbed her ass and

brought my mouth to the apex of her legs for a taste.

I took in her feminine musky scent and dove my tongue into her center without any sort of warning. She cried and almost lost her footing if it wasn't for my fingers digging into her flesh to anchor her to the ground. I forced one of her legs over my shoulder and feasted between her legs like a starved man until she shook and squirmed.

Humming against her pussy, I flicked my tongue inside, making her gasp.

“I've never been with a powered person before.”

Time stood still. The air around me began to boil. I slowly withdrew my tongue as my vision began to waver and get overtaken by red. My skin felt hot, my mind wanted to shatter to make sure I heard what I heard.

You're probably just lost in lust and hearing things, John.

You heard what she fucking said, don't be stupid.

I pulled away from her just enough and tilted my head upward. “What... what did you just say?”

She breathed heavily, staring down at me with primal hunger, enjoying my words coating her skin between her legs. She bit her bottom lip and condemned herself once more.

“I've never been with a powered person before. You're my first.”

I bet she enjoys every moment with her power over you while you're down here on your knees.

It was her plan all along, wasn't it.

Each voice in my mind sounded like my own and it felt as if I was internally dividing and not all at once.

My blood throbbed at my temples as I tried to control the rage that was spilling over from everything that had happened to my life in the hands of a Sepawn up until now.

Images of laughing women morphed into screams as they cried for mercy beneath my grip. One by one, they laughed in my face, taking advantage of the fact that they lured a powered person between their legs like mindless fish

on a hook.

A Sepawn, in this room, with me. Preying on my vulnerabilities? This had to be the work of Aramil. That whore just didn't know when to quit.

They thought to play games, they thought we were stupid. They each learned the hard way with my hands coated in their blood, introducing them exactly to what a powered man was capable of.

I should have beat the baby out of Aramil. I would have, if I knew. That was why she hid it from me. Bah, the bastard probably was someone else's but that still isn't the point. The point was their audacity! These Sepawns needed to understand their limitations in this game of life.

As I mentally drowned in my past, my hand flew up and grabbed her by the throat, squeezing it with all the force of my fury. "Is this some kind of sick, twisted game? Am I a fucking joke to you?" My hand squeezed tighter and her eyes began to bulge out of their sockets making her look like a fish on her own hook. She should have never tried with me, she should have casted her mindgames elsewhere.

I slowly rose to my feet and glared at this seacow. "Did Aramil hire you? Huh? Did she?" I snarled. Blood vessels began to pop, staining her eyes in red, marking her as the vile woman she was.

Of course, she did. All whores worked together in some way, somehow. I should have known.

She choked out a response, but I couldn't understand her words. A blubbering mess, this one. It only served to piss me off.

"Fine. If it's a dangerous game she wants to play with me, by hiring a Sepawn bitch to fuck me, then I'll play. We've gone too far to go back, haven't we?" I purred.

Her arms flailed wildly at my face, they always did. She scratched my forearms as she continued to fight, but her attempt at rough play was nothing compared to the sea and her demands. I snarled once more and led her backward toward the bed, dragging her on her heels.

When I slammed the back of her legs against the footboard, she fell backward and bounced on the bed, screaming when I released my grip on her vocal cords. Grinning, I pounced on top of her and slapped her face a few times before slapping my hand over her mouth. The whore bit into my palm, but all the pain did was make me grin wider in lust.

“Amaril sentenced you to your death by sending you to me. But I’ll keep you alive for now, because I’m not as crazy as everyone thinks. I can control myself and my desires. She was just upset someone planted a bastard in her,” I rambled against her face, biting her cheek, wanting to feel her flesh tear beneath my teeth.

I needed a release like this, and she was going to give it to me whether she liked it or not. I enjoyed the power I had. It was an addiction I craved in the blackest pits of my soul, one that got me into trouble time and time again in my younger years.

“Magis, Magis, Magis. You gave yourself to me so easily, why are you fighting now?”

Sepawns. Fucking Sepawns. Always fucking Sepawns!

A Sepawn won the last Midsummer Festival games, and my merchanting business went to shit. Because he wanted to leave a mark on the world before he lost his hold, his decrees and decisions dwindled me down to two ships affecting my livelihood.

Fine. I’ll leave my own mark on these scums of the world. I currently had one trembling beneath me in my clutches—It was the universe’s gift to me, surely.

“You want to be with a powered person, eh bitch? You wanted so desperately for me to sink my cock into your filthy pussy, just for a taste.” I licked the side of her face and she whimpered. “I’ll show you power,” I whispered into her ear.

I vibrated and split into four replicas of myself. One snatched her wrists above her head and pinned them down. Two grabbed her by the ankles and

split her legs wide for me, while the last one used his hand to cover her mouth, freeing me up.

I cackled as I stepped off the bed and let the replicas secure her while I unfastened my belt and dropped my pants, pulling out the belt. The way her eyes widened when she saw what was in my hands and what I was working with drove me wild with fever—touched by darkness, my darkness.

She stared at me with fear and still a hint of lust, hoping for something I wouldn't be able to give her. I let her look. It only added to my accusation of filthy Sepawns only wanting to use powered people for their own advantages. My body was riddled with scars because of what her people did to me, forcing me to work for scraps while I rebuilt my business back up from drowning.

I leaned in and breathed against her face, strapping the belt around her neck like a dog. "I'm going to fuck you hard, Magis, and then once I've come in your dirty Sepawn cunt, I'm going to pull out and make you lick the juice off my cock. Do you want to taste yourself, Magis?" My tongue traced my lips at the thought as I pulled the belt tighter, making her face a beautiful shade of red.

I hope she fights. I like it when they fight.

"I'm going to hurt you now, Magis. This will *not* be for your enjoyment, just mine. And when I'm done, I'm going to let my replicas have a go. We're going to fucking split you in two and make you beg for more."

"We'll fuck her two at a time," Replica Three jeered.

I glared at him. *Didn't I just fucking say he'll get her when I'm done?*

It wasn't a bad idea though.

The moment her hot cunt swallowed my cock to the hilt like the whore she was, I grabbed onto her hips and grinded her against me, making her want me. Her wetness coated my crotch in response and I reveled in it.

Dirty, dirty little whore.

Handing the leash to my replica, I pounded into her flesh fiercely, my

fingers digging into her pussy and pulling it apart for my viewing pleasure. She whimpered and struggled to no avail.

“This better not be blood,” I growled. “You better not be bleeding on my cock.” As slippery as it was, blood didn’t make the best lubricant. I would know. But when all else failed, it worked well enough.

Fucking her through her tears, I thought to myself that I wasn’t an unjust man to say the least. I gave people what they rightfully deserved. And this Sepawn was going to be given a taste of hell for tricking me. Amaril was just lucky I was busy at the moment, but she was going to get her due.

I continued to stretch and pound into the whore, slapping our flesh together like rutting beasts. She wasn’t tearing just yet. She was probably used to this kind of treatment. The thought filled me with more excitement over what we could do together in this room.

Replica One pinched and twisted her large breasts as she whimpered. Her cheeks were wet with tears and I was surprised his hand hadn’t slipped off.

“She’s begging for more,” Replica Two said.

Yes, he was right. I mean, I was right. It was enough teasing. Time for the main course.

“Who am I to deny her?” I asked with snark in my voice. I was also a funny man.

“Put it in her other hole,” Replica Three demanded.

“And what does our little seacow have to say about it?” I asked valiantly.

The others snickered. Her recognition of humor was lacking. Replica Four lifted his hand over her mouth slightly, giving her just enough space to squeal.

“Speak bitch,” he commanded, pulling her leash and making her choke for air before loosening his hold.

The moment she was able to, she barked like a sea lion. “No. Get away from me! What are you doing? No! Stop it!”

He pulled on her leash and covered her mouth again with his hand,

laughing at her cries. I had never fucked a sea lion before, but there was a first for everything. They had just as much meat on their bones, their skin was just as smooth... Her little pleas for mercy made my balls ache.

This was going to be nothing but a day of darkness for her. The sooner she learned to accept it, the more enjoyment we would all get. Well, minus her. As if my replicas and I were of hive mind, we all chuckled at once, making her tremble in fear. I enjoyed our game too much to stop now. She should be glad she wasn't dead, still able to enjoy my cock impaling her... *for now.*

"Be a sweetheart and stay still would you?" I groaned as I abruptly pulled out and shoved my hard cock into her tight ass.

Her body clenched and the hole fought me but I didn't let up. I wouldn't let one little starfish stop my conquests. When the head of my cock invaded her ass, I groaned aloud. She cried beautifully, the sound of her sobs pushing me toward the edge of my own release, but I held back, torturing myself a little while longer with her. Soon enough, her ass was proving to be dry, I had thought all the blood pouring from her would help with the friction but it didn't, not this time. I gave Replica Three a look and he spit on his hand, slapping it against her pussy with a loud thwack, reddening it and pulling the lubricant down to her ass. I clicked my tongue to let him know I needed more. He fingered her pussy and then shoved his finger beside my cock, rimming the perimeter of her stretched starfish.

She was lucky I wasn't as bad as some. Having replicas added to the darkest kinks of anyone's fantasy. But here in this room, as I continued to fuck her in the ass, all I could think about was how much she would stretch with *two dicks* inside of her.

She kicked and tried to scream in pain through the replica's hand over her mouth, but her defiance only urged me on.

"She's a feisty one," Replica One observed.

"It means she'll last longer," Replica Four quipped.

“It means she can take more,” I growled.

I pulled out and with our thoughts in sync once more, we forced her onto her stomach. I threw myself on top of her, my forearm right against her neck, reducing her airflow and suffocating her against the mattress. They always spasmed more around my cock when they were fighting for air. It slipped in easier this time, more blood having accumulated on my shaft. I continued to thrust deliciously into her tight hole, her blood coating the the inside of my thighs, making us stick everytime our flesh came together.

“Fuck, I’m tired of watching you,” Replica Four grabbed her hair and jerked her head back, pulling the belt off her neck and shoving his own hard cock down her throat to stop her pathetic whimpering and gasping for breaths.

She gagged beautifully and we all groaned in unison.

“Hopefully, she didn’t eat beforehand, else Replica Four is going to have a mess on his dick,” Replica Three said, laughing hysterically.

“Eh. He’s probably into it with the way he keeps gagging her,” I remarked as I continued to thrust violently watching them like a voyeur.

“Shit, just listen to her gag,” Replica Four moaned. “Fuck, my cock wants to blow.”

“Don’t be an asshole, hold that shit in, you prick,” Replica Two commanded. “You got three holes right fucking here. Don’t waste it.”

Suddenly, dear ‘ol Magis vomited all over Replica Four. He almost gagged himself until he manned up and began to lodge his dick down her throat to stop her from spewing out even more.

I continued to fuck her ass and listen to the others converse. These guys were nuts, wasting time talking when they should just put their dick where their mouth was. Or where her mouth was. Well, Replica Four was still in her mouth.

I shook my head, confused at my own thoughts, unsure if it was really me fucking her ass or if I was the one fucking her vomit filled mouth.

Without notice, Magis was silent and it pissed me off.

“Keep her awake,” I growled. “I wasn’t done watching her choke.”

Replica One slapped her in the face a few times and she began coming back to consciousness, crying as he dissolved. I vibrated again and split, creating Replica Five.

“Fuck, move over!” Replica Five shouted.

Replica Four dissolved while still in her mouth, his gray goo mixed with his release dripping from her lips. Replica Five shoved part of her body upward just enough for him to slide between her and the bed, avoiding her regurgitation on the sheets. The moment his dick slid into her cunt was the moment her ass wanted to squeeze me out.

“Fuck, she’s tight,” Replica Five groaned.

We began thrusting in an alternate rhythm. I vibrated again and Replica Six formed and fisted himself viciously, cursing under his breath for being left out. “You fucking assholes!” Replica Six growled and came toward our tangle of limbs and forced his own now hard cock beside mine in her ass.

She screamed and we groaned in unison as her body spasmed around us, fighting to let us all in.

I hissed when the head of Six’s cock finally slipped inside of her, as Replicas Two and Three dissolved. Fresh blood drenched both mine and Replica Six’s cocks and allowed us to slip in and out easier.

Replica Five beneath her groaned in release, the pulse of his cock throbbing through her flesh against ours.

“Fuck! Swallow it down, bitch,” Replica Five laughed and grunted simultaneously with almost his fist down her throat. Or was that Replica Four?

“Yes! Just like that. Look at her, look at how Four is dripping out of her mouth.”

Who the fuck was talking and who’s dick was suddenly in her mouth?

Seeing her mouth filled and feeling her ass stretch for us—for me—was

the breaking point. Replica Five and I both groaned in unison as Replica Six spilled inside of her ass. I forced myself to hold back through gritted teeth, wanting to prolong it just a little bit more, working my stamina to the brink.

When her cries and fight began to die down, so did the enjoyment. I forced a few more thrusts into her and growled as I finally let myself spill inside of her, adding to what was already there and overflowing. I watched with glee as our combined releases drip out beside my shaft with a tinge of pink and streaks of red.

Suddenly, loud knocks came at the door and we all jerked our heads in that direction.

“Magis! Are you in there? If I fucking find out you are, someone is going to die.”

“Who the hell is that?” I questioned, my hands still gripping her flesh while my hips slowly thrust inside of her as my cock died down. She didn’t answer but I could see her still breathing which was good enough.

The door banged again and my irritation grew to infernal heights.

I was already pissed off by how pliant and loose the whore became, and the fact that my remaining replicas all dissolved before we had a chance to compare notes on how good her holes were.

This asshole intruder was going to get the brunt of my frustration. “Oi! Fucker! I’m busy! Go find yourself another room!”

Chapter Five

Magis cried out right then and my dick hardened. *So, she was still there full of energy, and ready for more fun to be had.* The sound of a crash blasted through the room and the door broke open. It slammed against the wall dramatically and my aggression skyrocketed. *What was this, a fucking carnival show?* An enraged man with a large stomach frantically burst into the room with his sights landing on the bloodied woman beneath me.

“Do you mind?” I sneered. I wasn’t fond of sharing my spoils with strangers, especially ugly ones.

“That’s my fucking niece you asshole! I’m her ward!”

I wasn’t sure what the problem was. “Then give your niece some privacy. We’re busy.” I gestured for him to leave.

For all I know, she swings that way, the dirty Sepawn whore.

Maybe he was her pimp as well as Amaril’s.

Magis cried out, calling to him for help like the fucking cow she was, stuck in a corral. It was disgusting. She could have at least told him how good I was at filling all her holes. Ungrateful wench.

I easily pulled my dick out of her, covered in crimson down to my thighs and grinned maniacally as I wheeled around to face him. I rubbed the stubble on my chin as I thought through my options.

How much trouble could I get in if I slammed his face into the window

and tossed him outside? Eh. Fuck the consequences. We've only just docked the ship today. It'd be a record.

I bent at the waist and plowed into his chest and flipped him over my shoulder against the wall with a loud crash. Magis cried out again in terror, calling attention to our room from the other guests. I was going to have to punish her for that, make sure she would never squeal again unless it was with my dick lodged in her throat, cutting off her airway.

“Stop! Please! No more!” she whimpered.

As much as she begged, I had no more fucks to give to any of these dirty Sepawns. I was too tired from our tryst to create additional replicas, but my adrenaline rushed through my veins, feeding my hunger for pain and punishment as it flooded my senses. I didn't need to make more replicas. I kicked him in the gut and toppled him over to his side with another crash. Grabbing his short hair, I dragged him audibly across the wooden floor and over to the bed, shoving him in her face.

“Why would your uncle look for you in a tavern, Magis? Do you both have a conning business I was unaware of, hmm? Is that how you do it? Is that how Aramil hired you? Because if that's the case, sweetheart, I would have thought you'd learned by now you messed with the wrong man,” I snarled.

Sepawns always took advantage and cheated. It was the only way they could survive in this world of powered people. I was going to make sure she understood exactly how pathetic and useless she was when I was through with her and her uncle.

Fucking liar. He has to be her pimp.

“Is that it?” I demanded. “Is he your pimp, come to see if you've done your job?” I dropped his body on the ground like a ragdoll.

The innocence returned as her body trembled in unbridled fear. My grin widened and my cock hardened at her reaction. There she was, my good little bitch. I was going to have fun with this one and her little games with this new

addition.

Maybe I'll break her pimp uncle in front of her so I can hear her scream while I fuck all her holes again.

I laughed at the thought as she scooted back on the bed with her arms wrapped around her body as if she could protect herself from me, leaving a trail of crimson on the sheets like a pirate's map.

I threw her pimp uncle against the wall head first and walked over to the door and slammed it shut, locking us all inside.

“When day breaks, Magis, my name will be carved into your soul never to be forgotten,” I taunted, coming closer.

“No, please, no! I beg of you. Just let me go,” her voice trembled enticingly.

Her body would stay warm for a while after I was done and that was all that mattered. Vibrating another replica, my energy waned but I grinned in her direction as my replica grabbed her throat from behind, holding her against him at the headboard.

I slowly climbed into the bed, crawling toward her, grabbing onto her legs and pulling as my replica held onto her neck.

“Are you a keeper of secrets, Magis?” I crooned. She wouldn't be alive to tell any tales, but she didn't need to know that yet.

Raking my blunt nails down her thighs, she screamed and coughed as my replica squeezed her throat even tighter, licking her face.

I made up my mind. I would enter The Chaos Games at the end of the Midsummer Festival, win it all, and use my subsequent reign to set things as they should be. And in case anyone tried to come after me and change things again, I would use my wish to end the games and the festival once and for all. No festival meant no games. No games meant no winner, and no winner meant no wish to change things.

Sepawns would learn their place in this world, and that place was six feet beneath me.

I'm going to end it all.

Chapter

Six

The rest of my time in the city was uneventful. I paid the tavern owner an obscene amount of coin to dispose of the bodies of Magis and her pimp uncle and under threat of coming back to pay him a visit if word got out, I ensured his silence. To be on the safe side, I kept my head down and my business clean for the rest of my days until it was time to rejoin the crew and depart.

We sailed into the traditional city of O'lind where the Midsummer Festival was always held and The Chaos Games would be conducted. The city itself was rich and considered neutral territory. It operated under the direction of The Supreme Commission— a group of arrogant men and women who were responsible for the peaceful transition of authority and the official hosts of the festival and its entertainment. Since they were responsible for the transition of authority from one Emperor Supreme to the next, they wielded some of the strongest influence in all the world and its six territories. I was a citizen of the Kingdom of Day, but not its official entry, as the official entry was reserved for each kingdom's royalty. Which meant I had to find another way to be entered into the games.

Criminals could be entered as participants with the chance to redeem themselves and achieve a dream, but they had to be serving their sentence in one of the prisons scattered across the world. Though some would consider

my business dealings to be on the wrong side of the Emperor Supreme's decrees and laws, there was no way in hell I was going to have my freedom restricted. I loved the sea too much. The ocean had no limits. Entering as a criminal was a no go—dreaded whispers in my own ears.

Another way to enter would be through the recommendation of an esteemed member of society. Or to be recognized for such an exceptional contribution to the betterment of the world. I was neither of those things. The only members of high society I knew were the ones who paid me to ship their ill gotten goods and would have no part in recommending me. I wasn't a scientist, a healer, or any other well-intentioned person who would be recognized for their contributions to the world. I sailed and stayed in the shadows. Which left me with only one way I could think of to gain entry.

The crew searched through the decorated streets and blended in with the garlands and streamers of the city. I waited on the ship. After a few hours of playing catch with Replicas two, four, seven, and nine in my quarters, Corey walked through the door I'd left opened.

"We found one, Captain," he confirmed.

Originally from the Keeper nation and a laid-back man, Corey had narrow green eyes like two emeralds. His thick, straight, burgundy hair reminded me of a cobra's hood. I waved him on. "Tell me."

"In the market district, outside the blacksmith workshop. Everard wanted to stop in for a second and take a look at the swords. Well, the street outside had a pickpocket looking for marks."

"Makes sense," I reasoned with a slight head nod. "The festival brings people from all over. Sure to be some extra activity."

"Right, but before we got in the workshop, he tagged Henry."

"Wrong man."

"Definitely the wrong man. You know Henry's temper."

"I do. I once saw him crush a man's skull for chuckling at something he didn't find funny."

“Right! Anyway,” Corey continued, “Henry chased that son of a bitch through every part of the district until we finally cornered him in a small alley filled with the smell of damp earth. He started pleading for his life when Henry shifted into a velocitiger, but then he let slip that his brother was about to compete in the games and he was just trying to get enough to afford the tickets so he could watch him in the crowd.” Corey chuckled. “He also didn’t realize I knew the bastard and that he had screwed me over once.”

I leaned forward. “Where is his brother now, so I can *talk* to him?”

“I’ll do you one better, Captain.” Corey held up his hand and opened it. Inside was the Seal of Harmonious Heart, the official entry pin for The Chaos Games. “We traded the pickpocket’s life for his brother’s entry. He wasn’t ready for this keeper’s vengeance. We already got you set, Captain. You’re in the games!”

Chapter Seven

The people lined the streets to get a look at combatants and a chance to see who would be the next Emperor Supreme. Street vendors took bets and sold wares, while the drunken revelers danced to their own tunes. Powerdrop Wagons stopped to empty the people they transported and guards enforced the sense of peace to prevent the people from rioting.

The Midsummer Festival was a three day affair, with the main attraction in The Dreadful Arena, an ancient stone structure which circled around a dirt ring, which housed The Chaos Games—the culmination of the three day affair celebrating when the first ones stepped foot on this planet. The world in those ancient times existed as nothing but chaos. A child at the tender age of eight emanated a power. Powers then began to manifest in children eight and under throughout the world, and chaos ensued as people tried to control them. Wars were sparked, families fought, nations tumbled, until one man was able to unite the people. The first Emperor Supreme instituted the festival as a way for all the generations who followed to remember, and only held the position for ten years, to allow everyone to feel as if they too could unite the world.

“Get the fuck back!” One of the guards commanded.

I scoffed and flashed him the Seal of Harmonious Heart pin my crew obtained for me. It was the seal used by the first Emperor Supreme as his mark of official documents and declaration and was later adopted by The

Supreme Commission to show someone was approved to try their hands at becoming the next Emperor Supreme. These pins were highly valued, but rarely robbed. The person who possessed a pin understood they were potentially forfeiting their life on the chance they could rule it all. As valued as the pins were, not many people valued the pins over their own life. So, counterfeiting and robbery of pins was historically low.

The guard opened the gate for me and waved me through to another guard on the inside. He led me through a door in the back of the arena and down a long hall. At the end of the hall was the entrance to the arena floor. There were a few guards lining the inner walls, but when they saw I was escorted without chains, they knew I was one who volunteered to be here. My escort turned and returned to his place inside the back gate and I found a spot along the wall near the front. I leaned my back against it, placed one foot up on the wall, shut my eyes, and tilted my head back. I was about to change the world, and I needed as much rest as I could possibly get.

The sound of heavy chains approaching mixed with the discordant cheers of the crowd above, but I continued to examine the darkness my closed eyelids provided. Rest was in there, somewhere, I only needed to find it. The clicking of the chains as the locks were turned and removed streamed in and disturbed my peace. I opened my eyes to see four others and blew out a breath.

“Listen to me, all of you,” one of the combatants in the hall with me commanded. “When the trumpets blow, we have to go out there. No matter who comes out of the doors on the other sides, we face them together.”

“Why?” The woman asked.

I shut my eyes and leaned back. To hell with this and all of them.

“Because we either fight together, or we die alone,” their leader said.

Then you’re going to die alone, I thought.

“You’re all going to die, anyway,” someone said and I chuckled.

Finally. A man of reason.

“I’m going to win this,” someone else said, and I knew I was surrounded by morons.

Perhaps these games aren’t going to be as taxing as I first thought.

These idiots continued to ramble and banter back and forth, attempting to form a bond. I’d seen it before from condemned men. Their nervous energy would manifest itself in speech.

Why can’t they just sit back and shut up and wait till I kill them all? I’m trying to rest here.

More banter and explanations for why they’re here. I was surprised no one said because their fluffy dog Spot asked them to do it. It was ridiculous.

“Is there anyone here who fights for a reason *other* than to end it all with their wish?”

Oh, here’s something.

I opened my eyes and studied them.

“What is *your* name, friend?”

“I’m Torrin.”

“Hunter.”

They looked at me, and I blew out a breath.

Guess I’d better join in.

“John.”

“Amira.”

“I’m Bhif—”

“We all know who you are,” Hunter interjected. “Bhif the Lionalon. We get it.”

“What is your gift?” Torrin asked Ridley.

He pressed his lips together and I narrowed my eyes as the temperature in the air around me began to rise.

“I’m a giant,” Bhif declared.

“Yes, we *know* Bhif,” I sighed. “You’re a giant.”

Fucker. Now, shut the fuck up so we can get back to that Torrin guy.

Bhif glared at me. “I’m a giant, not stupid, little man. Disrespect me again, and you’ll be the first to see Bhif’s power. Ask the wolf.”

I scrunched my forehead. “Wolf?”

Bhif stepped towards me and I straightened myself.

You don’t want none of this, Bhif. I’ve fought way bigger men than you.

“What’s your *power*, Bhif?” Torrin repeated, saving Bhif’s life by interjecting. “You’re big.”

“Ice generation,” he growled and continued to try to stare me down. I met his eyes with the same level of disdain.

“A distance fighter?” Ridley asked.

A coward, I surmised.

Bhif turned and walked away. A wise decision as I was not going to give him the opportunity to make it through the entrance and compete if he continued to cross me.

Ridley folded his arms across his chest and looked at me.

“What?” I scoffed. “I’m a sailor. I transport cargo throughout the world. I’ve seen the giant’s kind before. He’s the runt of their litter. I’ve seen your kind before too. Probably powered with Shadow Marionette or some useless shit like that. You’re all going to die.”

Ridley’s jaw trembled at how easily I ascertained their strengths and weaknesses.

“Figured as much,” I concluded. Then I raised an eyebrow. “You know... you two are actually a perfect match for each other. He fires from a distance while you sit back looking for weaknesses to exploit. The only way for someone to do anything would be to get close. Except, if your enemy somehow made it past the ice projectiles, you’re both good fighters on the inside. Hell, by that point, you probably already figured out their weakness and know how to attack them. It’s almost an unbeatable combination.”

“Almost?” The woman asked.

I looked at her for the first time. She was dirty, but I’d seen worse. I

tightened my cheek. She wasn't going to survive long.

“Replication,” Ridley blurted out.

Lucky guess.

“How else would he know so much?” He continued. “Because he’s a sailor?”

I tightened my lips and moved back to my spot on the wall.

Ridley continued his soliloquy. “I’ve known too many of them to know most are nothing more than drunkards trying to get through a job so they can get to their next drink. No, he’s something more than that. He replicates himself so he can be in more than one place at one time for a few minutes. Probably uses it to spy on people. That’s how he knows.”

Fuck you.

“Figured as much,” said the one who I thought saw reason.

I’ll kill you first for mocking me.

The crowd noise shook the foundation of the arena. I inhaled peace and exhaled strength while the others in the hall with me panicked. For the first time, all was quiet.

“So, we fight together,” Torrin said, breaking the silence.

Fuck!

“You all will use your gifts—”

“Why do you keep saying, ‘gift,’ Torrin?” Ridley asked.

“Can’t you tell?” Bhif said. “He’s a Sepawn. He has no powers. That’s why he thinks of them as gifts.”

The air around me rose to a boil and my vision streamed red streaks across the hall. “Sepawns,” I spat. “I’m not fighting beside a Sepawn.”

I can’t escape these fuckers. No matter. When I win this shit, you and your kind will no longer be a concern of mine.

Ridley stepped to the Sepawn and I tilted my head. “Your kind killed my brother,” Ridley informed the Sepawn.

Yes! Fuck him up!

“How? How can someone with no power beat one of us? You’re dead as soon as you walk through that hole.”

Yes!

“By you?” I asked through narrowed eyes.

Ridley sighed and shook his head. “No. I have no quarrel with you outside of winning these games.”

No!

“But Sepawns won the last tournament,” Ridley continued, “and ruled for a decade. How?”

Oh. Okay, this is interesting.

“We won,” the Sepawn answered, “because we’re underestimated. To be discounted is a gift.”

My nose wrinkled. He was right. Even though I’d had my way with Sepawns every time I’d encountered one, the situation with Magis allowed her pimp uncle to get the jump on me. Had he been someone stronger, I might have been done. I had to remember not to get so full of my hatred that I forget who I was dealing with. Sepawns were a curse, a blight on the world, yet somehow they continued to thrive. They were pests overdue for extermination, but they were clever.

I vowed to never underestimate a Sepawn again.

Ridley coughed and then stepped to the front of the hall, beside the gate separating us from the end game. “We all have the same end goal, to end it all.”

What?! Shit, did I miss something?

“Our powers seem to be complementary to one another,” he added.

“And we all wound up on the same wagon,” Amira added. “This is no accident.”

“No,” he sighed. “This is providence.”

“Then we fight together,” Torrin declared, “so that none of us die alone.”

“And in the end?” Bhif asked.

I'm taking you all down.

Chapter
Eight

The gate blocking the opening swung wide and those of us inside the tunnel proceeded forth to the raucous sounds of trumpets blaring and people cheering. As we pushed through, I used my hand to shield my eyes from the brightness of the day and scanned the upper levels. The crowd sat up high and was made up of all kinds. The rich were obvious as they sat the closest to the arena floor, also the style and quality of clothing declined the higher the seats were. The arena floor was vast and covered in white sand decorated in blood.

I walked to the center of the arena and the others from the tunnel followed. They were mindless peons looking for leadership.

“Bhif doesn’t like this,” I heard Bhif complain as other combatants from the other three gates filed in beside us.

“Stand strong,” the Sepawn begged. “As long as we stay together, we have a chance.”

“You’re all going to die,” one of them chuckled and then whistled.

Fuck that.

“I’m not going to die,” I stated. “And I’m certainly not going to fight beside a Sepawn. You’re on your own out there, and if it comes down to me and you in the finals? Rest assured, I’m going to beat your ass. You won’t win this contest like the last fucking Sepawn did and subject us to another

decade of madness.”

“My brother lost in the last games to a Sepawn,” Ridley said.

I spat on the ground. “Then your brother was a coward, incompetent, and the reason this world has gone to shit.”

The thought of losing to a Sepawn enraged me.

“The best thing a Sepawn can do is be put in the ground,” I concluded.

“I agree, but be careful what springs from the ground,” Hunter added. “It can be death or life all.”

Trumpets blared to announce the entrance of the Supreme Commission and the Emperor Supreme with his cunt queen. I didn’t give a fuck. If I thought I could generate enough replicas to take down everyone and reach that Sepawn scum, I would. But, history records the maximum amount of replicas ever made at any one time has been a hundred, and my personal best was twelve. I slept for a week after I made that many replicas. It exhausted me.

“It was written into our laws,” the herald exclaimed, “by the first of us that the Midsummer Festival would be held every ten years and culminate in a test of strength and will.”

I fucking hated this shit. *Get on with it.* I shut my eyes and slowed my breathing to conserve my strength. I had a job to do.

“Listen to me,” the Sepawn whispered. “When he makes his move, partner up and protect each other.”

“The pompous prick is milking this till the end,” I growled. Between this prick and the Sepawn prick, I didn’t know which was more torturous.

“You can continue to bear your hatred for Sepawns, or you can take a look at the men and women who encircle you, all with the same murderous intentions, and work with me and live,” the Sepawn said.

I opened my eyes, looked around and shook my head. All I saw were men and women on their way to their deaths, but this fucker obviously wouldn’t stop talking to me until I engaged. “What would you have me do?”

“Bhif fights alone mostly, but even he recognizes when a different option should be considered,” Bhif observed.

“We’re with you,” the woman said.

“I’m in as well,” Ridley whispered. “We can resolve our differences once it’s down to us, and only us. There are too many here to battle without a solid plan. You seem to have one, Torrin, so I’m in. Regardless of our motivations, we’re all striving for the same thing, and that’s to end this madness. There’s honor in that. There’s beauty in that. There’s a chance for victory in that. I’m in.”

Bloody hell.

“Here’s what we do,” the Sepawn said. “When he gives the signal, Ridley, you and Bhif go left. Protect each other. Make your way to that side of the arena and with your backs to the wall and at a distance. Ridley, when you see the opportunity, you cut the bastards down. Bhif, follow his lead.”

Bhif grunted an agreement and Ridley nodded slowly.

“Hunter,” the Sepawn continued, “You and—”

Hunter whistled. “I am not your *ally*. I am a titan.”

I was starting to like this Hunter guy.

“Fine, have it your way. John, you, me, and Amira will head to the right.”

Was he not listening to me?

“Fuck you,” I cursed. “You coupled me with you? That’s an insult.”

“But...but, you just agreed,” the Sepawn cowed.

“Before I knew your plan,” I growled. “You obviously plan to stab me in the back the minute it’s turned. Fuck you.” I looked at Hunter. “But the Sepawn’s plan has merit. There is strength in numbers, and I provide the greatest numbers you’ll find. Care to team up?”

Hunter chuckled. “Heh. Your hatred of Sepawns will be your undoing. Sure, I’ll team with you, only so I can be there when you crash and burn at his hands.”

“If you think I’d die at the hands of a fucking Sepawn, then you’re

useless,” I fumed.

“Only a fool underestimates those he perceives as weak.” Hunter rambled. “The Sepawn’s not weak. He knows there’s strength in numbers. I would think you would as well.”

I tightened my face. “Better than you.”

“You may think arrogance is what gets you over the top, but it doesn’t. Arrogance prevents you from reaching your full potential. The Sepawn understands this. *If* you survive to the end, you’ll probably have the fewest kills out of all of us.”

Okay, you’re getting on my nerves.

“Let’s find out,” I dared.

“Let’s.”

Fucker.

The Sepawn cunt Emperor Supreme clapped his hands like I was a dog to play fetch with.

“Begin!” The herald shouted.

Chapter Nine

The clap signified the start of the chaos, and I would *not* be perceived as an easy out. I inhaled and willed my power to create more replicas. It was never an enjoyable experience, in fact, it was the exact opposite. Pain. The process of splitting my body sent waves of throbbing, nauseating pain pulsating within my abdomen and threatened to return my breakfast to me in an instant. An overwhelming feeling of dread covered me and for a moment I always thought the pain would only get worse and worse. For a moment I'd focused on it, honing in on every sensation. Where it came from, how badly it hurt and how badly I wanted it to stop.

Other replicators I'd spoken with in my travels experienced the same. It was why the record for most replications in only one setting was one hundred, and the replicator who accomplished the feat went insane doing it and had to be put down like a rabid Terou by his friends and family.

The entire process exhausted me. Not only because of the pain and of having to deal with the pain, but the mental toll of creating another mind was also taxing. I'd learned through the cold, harshness, but steadying influence of the sea to keep the pain in check. It was annoying, but I'd learned how to manage it. I would simply take a deep breath and shift my focus, determined to swallow the pain and keep going.

My entire body vibrated and then produced two exact replicas. For

simplicity's sake, each replica was identified by its number in order of the way they were created in my mind. Replicas One and Two formed and split from my body with the understanding of their mission. Even though the mental and physical properties of the replicas were exactly the same as me, they would only last minutes, melting away after five or so. So, they had to be effective and fast in whatever task they'd been created for. I'd once had a conversation with one of them about whether any future replicas might give me pushback for dangerous assignments. I'd never gotten an answer as the bastard dissolved before he finished his thought. I dropped the matter and since none of them ever bucked my commands, I assumed they wouldn't. No matter how dangerous the mission.

The simple fact was I couldn't make an indefinite amount due to exhaustion, and they couldn't exist without me in the first place. They only lasted minutes, so why try to overthrow me? No, it appeared the replicas simply would try their best to enjoy the short lives they'd been granted. Replicas could replicate themselves, however replicas of replicas degraded quicker and were of less quality due to the painful duplication process. The quality would be so bad, eventually replicas of replicas became useless, blubbering idiots.

The two replicas I'd created at the start rushed behind Hunter and attacked the first combatant they saw. I formed four more and sent them to destroy the combatant. The domination of the combatant pleased me as I walked past Hunter in case they needed support.

"Not bad," Hunter challenged.

"Not bad?" I scoffed. "Are you watching this?"

The six replicas pulled on the combatant, each in a different direction, until the combatant's body exploded into six separate pieces, their innards flooding their floor, and the screams of the combatant rang out. The crowd exploded into a lustful, ravenous din at the liquid-filled red explosion.

Hunter acted as if he were unimpressed.

“Fuck you,” I said. I wasn’t here to dazzle someone I planned on killing anyway. I vibrated again and created more, giving me a total of nine. I dared not push any further as I was already becoming aware of the fatigue circulating on the outskirts of my mind. The other replicas returned to me, eager to continue on, bloodlust in their eyes.

“I’ve known a few replicators in my time,” Hunter continued. “This is nothing new.”

“Well, how about we bring *your time* to an end?” Replica Nine warned.

“Except, the thing I always wondered about replication is this—how do you keep track of who the original is when there’s so many of you?”

Fuck.

I hated this man. With one sentence, he tried to fracture my mental state. He indeed understood the complexity of replication.

“Simple,” Replicator Three answered, but then they all chorused the same thought. “I’m the original.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

“You idiots,” I chastised, “he’s trying to confuse you. *I’m* the original. Use your heads and don’t fall for his tricks.”

I am the original...right? Fuck! What if I’m not? What if I’m only seconds away from dissolving? Which one of those bastards is the original? He’s got to find a way to keep me alive! I don’t want to melt away into goo!

“Exactly,” Hunter laughed. “If each replica is the spitting image of the original, down to their thoughts and feelings and the power to make more replicas, but still individual beings...how do you tell which is the original?”

Fuck you for causing this mental anguish! How much time do I have left? Did I really make them, or did I make myself?

“Replicas only last minutes,” one of the replicas answered. I wasn’t sure which one said it as I’d lost count of who any of us were. “Any replica who makes a replica, then that replica loses quality.”

“Yes,” Hunter agreed, “but minutes can feel like hours, and the replicas

who make replicas can make many replicas before there is a significant loss in quality, correct?”

“Stop trying to confuse us!” I bellowed.

“It’s a strong power to be sure,” Hunter said with a shrug. He tried to downplay what he was doing, but I could tell it was intentional. I knew it. “But it seems as if it would drive a person mad trying to ensure they don’t lose themselves in a sea of themselves.”

I’m not going insane! I won’t be put down by Máel or anyone else for that matter.

“Enough!” We declared in unison. “Fuck the Sepawn and fuck the plan. We’re in this to win it, and we’ll start with you.”

If I’m going to dissolve, I’ll do so after I kill you.

Hunter wore a smirk on his face as he stared right at me.

I knew it! I’m the original, otherwise, why would he look at me? I am the original...right?

“After all this time, you people still haven’t changed,” he lectured. “It already started with me, before you were born, boy. You’re merely repeating the same mistakes as your predecessors, but the difference is I’ve had centuries to fix mine. And you’ll be dead in minutes.”

Fuck you!

I rushed him, and noticed the other replicas all did as well. I wasn’t sure if they were following my lead as the original, or if we all had the same thoughts at the same time. I only knew I wanted to hurt him before I dissolved. If I wasn’t the original.

The first one of us arrived and placed both hands on my forearm.

Yes! We’ll tear him apart with our bare hands.

Hunter looked at the replicated me and smiled. “Rot,” he commanded.

Oh no.

We all froze in place and watched the horror. The bloodcurdling scream the John released was a sound I’d never thought I’d hear. His skin turned a

lifeless gray as the necrosis spread, infecting every cell with decay and rot. If he was the original, we would all be dead on the spot, but he wasn't. The replica's screech filled every part of the arena as his body collapsed into a pile of ash, dust and goo.

"I guess *he* wasn't the original," Hunter laughed. He bent down and stuck his hand inside the mix and pulled out a fistful, causing one of us to vomit. "The death of the original, and the subsequent destruction of the replicas would have powered me for hours."

What?

He let the ash fall from the bottom of his fist in a steady stream, then opened his palm, placed it on top of the pile, and started to glow. My jaw dropped to my feet. Once he was done, he raised to his feet, and was taller than he'd been before, with thicker muscles.

"How...how...how did you do that?" One of the us stammered.

"With all the power in the world, it's amazing how you people think so small. You've forgotten your own history."

"I've never seen that ability and I've been all over the world," I said.

"But have you ever been *in* the world?"

My face tightened. "What?"

"You said Sepawns belong in the ground. Well, I warned you that being in the ground is not necessarily a punishment. It can give you time to think, to germinate ideas and thoughts—thoughts such as revenge on the world who locked you away and forgotten you. I've been in the ground. Let me show you what happens when something left for dead still has life."

Shit. What's next?

Hunter vibrated and split into a whole host of replicas. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen or experienced before. Whereas I could split off into two at any given moment, this man—if he truly was a man—created dozens. I looked around, and the other John's melted away in stunned silence.

Cowards! They'd rather give up than stay and fight. Wait...I'm still here?

I'm the original!

“He’s a replicator,” one of the remaining combatants yelled.

“No,” I corrected and shook my head. “He just killed one of my replicas by telling it to ‘rot.’ And it did. That’s not a replicator power.”

Ridley and Bhif had moved close enough from the side wall to rejoin the center. “What are you?” Ridley asked.

“You want to know what I am?” Hunter snarled. “What I am is the forgotten. The cast aside. The discarded.”

I'm the original!

“Kill them all,” Hunter commanded his replicas.

Fuck.

Chapter Ten

Hunter's replicas charged us and everyone in the arena. I backed away until I bumped into the ones from the tunnel.

"Back-to-back!" Ridley shouted.

Makes sense. I'd hate to do it, but what's the alternative? If I'm to die, it will be on my feet and not on my knees.

"Don't let them touch you!" Torrin bellowed. "Amira! To the center!"

"Give her space!" Ridley declared.

Amira brushed past me and moved to the center of our circle, while I, Bhif, Torin, and Ridley surrounded her.

"What do you see?" Ridley called to Torrin.

"Amira, use your Sense Manipulation to blind any Hunter that comes close. Bhif, make an ice moat in front of us to rob them of their footing. Maintain it as long as you can. Ridley, you, John, and I will cut the bastards down as they get close."

Bhif formed a long, sharp ice sword and tossed it to me, while I steadied myself for the attack.

Look at this shit. I'm about to die taking orders from a Sepawn, using a sword from an ice giant. I'm fucked whichever way I slice it.

An unending wave of Hunter replicas surrounded us on all sides, but instead of seeing the destruction of the storm, I saw the beauty. This wouldn't

be the first time I'd stared into the face of a ship killer. Being out on the ocean, transporting and delivering legal and questionable goods, taught me to rely on a crew even when we disagreed. I will rely on these men and woman with me, and go down fighting.

Bhif created a large ice moat around us, which made each Hunter replica stumble and lose their footing as they pressed. Amira shot a wave of nausea through me into the horde further limiting them.

"Now!" Screamed Torrin.

Using my ice sword, I hacked and slashed at the nearest Hunter replica sending stream after stream of blood into the air. The ice sword proved to be surprisingly resilient and somehow didn't freeze my own hands as I wielded it. I hated to admit it, but these crew members were exactly what I needed.

"Ridley, find this bastard's weakness," Amira called from behind me.

"Already know it," he answered. "Powers are like muscles, remember this. The more he uses it, the more fatigued he'll be. Eventually, he won't have the stamina to make new ones, and when he does—"

"I'll kill the cunt!" Bhif hollered.

I had to let them know. We're in the fight of our lives, and they've proven to be capable warriors. Even more, they've proven themselves to me and teaming with them might provide a way for me to survive the day. I needed them as much as they needed me.

"No, you won't," I yelled. "The fucker eats death! I saw it! He absorbs the death of one of my replicas and grew stronger! With all this death around him, he'll be unstoppable if we don't find a way. Somebody better get their head out their ass and come up with something quick, or we're going to be overrun."

Another Hunter rushed forward and slipped on the ice. I cut the fucker down in an explosion of red, but used the last of the ice sword as it melted away. "Bhif! Sword!"

"Bhif doesn't like the sound of that," Bhif said as tossed me another ice

sword.

“Ridley,” Torrin yelled, “ give us something, man. Or we’re all dead!”

On and on the battle raged. Hunter seemed to grow stronger the more he created. The more replicas, the more death, the more he absorbed, and the more he created. It was an perpetual cycle of Hunter blood and ice as we fought against him. My shoulders and arms ached and the muscles in my legs cried out from the strain. This was a war of attrition and sooner or later, we were going to lose.

Bhif tossed me another ice sword, but as it flew through the air, I noticed it was shorter and thinner than the other. Also, the ice moat had thinned from the fallen impact of the replicas, and was nowhere near as effective as it was minutes ago.

I looked at Bhif. He was drenched in sweat. The woman behind us huffed and wheezed. The Sepawn was sure to die, and the other man moved slower than he had at the start. The team was fading, and with it, my chances at survival.

You’re the captain of the ship. Time to lead them to safety.

“Fine. If no one else can do it, I will,” I declared. “We’re going to take the fight to him!”

I scanned the chaos before me, and pointed the remainder of the ice sword in my hand at the original Hunter.

“How?” The woman cried, her sultry voice begging for my domination. She would suck my cock the moment I led us through this, I was sure of it.

I slammed my ice sword through the right eye of a replica and glanced over my shoulder as the way forward burst in my mind like the nut I was going to burst in her sweet cunt when this was done.

“If anyone is going to get us out of this, it’s you, John,” the Sepawn remarked. The fucker needed me.

I’ll put aside my hatred for you, Sepawn, but only for this moment. Because I’m a bigger man than you or your kind will ever be.

The clouds in the sky parted and gave way to reveal the sun. The light streamed down from the sky and flooded the field, bathing me in a celestial spotlight and coating the field in shadows. The air around me grew hot, but not from the heat of the sun. No, my blood boiled from the fact I would have to save a Sepawn.

Fuck him. I know what I have to do.

“Bhif!” I commanded, “form an ice path from us to the original Hunter. Put us in a direct line and on a collision course.”

“Whaaat? Bhif doesn’t like the sound of that,” Bhif complained.

“Do you like the sound of your own death instead? Do it. Everyone else, when Bhif makes the path, climb on board. I’ll make a couple of replicas. Their job will be to push us down the path and get us to the original as quickly as possible. If they die along the way, their sacrifice will not be in vain.”

“Fuck you,” the Sepawn spat. “Who put you in charge?”

“Providence,” I answered. “I’m the best chance you have. Now, shut the fuck up before I cut you down myself.”

The Sepawn bowed and cowered in the face of his better.

“Amira,” I continued. “Keep the Hunter replicas off balance and when we reach the original, focus all your strength on the original. He’s strong right now, probably stronger than you since he’s been renewing his strength, but do the best you can.”

“Got it,” she declared seductively.

“Torrin, call out any incoming traffic to us. Point out any attackers, and any that get through Amira and I’ll will deal with them personally.”

“And what happens when we get there? To the original Hunter?” Torrin asked, his cowardice dripping in every syllable.

“I’m going to end it,” I answered.

“Bhif likes the sound of that,” Bhif roared. “Everyone, climb aboard.”

Bhif waved his hands and pushed out, doing as I commanded and made a

solid path of ice cutting across the arena and directly in the path of the original Hunter.

“Get on,” I instructed and created two replicas as support. “Bhif, lock me in your fucking cold so I don’t all off. Let’s go!”

Replicas One and Two nodded, grabbed hold and pushed, hurtling us forward. I held the ice sword in my hand and pointed it forward like the commander I was, driving Bhif to steer us down the path, and filling the Sepawn with courage. Amira disoriented any Hunter replicas that came close while I cut them down. We rode a wave of red death with me as champion.

The original Hunter looked our way and we stared at each other in challenge. I smirked at the look of horror on his face. “Now, Bhif!” I commanded.

Bhif split his hands wide and the ice path melted into the ground. Because of the speed at which we traveled, our pack tumbled, but I used the momentum.

The crew stood aside and I dove head first down the middle, rolling into my fall and came up on my feet and in front of the original Hunter.

“Very dramatic,” he snarked.

“Dodge this,” I fired back. I pushed past my own limits and four replicas. My replicated selves rushed forward and grabbed a limb each of Hunter. He was strong. All the death he absorbed had strengthened him beyond what I’d ever experienced. “Bhif!” I shouted.

Bhif created five sharp ice swords and tossed one to me and each of my replicas. We drove the ice blades into the chest and sides of the original Hunter. He dropped to his knees, threw his head back and roared to the sky. I snatched the sword Ridley had from his hand, and drove the tip of it into and through Hunter’s brain. The crack of his skull was louder than the resounding cheer from the crowd. His body shook with violence and each of his replicas screamed as they dissolved, filling the arena with the agonizing cries of death.

I was a hero to the masses, but Amira wanted me for herself. She dropped to her knees and reached up, opening her mouth and begging to take me into it.

“No,” I said and withdrew from her. “At least, not today. It’s not right for you to have me, when the world needs me. But...perhaps, one day you shall taste my victory.”

I would have fucked her senseless right there in front of everyone, except the Sepawn had experienced enough of my glory. I would not give him the satisfaction of seeing me fuck as well.

Chapter Eleven

The royal herald approached me with the cowardly Emperor Supreme by his side. “You saved us all,” he moaned. “If it wasn’t for you, we’d all be dead. Thank you! Not only did you save the world, you did so with honor. This day will go down in history as the darkest of days, so, we *must* forgo the normal rules. Even though you, and you alone, are the reason we’re alive, the Sepawn Emperor Supreme has declared five winners of the The Chaos Games.”

“What?!” I growled.

“We have to bring the Midsummer Festival to an end. You gave everything you had to save us, it's not fair to ask you to fight these five leeches with you for ultimate victory. You deserve better. So, we decided the five of you will be given charge of your individual territories, establishing them as sovereign kingdoms in their own right for the next decade.”

“The four of them,” the Sepawn corrected.

“What?” The herald asked. “What did you say?”

“I said, ‘the four of them,’ will be given charge of their own kingdoms. I don’t deserve my own kingdom.”

The herald nodded in agreement. “As you wish.”

“And him?” I asked and pointed to the cowardly Emperor Supreme. “If he wants to rob me of my ultimate victory, what is to happen to him?”

“Since there was not one clear and definitive winner, and he’s a Sepawn who doesn’t know when to quit, the Emperor Supreme will not be removed from power completely. He will continue to rule, however, he is a Sepawn. We’ll let him rule over Sepawn Island. No one else will want to.”

“That’s bullshit,” I spat as the air around me rose to a boil. “That cunt did nothing to help in this fight except cower in the dias with the rest of you fucking cowards.”

The herald’s voice quaked as he answered. “I’m sorry, sir, but this is the best we can make of the situation. We don’t want you to have to shed anymore blood on this day of death.”

“Agreed,” the Sepawn chimed in. Of course he’d advocate for another coward to rule his people.

But, it reminded me of something. “What of the wish?”

“Wish?” The herald asked.

“The wish,” I said. “Each winner gets one wish to be granted.”

“We...we can’t grant them each a wish,” the herald scoffed. “That would be insane to give them that when *you* did all the work.”

“No need,” the Sepawn said. “Because we all have the same wish. So in essence, you’re only granting one wish, and in doing so, fulfilling the Midsummer Festival traditions.”

“Oh?” The herald asked.

“End the Midsummer Festival,” I growled. “I never again want to give a Sepawn an opportunity to achieve greatness they don’t deserve.”

“What?!” the pompous prick wailed.

“You heard him,” the Sepawn agreed. “This should be the *last* Midsummer Festival ever.”

“The wish is to end it all.” I commanded.

Epilogue

“I ’m not a psychopath...am I?”

“Of course not,” Replica Three-Hundred-Forty-Five answered. “Why would you think?”

“It’s what Hunter said. It’s been bothering me ever since. Not so much that I get lost, because I know who I am. It’s just the thought that a little piece of my mind breaks off every time I create a new replica.”

“You’re completely fine! Just look at it this way, I’m—”

“Dammit!” I cursed. Rubbing my temples with my fingers, I vibrated and created another. “Three-Hundred-Forty-Five dissolved. Do you know what he was about to say?”

“No. I’m Three-Forty-Six. Five had his own way of doing things. What were you talking about?”

I blew out a breath. “Just that I might be a psychopath.”

“No! You’re completely fine! Look at it this way, I’m—”

“No!” I screamed as Three-Forty-Six fizzled out into a pool of gray goo.

The trip back to the Kingdom of Day was long but news traveled fast, making it back before my arrival.

“I will be your advisor,” one of the random men beside me stated as I divested myself of my clothing to prepare for a much needed bath.

“I will be the judge of that. I’m going to shower and get this road dust off

me. Get out of this room until I call for you.”

The man sputtered and called for the servants to get my clothes for the wash. I wasn't in the mood for propriety. I needed to get clean and feel like a new man. Or men?

The tub was opulent like the rest of this place, over exaggerated in finery and decoration. It was pointless but with power came great advantages.

Once the grime was off my skin, I got up and splashed over the side of the tub on my exit. Servants had brought in towels a few minutes ago but rushed out, afraid of my ire. Good. I didn't need any time wasting conversations today. I needed to get to the point. The point of my new reign.

“Bring her in,” I declared.

A beautiful seductress came in and immediately knew what to do, sinking to her knees and ensuring my cock was clean with her mouth.

It still bothered me how the bloody Sepawn still had a measure of authority after the games. They were a menace and mockery to society. Things needed to change.

Once my body was dry, and I busted in her mouth, I walked out the room without a stitch on and called for the servants. Some of the maids gasped and covered their eyes while the male servants quickly answered my beckon.

“Get me some clean clothes, then gather my personal guards. I need to have a word with them.”

“Yes, your majesty.” The young servant bowed and quickly went off doing as I bid.

I stood there, leaned against the doorway to the washroom and waited as I mentally checked off all I had to do. I needed to oversee the kingdom's naval forces as well as their docks. I wasn't sure if Máel and the crew were still on land once they found out about my victory. If they thought I left them behind for wealth, would they have taken over my ship and continued our trade?

The moment the servant ran back with a pile of linens, I snatched it from his arms and began dressing right there. When the royal guard appeared right

behind him, I grabbed the rest of my clothes, laid it over my shoulder, and crossed my arms before addressing the men. “Is this all of you?”

Five men stood before me, one shook his head. “No sire, but we were the ones assigned to the former king. The royal guard consists of—”

I cut my hand in the air to stop him. “It doesn’t matter. You,” I pointed to the farthest one on the right, “What’s your power?”

“Telekinesis, Sire.”

“And yours?” I asked the next man.

“Shadow Teleportation.”

“I guess that’s one good thing about the current system. Citizens from all over the world mingled in all nations. But you are loyal to me, correct?” I asked him with narrowed eyelids.

‘Yes, Sire, I am.’

I vibrated and split into three replicas.

“He’s lying,” Replica One said.

“Get him!” Replica Three demanded.

Replicas One, Two, and Three surrounded and seized the guard.

“No...no!” He screamed. “I’m not lying, Sire. I’m loyal—”

I grabbed and twisted his lying head, snapping his neck before any other further words could fall from his mouth.

My finger went down the line and I pointed at each of the remaining guards. “Do you see? I don’t need you here. If you are not here to serve then you will be replaced. Do you understand?”

The guards bowed their heads. I continued my questioning, and gathered all the information I needed. In order to be a royal guard for me, I needed to be assured of their powers, and their loyalty. The ones who didn’t convince me were handled by my replicas.

Or was it me? Did I handle them?

One guard was all I needed within these walls as I could handle myself if need be.

“Get me Máel,” I commanded one of the guards. “He needs to see this.”

“I...I can't, Sire,” he answered with fear in his voice.

“Are you a coward?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“No, Sire.”

“Then find me Máel, Máel Knapp. He's probably on the ocean somewhere. Send out all manners of communications and tell him to get his ass back here to the mainland. I wish to celebrate with him and the crew.”

“Sire,” the guard answered, “I can't get him, because he's dead.”

The news hit me like a punch to the chest. “Dead...what do you mean, dead?”

“Sire, he's...he's right there on the floor. You killed him.”

The guard pointed to a man whose body was slumped over. I rushed to his side and lifted his head to see Máel staring back at me with cold, lifeless eyes.

“How did this happen?” I roared.

“Sire, you just did it. You sent for him and your crew as soon as you returned from the games. As you went down the line asking for powers, you said he hadn't done enough to convince you of his loyalty, so you broke his neck. You and your replicas.”

“You lie!” I bellowed, and vibrated again. Replicas Four and Five rushed the guard and ran him through with his own sword.

“He's lying,” Replica Five stated as blood dripped from his clothes.

“Clearly,” Replica Six agreed. “Though, is he?”

I don't remember.

“Well, if he was telling the truth, which one of us did it?” Replica Two asked before he dissolved into the gray goo.

“Why would the original kill Máel? It doesn't make sense,” Replica Four asked and rubbed his chin.

“Well, I didn't do it, so that must mean I'm the original,” Replica One stated.

Wait. Is he Replica One, or is he the original? Am I really Replica One?

“No way!” Replica Four roared. “I didn’t kill Máel, so I’m the original.”

“Impossible,” Replica Five declared, “when I’m the original.”

“I’m the original,” I argued. “I think.”

“It might have been Three-Forty-Seven,” one of them said.

I’ve lost count. Am I the original or am I a replica?

“Wait. If it was Three-Forty-Seven, shouldn’t that make me Three-Forty-Eight? Unless I’m the original?”

“You can’t be the original when I’m the original,” one of them declared right before he dissolved.

“Guess he wasn’t the original.”

“Who’s the original?”

“Watch. It’s me,” one of them said and then vibrated, creating his own replica.

The new replica looked at the one who vibrated. “No. I’m the original,” the replica’s replica said.

Or, was he really the original who made a new replica?

“Sire?” a voice called from behind me. I spun on my heels and came face-to-face with an unremarkable guard.

“What?” I fumed. “Can’t you see I’m arguing with myself?”

“Yes, Sire, but...but it’s time.”

“Oh,” I sighed. “Okay.”

The replicas dissolved into gray goo, leaving me as the last one.

“Ha! I knew I was the original. Get someone to clean this up. I’m on my way.”

“Yes, Sire,” the guard said and exhaled.

I walked down the hall until I reached the throne room and took my place on the throne carved with golden filigree images depicting vines and florals that wound around thorns. Sitting at the base of each arm was the carved head of a lion, roaring his dominance above the people and his kingdom. Each foot

was in the same color gold with a pristine white backing and seat to indicate the purity of divination.

My coronation was literally a dog and pony show for the masses. I had no need for this utter bullshit but the people did—my people. The citizens of the Kingdom of Day were in need of strong leadership as the rest of the nations were. If Máel couldn't convince me of his loyalty after all of these years, then no one could.

Did he not convince me, or did he not convince one of the replicas? Wait. Did a replica really kill Máel? My best friend? No, a replica would never do that. It must've been an assassin who snuck in when I was distracted. But who would want to kill Máel?

Of course. Fucking Sepawns getting revenge.

The royal herold stood before me on the dias in his pompous outfit with puffy sleeves and unrolled his scroll. "All hail, King John Warwick, new sovereign of the Kingdom of Day. May his rule be long as his strength be just, may he lead us all into a new dawn and see his people prosper."

His voice grated my nerves. I pushed him aside and rose to my feet. "The problem is," I stated, "before my reign even had the opportunity to get off on a prosperous foot, my hand was cut off right out from underneath me. My friend Máel was to *be* my right hand and rule with me. But some Sepawn assassin scum snuck in and ended him. Well, I will end the Sepawn threat. Here is my first decree. Any Sepawn in the Kingdom of Day from this day forth shall be the servant class."

Gasps of horror filled the room. It only spurred my hatred forth. After all I've done for them, for the world...they would side with the Sepawns? No, they were in need of leadership, they weren't used to having a strong head like me.

But is it me? Or am I a replica who hasn't dissolved yet?

"As of today," I continued. I could resolve whether I was the original or not later, "any child who does not display a power by the age of eight shall be

exiled from this kingdom.”

The voices rose, most of them feminine but it only further solidified my belief. Aramil tried to pass her bastard off on me, so here’s my response. The world needed to understand how disgusting Sepawns were. I would expose them, and drive them out from their places of power. I will send them back to where they belong. They can find their way to Sepawn Island with their cowardly former Emperor Supreme, or they can find their way to the afterlife.

Wait. I don’t want the people to split on me like my replicas did. They may rise up against me, like one of my replicas did when it killed Máel. Or did I kill Máel? Am I the replica?

Be smart about this. Keep the people on my side.

“But I am not a cruel leader as some may try to get you to think. No. I will leave it to the parents of nonpowered children to be rid of them how they see fit.”

Yes! Brilliant!

“It will be *your* responsibility to disburden our nation of any born Sepawn in the Kingdom of Day. If the other nations are smart, they’ll realize the Sepawn threat, realize how deceptive they are. They snuck in an assassin and killed my friend. Let the name of Máel ring throughout history and serve as the martyr who started the movement! So, I extend the hand of friendship to all the nations but the Sepawns and entreat them to join me, to join us. Remember who it was who saved you on the darkest of days. You may do so slowly but surely join us in this new movement.”

The other kingdoms would, I was confident. At the very least, I know Amira wants to suck my cock as soon as she can. She longs for someone strong behind her to punish that pussy.

A smile permanently plastered on my face as I made my way back to the royal bedchambers.

Wait. Is it my face or someone else’s?

Am I the original?

Or am I a replica?

GIANT EMPIRE

BHIF THE LIONTALON



Courtesy Warning

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to violence, explicit scenes, forced marriage, dead chickens themes that may be disturbing to some readers.

No chicken was harmed in the making of this book.

Chapter 1

Bhif The Lionalon

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO...

She screamed and screamed. I covered her mouth as I continued to shove my cock into her wet cunt. It squelched with every thrust and she moaned against my hand, quietly sobbing for more.

I leaned over her, bending her body in half, pushing the back of her legs against her shoulders.

My hands slipped from her face and she quickly grabbed it, pulling my large finger into her mouth. The way her tongue swirled around the digit made me groan and curse as my hips pounded into her harder, shaking the wooden table beneath her.

Some of her goats bleated, ramming their horns against her front door, wondering where their mistress was. Mia Clover was the sexiest widow I had ever come across in the Giant Empire. Her hair a striking black against her pale skin, it currently splayed like a halo around her.

Not to say I ever looked beyond this cunt warming me. I just had no reason to. I had come across many virgins who were curious about Bhif the Lionalon's prowess. Over the years, it became monotonous. Mia was the first woman who shunned my advances and it elicited a new excitement in me for the chase. It took me a while before she let me around her, helping around her home.

The first time she let me taste what an experienced woman could give me, I was caught in her trap. Because who wouldn't want to hold down the amazing Bhif? My hands glided against her skin, relishing her beneath me, savoring her as I invaded her cunt with my big cock.

As her pussy milked me, pulsating around my shaft to the point of pain, the table screeched across the stone ground of her small farm home. She was small for one of our people and maybe that was what drew me to her as well.

"I can't!"

“You can,” I gritted out as I thrust into her a few more times until my abs tensed up and lightning shot down my spine, spilling into her.

She cried out and her goats bleated. The sound of some of her chickens distressed and flapping around were dulled as I continued to pour into her.

Until I finally collapsed on top of her.

“I can’t breathe!”

“I can’t either. I think I just died.”

“Get off me, Bhif!” she whined. It made my dick twitch.

“I did get you off,” I chuckled.

Her little fists hit me in the chest and I straightened up with my cock still firmly planted inside of her.

“Mia, there’s still light out. We’re not even close to done.”

She looked at me flabbergasted. Did she not know me? Have we not done this song and dance every single time we came together? I was Bhif the Lionalon. My stamina knew no bounds.

“My pussy will be raw by the time you’re done with me and I need to tend to my animals!”

I scratched my lightly furred chest and stretched my arms up, thrusting into her once more. “They’ll be fine. We can hear them from here.”

She dropped her legs onto my chest and I grinned, ready for more—Until she kicked me like an angry horse, toppling me into her kitchen stove with a crash.

I groaned and rubbed my back as I sat on my naked ass on her kitchen floor. “Mia!”

“Oh, don’t you Mia me!” She angrily jumped off the table and grabbed her clothes off the floor.

A shrill scream left her lips when she found her favorite dress torn. I couldn’t help it. It had been a while.

I couldn’t go a day without emptying my sack.

“Get out, Bhif!”

I got to my feet and dusted my backside off, looking at her incredulously. “My dick’s still hard.”

The daggers she shot through her eyes as she glared my way made it *rock* hard. Like the giant I was.

Damn.

I almost didn’t block her rolling pin fast enough when she threw it at my face. Did women not feel relieved and relaxed after orgasming like their world exploded? I mean, I know my skills were amazing so this left me in the utmost confusion.

While I contemplated the mysteries of womandom, the sound of chickens screaming floated through the wooden slats of her home. Her face went from angry to shocked and fearful. My own instincts kicked in and I ran out the house before she could make a move.

My blood still pumped from our session as my eyes scanned the surroundings to see black fur in the chicken coop. Quickly grabbing the ax off her wooden stump, I gripped it firmly and ran toward the large black wolf.

He turned at the sound of my footsteps and blood ran down his jaws as he crunched down on Mia’s favorite chicken. I rolled my neck and exhaled. She was going to blame me for this. I wasn’t going to get pussy for a month. The thought of her withholding because of a wolf pissed me off beyond reason. My nostrils flared and my teeth bared. The wolf bared his back at me, and for a moment we were engaged in a teeth baring contest. But Bhif didn't lose. Bhif’s a giant and a giant’s promise is not to be fucked with. I gritted my teeth harder and swung the ax.

Fuck you, for fucking up my fucking, you fucking wolf!

I missed. Totally blew my mind as I didn’t anticipate how agile the wolf would be. He leaped back and left me crashing the ax down into the ground.

“Argh!” I thundered.

No damn wolf was going to make me look foolish. With my strength, I

pulled the ax out of the ground and swung it to the side. The blade skidded off his fur and he ran. Roaring like a beast, I ran after him with my ax. It was only when I felt my dick swinging between my legs, I realized I didn't put on any clothes.

No matter. I was going to fix this little problem for Mia and she would forgive me and let me sink my dick into her ass as thanks.

It was a simple plan with a simple solution.

I caught up with the wolf and threw the ax, missing him. I didn't need it as I would not be stopped, with or without the ax. Mia's ass was on the line. With only a few feet separating us, I leapt onto his back, taking him down, and we skidded across the grass. He let go of his prize and snarled as he tried to turn and snap his jaws in my face. Wrapping my arm around his neck, my other hand grabbed the upper side of his mouth and pulled. His fangs sunk into my flesh, piercing through to the muscle. I screamed like a bitch, but I didn't let up. I was Bhif the Liontalon. I gritted my teeth, gave him a feral grin, and stared into its fearful face.

“You think you got the upper hand on Bhif? You crossed the wrong giant, beast. I hope you enjoyed that chicken because it was your last.”

I threw my victory speech into the wind, as the crack of his jaw reached my ears. The warm blood on my hands chilled until my entire palm stiffened with the drop of temperature. The animal's jaw tore further apart, its mouth filling with crimson liquid from its wounds. The arm I had around its neck loosened. I pulled it back as I formed an ice spear as long as my arm, and shoved it down the wolf's throat.

I jumped to my feet, and dragged the beast behind me, stopping to scoop up the ax I'd thrown with my other hand and walked back to Mia's cabin. My chest was light and a warm feeling flowed through my body. These were the simple tasks Mia needed a husband to do.

If only she'd stop refusing to take one.

I'd offered her and despite my best efforts and best orgasmic thrusts, she

denied my marriage proposals time and time again. There seemed to be no way to breach her relationship walls. She was a stubborn one, no doubt. But like the wolf's jaw, I'd find a way to crack her.

No woman could resist me.

I was Bhif the Lionalon.

I just needed a little more work to break her down—one orgasm and thrust at a time.

When I made it back, Mia was in utter grief. Some things about women I couldn't understand. It was a chicken. Even if it was her favorite one, it was still only a chicken. I could get her a million more.

Her tear streaked face was beautiful, but her sneer threw me off. Why was she still pissed at me? Wasn't I the one who saved the day?

"Mia! I have returned and brought you an offering," I boldly announced.

Her screech made me take a step back. "You distracted me! This is why all this happened! If you would have just got off me when I told you too, I could have saved her!"

My hand warmed and the beast dropped like a sack of bricks onto the ground beside me. Lifting my palms up, I tried to take control of the situation. "Mia, calm yourself."

Everything happened in slow motion. Her goat bleated with accusation. The chickens clucked with damnation. And Mia turned her back, slammed the door, locked it, and shut me out.

I fisted my hands and hung my head trying to wrap my mind around how this situation was my fault. No answers came, no matter how long I stood there without a stitch on. The only thing I was certain of was darkness descended and the chill in the air picked up, making my balls shrivel in an effort to contain warmth between my legs.

Running my hand down my face, I groaned when I realized there was still blood on it. Pivoting with a growl, I slammed my fist into the dead beast beside me, cracking its ribs. I couldn't even get the satisfaction of hearing its

painful cries since it was already dead.

Shaking my head, I walked away from Mia's home, with my balls blue, and not from the cold.

Chapter

Two

“**W**hat’s got you looking like your dog just died?”

The sounds of the tavern was controlled chaos. Men laughed as they bantered back and forth over the music. It smelled like stale beer and unwashed ass, which was no surprise with this many men in one area. The walls were made from thick tree trunks, insulating us from the elements better than Mia’s little cabin. The sheer amount of bodies currently being filled with whiskeys and other spirits was enough to heat up the room. I took another swig of my beer before turning to look at the guy sitting next to me at the tavern.

“Her chicken died,” I told him blatantly, still unable to believe the simple fact she chose the stupid creature over me. Me!

The bird was dead, and she still chose *it*? It was no longer chooseable! This made no sense. I had plotted to break into her home when she slept and fuck her until she came to her senses, but the tavern sounded like a better alternative and my gut was empty. Plus, she’d probably do something silly like accuse me of rape or something just to get revenge. Mia kicked me out before she could feed me. It wasn’t fair. I was ready to fly with this woman, but instead, I’m in a tavern talking with a stranger. I was grounded for love and it didn’t sit well with me.

The fermentation of the drink was only starting to have its effects and that

pissed me off as well. I wasn't the biggest giant in the land. In fact, many of them called me "runt" as a term of endearment. My father wondered if he had actually sired me at all based on the other giants and their youth. He was a renowned blacksmith, forcing me to apprentice for him at a young age.

"You're not the biggest child I have, son," Father would say, "if you're going to survive, we need to teach you other skills. The giants honor all those who are able to contribute. You may be the runt, but it doesn't mean you can't be big in your own way."

Father loved me like that, yet all the hard labor could've played a part in the brute I grew to be.

My mother, bless her sweet soul, was the size of Mia. It was because of her, I wasn't the biggest. I got her genes.

"You'll be big in other ways," she'd tell me.

I always thought she meant the size of my cock and fucking prowess, so when I found Mia, I made sure she'd experience both. And now, I feel messed up for thinking of my mother and then thinking about fucking Mia and her delicious cunt.

Shit.

Maybe that was my problem. I should have feasted between her legs more. But surely, my dick was enough. Surely, the chicken wasn't worth losing that.

"Barkeep, give me another!" I slammed my mug onto the counter and ran a frustrated hand down my face. At this rate, I might peel my own skin off with how much it'd been happening.

Gian the barkeep leaned back against the shelves and looked at me. The toothpick in his mouth waved as if to say I should have saved the damn chicken sooner.

"Bhif, you know you're my favorite customer, and as much as I love the fact you're here I'm going to have to stop you here."

My temper snapped and I threw the glass at him. He was quick to duck,

his calm expression never changing.

“I can drink any man under the table,” I roared. “Now, get me another!”

“Like I said, you asswad,” Gian scowled. “This is exactly why you need to be cut off. Regular patrons feel the drink by their third. You, my friend, have already downed about eight.”

I scowled. I could match his scowl. I could scowl better than the rest of them. Scowling was my thing. Nobody scowled better than Bhif the Scowler. I meant Bhif the Liontalon. And that number couldn't be right. That was only my fifth.

He leaned in and put his face directly in front of mine. “Go take a walk, Bhif. This is my sister Gianna's place and if she were here right now? She'd be pissed if she knew someone was breaking her glasses.”

I growled and shot up, knocking the stool to the ground in a loud crash. The patrons all stopped their chatter and turned their heads in my direction. It wasn't the kind of attention I wanted. They saw me not for my prowess, but for my shortcomings, which aggravated me to no end. My hands itched for some fun and maybe Gian was right. I needed to get some air.

I wouldn't tell him though. I stared at him with a snarl. Or was it a scowl? Either way, I stared at him with something to let him know I meant business and bent down to grab the stool. Then, I pulled a few of the gold coins I had out of my pocket to settle my bill and slammed them on the counter while setting the stool back into place in an upright position. I could hear my mother's voice in my mind telling me to control my tantrums and scowled further.

“Bhif! Get control of your tantrums,” she'd say.

Stomping through the front door, I made my way around the back to take a piss. It smelled like shit back here, but I ignored it. Gravity made me feel the effects of a full bladder. Maybe I did have more than five drinks.

I unfastened my pants and sighed in pleasure as hot piss poured onto the ground. Being an Ice Manipulator, I'd often field stupid questions like, “do

you pee ice?”

No, and what a dumbass question.

People were stupid. Life was stupid. Chickens were certainly stupid. Her chicken was stupid enough to get eaten by a big-ass wolf. A big-ass wolf! How do you not see a big-ass wolf coming to eat you? Now here I was, peeing my troubles away on the side of a bar of ass and shit.

Fuck me.

Anyway, I made sure to aim far away so it wouldn't splash on my boots. Once done, I shook myself, tucked myself in and turned as I refastened my pants, only to run into two men standing in a defensive position on either side of Gian.

“Look, if you're here to watch the show of me pissing, ya missed it. I don't pee ice, and I'm done.” My mouth always got me in trouble, but at this very moment, I was looking for it. I needed something to release my frustrations on.

“What the fuck, Bhif?” Gian scowled. “I put up with all of your shit, and then you try to get away with *this*?”

My hands chilled but I kept a relaxed body posture. “I killed the fucking wolf that ate her chicken, so enough with the scowling already.”

The other guy, who stood about the same height as the first and looked related piped in. “What?! He's not talking about a chicken, you stupid fuck.”

“Then...what the fuck?” The drink was starting to hit me and I cursed under my breath at its timing.

“You gave me counterfeit coins to pay your bill, Bhif,” Gian snarled. “You're trying to stiff me on what you owe.”

My face tightened and I shook my head. “No...No! I would never do that. No. Wasn't me.”

Gian held up a gold coin. “It's got *your* picture on it, stupid. Instead of the king's.”

My jaw dropped. “Whaaa?!”

“And now we’re going to take what you owe out of your ass, ya prick,” the first one sneered and lunged at me.

I sidestepped and brought my clasped fists down on his back right before I side kicked the other guy who came running at me. The moment the second guy hit the ground, the first one jumped on my back and I flipped him into the wall of the bar. I wasn’t the biggest giant, but I was stronger than most.

Thanks, dad.

My hands formed into large, deadly shards of icicles as I threw a fist into the next guy’s face. The only problem I didn’t account for was he was an Absorber. Fucking Absorption power let him absorb my power temporarily and use it to strengthen himself, while taking away my own power. He grew as tall as the barn outside Mia’s place, left me powerless, and slammed his own massive fist back into my face.

Patrons came out of the tavern to witness the show. I could hear someone asking about what was going on right as I swept my feet under my opponent, taking him to the ground. His big-ass hit the ground hard, and I straddled him to punch the shit out of him, but his companion wrapped his arm around my neck and held tight.

“What did you say?” One of the people in the crowd asked.

“He fucking used counterfeit coins to pay,” another answered. “The counterfeit was so bad, there was no way it was going to pass. Instead of King Gomory, it was *his* face on the money. I could hear it through the walls.”

“Oh, that’s just stupid. How bad a criminal can you be to use your own face?” was the last thing I heard before more men jumped into the fight, landing on top of the guy choking me and pinning us all to the ground.

In a flurry of ice and limbs, everything became a blur. The effects of the drink made it hard for me to get a grasp on what was actually happening. The only thing I was sure of was the fact that my fists were hitting flesh and that made it worth it.

My face was beaten raw and my last thought before some asshole with superstrength took me to oblivion was, I should have just sucked in my pride and gotten Mia another chicken.

Chapter
Three

“**Y**ou can’t hold me! No one can keep me, for I am Bhif the Lion—”

“Get your ass in there!” The guard yelled right after we both scuffled and he shoved me aggressively into the cell, making me land on my stomach. “Fucking runt,” he decried.

Whenever someone said *runt* like that, it made me wonder if they meant it as an insult.

I wasn’t a small man by any means but I was the smallest out of all my siblings.

“They’re insulting you,” Lori, my sister, once said. “Don’t let them get away with that.”

Grrr...the fact she may have been right after all these years ago hit me like a snow boulder and that in itself made my irritation rise.

I always had to work to be stronger than those around me, and to face things without fear. I had consistently worked with my powers, coming to understand its strengths and limitations and utilized it after conscription to the local Peace Protection Groups. People of the Giant Empire were known to try and take advantage and overpower those they thought were weak because of size. It was why I had to not only train, but use my other talents like counterfeiting coin.

And it was a good profession behind the veil of fighting. No one

suspected a thing until Gian, the cunning old fool. I should have known I wouldn't be able to put it past him. But I was in a weaker state of mind then, making mistakes I shouldn't have.

The guard's boot steps slowly faded away after the clank of the bars shutting me in. I waited a few moments before making any moves.

"Laying there with your face on the ground, ain't going to get you outta here no quicker."

As I lay with my face on the ground, I remarked how well-maintained the stony floor was. It almost was clean enough to eat off of. I pushed myself up to a seated position and surveyed my area. The drink had already worn out of my system, the room no longer wavered and moved as I stared at my new surroundings. Built by the Civic Committee in response to population demands after the rise in civil skirmishes within the cities, the walls were solid. This particular prison was surrounded by a moat filled with putrescent water and sharp spikes.

They were stupid to think it would hold a man like me. I was only humoring them by letting them bring me here. If I wasn't so influenced by drink, I would have thrown them in the cell and locked them in these cages while I made my way back to find Mia.

"Got drunk, eh?"

Shaking my head, I placed my hands beneath me, pushed up and brought myself to my feet, dusting myself off. At least I wasn't naked this time. Making my way to the edge of our locked cell, I grasped the bars and scanned the area to see if there was anything that would help me escape.

The only thing I could see were brick walls, a small desk and chair and a lamp that had seen better days. There were no keys on the wall or anything at all. Just stone.

"Bhif? You're not getting out of here if that's what you're thinking?"

I placed my head onto the bars and grumbled to myself about how stupid my mistake was. I should have grabbed the coins from the other pocket.

Counterfeiting money had gotten me in trouble a time or two, it was nothing I couldn't handle. This time was no different, I just had to figure out a way to get the guard back here so that I can take the keys from him.

“Bhif?”

Scoffing at the situation, I turned and rolled my neck, determined to figure out a game plan as I laid low here. I grumbled over the fact that there were also no windows within the cell for me to look out and see who was out there patrolling the area.

Walking a few steps to the back, the sound of my footsteps echoed. Suddenly, I heard someone calling my name before noticing another figure on the ground.

“Bhif?! What the hell, man? I've been talking to you all night. What are you doing here?”

Of all the rotten luck, it couldn't be. “A chicken, Huotosh. A chicken. Why are you here?”

Huotosh was a potter from the village of Tregaron. His brother had done trade with my father in the past during their travels through our village. Raised in a strict home, Huotosh found himself in a lot of trouble with the female variety as he grew up, an act of rebellion to his family the more they pressured him to take his family business seriously as his father began to age. He was a bit of a moron, so I'd learned how to tune him out when needed.

“Imprisoned for the crime of harassment. At work! Who knew you couldn't tell a woman you want to bite between her legs?”

I didn't know they hired women in his company now. I thought it was only a family affair. It must have really been a while since we last saw one another. I made my way to the back of the cell and sat on my ass beside him, leaning against the wall. The silver lining to this situation was that we were not in chains.

“What's this world coming to?” I asked more to myself than to him. “I had a similar conversation with Mia.”

Huotosh and I had recounted our lives together a time or two over drinks when we would run into each other in the taverns. Father used to make me deliver weaponry to his customers who would seek him out from far and wide for his skill. We took advantage of the short reprieve we had away from our family's eyes.

He shook his head in disbelief. "At least Mia likes you. I thought this woman loved me."

Bah! Women were the most complicated of creatures. The moment one thought they discovered the secret, we were slapped in the face and made to be morons once more. Thinking about it too hard gave me a headache, one not the result of residual drink.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because she was my coworker."

I did not see a problem here. "So?"

"So, who doesn't love their coworker."

I wasn't sure if it was a question but I gave him my wisdom anyway. "A lot of people. When Father had me blacksmithing I saw—"

"Bah! Everyone loves a coworker. It's in the handbook."

I jerked forward, turning to look at him seriously. Was this what I was missing? "What handbook?"

He looked at me incredulously. "What do you mean, what handbook? *The* handbook."

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion, wondering if he was pulling my leg. It was a big leg. He wouldn't be able to even if he tried. I should kick him and get some answers. "Where's *the* handbook?"

"In someone's hand!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms up, almost hitting me in the face. "How should I know? The bottom line is I go to see the judge tomorrow and they told me I'd better have a good reason for sticking my hand down her shirt. I do! I wanted to see if they were real or not!" he threw his hands up in the air in frustration.

That *is* a good reason. I rubbed at my chin and didn't say anything for a few moments. But I couldn't hold it in any longer. I needed to know. "Were they?"

"Couldn't tell. But they felt mighty fine."

I nodded my head. It made perfect sense. I would have done the same. "Then it was worth it."

A few moments of silence passed by once more.

"Are Mia's?"

I inwardly scoffed at his question. "Does Bhif look like the kinda man who eats fake apples?" I opened my arms to showcase myself in my full glory sitting here beside him.

"Bhif looks like the kinda man who eats anything, *even* fake apples." He mumbled the last part and I scowled in his direction but he looked off in the direction of the bars, ignoring me.

"I thought you were in jail for telling her you wanted to bite between her legs?"

"Yeah. I wanted to bite her apples."

I grunted.

This conversation had me missing Mia too much. I was moody and horny. Grumbling about how stupid my night turned out, I made myself comfortable at a farther corner of the cell so I could stretch my legs out.

"Watch it with your big feet, Bhif!"

"You need to go to the other corner then, Huotosh, I need some rest in preparation for what's to come. You should do the same."

Huotosh let out a frustrated sigh from his corner before stretching out his own legs beside mine. I clasped my hands behind my head and thought of what I could say to the judge to get me out of this prison quicker.

The only thoughts that ran through my head were dead clucks and wolf howls as my mind slowly wanted to drift off to slumber.

"I've been here for the past month and I haven't even gotten my date set

yet. These assholes just want to string you along and keep you on your toes, making you think you'll be here forever.”

I zoned out, ignoring all of Huotosh's ramblings as the darkness threatened to consume me.

“Bhif, are you listening to me? The apples—”

“You need to shove those apples where they'll keep you out of trouble, Huotosh. Now be quiet and let me sleep.”

Chapter
Four

The room was drafty, mostly empty besides a large wooden desk and a few chairs behind me. There was a large faded image covering the wall behind the judge. Scenes of Giants in battle as well as scenes of domestic life and farming mingled as if it were in motion.

I stood in front of the judge who was in his later years with a permanent scowl on his face. The wrinkles only added to the droop of his cheeks which made even his smiles look like grimaces. The more I quietly observed him the more I noticed that his body was still fit for fighting, but his countenance told me he had retired from those days for some time now.

He would still be a worthy opponent if one got on his wrong side, something I wasn't trying to do at the moment.

As he sat there, staring at me behind his hands, I fidgeted where I stood, my chains clinking together with every movement.

“Why are you back before me again today, Bhif?”

“A chicken, your royal judgeship. A chicken,” I answered with a sigh.

Judge Viscardi rummaged through the papers on his desk with a furrowed brow. “Did I get the wrong information?” He asked.

“It's Bhif, sir,” Zachaeus the bailiff sighed. “You have the correct information.”

Judge Viscardi's nostrils flared. “Bhif, you are here for counterfeiting

coins and attempting to pass them off as legal to one of our best citizens.”

“Pfft. If Gian’s one of our best, then we’re doomed. He needed two other men to take me down. And a crowd.”

“Bhif! Do not interrupt me while I’m speaking to you,” Judge Viscardi roared.

“I’m just saying your judgey-ness. Gian is no saint. He’s probably done more than I have in half the time I’ve done it. Why, did you know that he once—”

“Bhif!” Judge Viscardi shouted and dragged his hand down his face.

“You are truly one of a kind, do you know that, Bhif?” Viscardi sighed.

“You know? I was *just* thinking that. Spooky, how good you are. Is that how you’ve been able to maintain your judge-stuff all these years? I didn’t think there was a power of mind-reading in the world...”

My eyes widened. “Gasp! Are you the first mind-reader, Judge? We need to tell the world—”

“I can’t,” Viscardi interrupted with a shake of his head. “I can’t do this with you anymore, Bhif.”

“Do what?”

“How did you even get out of the Peace Protection Group to begin with?”

I pressed my lips together.

“I give you a warning, you come back. I put you in the peace groups, you come back. We’re going to have to think of a more *permanent* solution to this problem we have.”

“We don’t have a problem. I’m Bhif the Liontalon.”

“Bhif! This is your third time before me.”

“Practice makes perfect.”

Judge Viscardi narrowed his eyes, as a vein pulsed in his forehead. Was I missing something?

“We’ve never had a giant citizen win the games, did you know that?” The judge’s voice was low pitched and hoarse making me imagine his years of

yelling at soldiers during the old wars.

Forcing my attention back on what he said, my brows wrinkled in thought. It was a stupid question. Everyone knew that. It didn't matter how small one's village was, everyone knew the results of the festivals. It affected all of our lives.

"Well, you know how the ancient saying goes. 'Those who don't know their history, are bound to not know their history.'" I was pretty clever and was proud of it. But it seems I was the only one laughing.

"That's not how the saying goes!" The judge roared.

Ah, a man without a sense of humor. He's always come across as a hard man to like, but I thought it was an act. I liked him a little less. I looked to the bailiff and curled my lip. I didn't like him at all. He was not an act, he was an ass. Hopefully, I can make the judge crack a smile so he liked me enough to let me out of here.

"Are you sure?" I asked as the judge glowered.

Huotosh was sitting in the seats behind me, waiting for his turn. This prison system only housed a few prisoners and the judge was normally quick with his judgment. Unless there were other holding cells I wasn't aware of.

The judge leaned forward and stared me directly in the eyes. "Let's try this again, Bhif. We've never won the games, and do you know why? Because as soon as the other combatants see a giant has entered, they immediately target them. We're physically the biggest which makes us the biggest threat to the other kingdoms combatants."

He was right about that. I understood completely. "And?"

"You are *not* the biggest giant by any means—" The judge started and I flashed back to the bailiff degrading me when he threw me into the cell and growled inwardly. Was my size to be the only thing up for discussion? Bhif had plenty of talents to be talked about.

"He's a runt, your judgeship." There he went again as if he was intimidated by me somehow. I didn't know what his problem was. The first

time I met him was during my arrest.

I glared at Zachaeus the bailiff from the side of my eye, refusing to turn my head and cause more trouble. I had a personal tiff with him spanning years. I kept wracking my brain for common ground between us, but nothing would come up. He was determined to put me in the worst light, being one of the ones who'd call me runt when I was a child. One of the ones my sister warned me about. I needed to understand why. Or I didn't. Once I was out of here, I'd fuck his wife and show him who the runt truly was as I gave her my big fat cock.

Judge Viscardi cleared his throat, and I returned to him.

Damn. He must've seen me looking at Zachaeus. I thought I was subtle.

The judge sat there staring at me critically, nodding behind his clasped hands, contemplating his thoughts. "You're a runt, so for the first time, we may have the chance to actually win. Since you blend in so well with the small people, they may overlook you."

I didn't like the way this conversation was making me feel one bit. I was Bhif the Liontalon! "But I'm bigger than them! I'm just small for a giant."

"My wife is bigger than you!" Zachaeus added with a chuckle.

"Well, according to your wife I'm bigger than *you* so that makes us even," I grinned.

He wanted to leap at me and that's when I knew.

I was definitely fucking his wife after this.

I was ready for it. All his stupid size jokes were getting on my nerves. But the judge cleared his throat and pointed his ire at the bailiff making him vibrate with fury where he stood. "Insolent dog," Zachaeus mumbled under his breath.

Ignoring him, I gave my full attention to the judge who still stared at me. Why couldn't they consider Huotosh? He was sitting right behind me. I had other pressing priorities, I needed to go find Mia. I wondered if she'd found another chicken. All these thoughts about fucking brought me back to where I

truly belonged. Between her legs.

“Bhif,” Judge Viscardi sighed, “for the crime of counterfeit, I sentence you to Trial by Games. You either win at the Midsummer Festival and rule the world, or you die on the sands. Either way, this will be the last time you appear before me in my court.”

“No.”

Judge Viscardi raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“No,” I repeated. “They’ll target me in the games whether I’m the biggest *giant* or not. I’ll still be bigger than any of them and that makes it an unfair fight. I refuse,” I clearly stated with my shoulders back, confident in my assessment.

“If you don’t go, then I’ll sentence you to having your cock removed and fed to the pigs,” the judge deadpanned and I swore I could feel my balls shriveling at his threat.

“To fight for the honor of Giant Kingdom has always been a dream of Bhif’s! When do I leave?” I declared.

Judge Viscardi smiled and Zachaeus snickered. Houtoush audibly groaned from behind me. This was ludicrous. Zachaeus the bailiff could go, heck, even the judge could! Why did they need me? I was nothing but a blacksmith’s son who served his time. Let the younger giants fight that honor. The single ones. I had Mia and I needed to get back to her in case someone else came sniffing around what didn’t belong to them.

But as I stood there and stared into the eyes of the judge, I knew his decision wouldn’t be deterred. Mia needed my cock. I needed my cock. My cock needed me. My cock was what got Mia. *And that stupid chicken was what kicked me out.* Bhif will just have to quickly kill everyone and then leave. I narrowed my eyes and looked at Viscardi as he continued to smile with his apparent victory.

He obviously didn’t know who he was messing with.

Bhif the Lionalon.

And when I win, the first thing I'm going to do is come back here and have your cock removed and fed to the pigs, asshole. Then, I'm going make you watch, Zachaeus, as I have Mia fuck your wife, while I fuck Mia.

Chapter Five

It smelled like ripened bodies in this wagon, ones which sat out in the sun for days. I discreetly stared at the newcomer who came without chains and a weapon and moved to the rear. The unconscious man before me looked like he took a good beating. I wondered what got him into this predicament. Whatever it was definitely wasn't as simple as counterfeiting money.

The rocking started back up as the wagon continued to move forward. The woman tried to hide her face from the rest of us. I couldn't blame her. It was predominantly males here, me being the biggest one. If it were Mia in her situation, I would have pummeled them all into the ground for even daring to have inappropriate thoughts about her.

But this woman was not Mia. I did not have as many fucks to give her.

A soft groan left the lips of the man laying on the opposite side of the wagon. As he peeled his eyes open, I kept my guard up. Bhif was not as dumb as they made him out to be. Too many years fighting battles back home gave me insight into the mind of my enemies.

Except the judge. He didn't count. I didn't know we were enemies at first, I thought he liked me. Why else would continually preside over my issues?

"You're awake," the woman whispered. My focus fell to their conversation while I pretended to look elsewhere stoically.

"My sister," the man groaned as he stirred.

“What?” The woman asked.

“I was with a woman. Where is she?” he croaked out desperately and I wondered if she was killed before he could wake.

“Sorry. You were alone when they loaded you,” the woman explained.

He shifted and noticed his cuffs.

Welcome to the club.

“Energized cuffs,” the newcomer explained to him and I narrowed my eyes in suspicion at his knowledge. “Don’t try to break through them.”

Conversation continued between the people in the wagon, offering condolences to this man who was probably telling lies to begin with. I decided to cut the mushy crap and interject myself.

“There’s one here I want to see on their back,” I said with heavy insinuation. I was clever like that, and I was bored. This trip to the festival was taking too long.

I stared at the woman to try and capture her attention but she ignored me. I scoffed inwardly. No woman could resist giving Bhif attention, she was only playing hard to get and I needed some sort of form of entertainment while I sat beside these ripened bodies. She was nothing compared to Mia. My train of thought made my mood sour.

“Hey,” I called out. When she ignored me again, I decided to take a different route to rouse her reaction. “I’m talking to you. How about before we get out of here, you let me fuck the dirt right off of you?”

“Leave her alone,” the beat up asshole beside her grunted.

This was what I was talking about. I needed something to occupy my time until our arrival at the festival.

“What did you say?” Giving him all my focus. If this was what he wanted, who was I to deny him the full attention of Bhif.

“I said, leave her alone. Can’t you see she doesn’t want to be bothered with the likes of you?”

I inwardly laughed. It wasn’t even about her anymore. My hands formed

fists as I imagined his face and skull punched in. Perhaps if I took him out first, the guards who traveled behind the wagon would remove me and provide me the perfect opportunity to escape.

This'll work, Mia. I will make my way back to you.

“Oh, she’ll be bothered, and then maybe after I bother her, I’ll bother you too,” I taunted, willing him to take the bait.

He accused me of being an empty headed sack of muscle but his play on words didn’t scare me. No. This stranger was going to know the prowess of Bhif the Lionalon soon enough. I pulled my hands hard into my chest, rattling the chains and causing the others chained on the same line to lurch forward from my strength.

“Do you know *how* I got here?” I snarled.

“Probably fucked the wrong farmer’s goat.”

What the hell?!

If we were anywhere else, if my situation hadn’t been what it was, I would have laughed. Unlucky for him, I wasn’t in the mood for his little jokes.

I roared.

He turned his face to the window, dismissing me. “I don’t care how you got here, but leave the lady alone.”

My muscles tensed as I rattled the chains again. I could probably break free but it would take up too much of my energy if I needed to fight off the guards afterward. He was lucky.

It was time to kick this up a notch. I recognized the road we traveled and it wouldn’t be long now.

“You little punk. I killed a monster three times your size who dared to look at me,” I snarled. “I was only joking with her, but I’m not with you. You’re going to be next.”

He threw another one of his stupid jokes and it only served to irritate me further. “I’m going to *kill* you,” I threatened. I could easily break his neck if

he would just come a little closer.

Come closer fool.

“Right. And I suppose you’re going to kill me with these chains we have on our wrists.”

He was the simple minded one and didn’t realize it.

“I can kill you with or without the chains,” I bragged. “Bhif the Lionalon, can do it all!”

“Who?”

He can’t be serious.

My jaw dropped, but I decided to be helpful and cure him of his ignorance. “Me. I’m Bhif the Lionalon. No doubt you’ve heard the virgins singing songs about me in the hills.”

“Never heard of you.”

This little bastard was really getting on my nerves. He must have been a former prisoner and not gotten out much. He tried to devalue my reputation. Bhif wouldn’t stand for such nonsense.

I snatched the chains back again, lurching everyone forward with me. “I’ve never heard of you either!” I bellowed. “You’re probably some...some chicken fucker.”

“You’re not very good at this, are you?” the asshole asked.

The comeback *was* horrible, but damn that and damn that chicken. I needed to get out of here. I needed to reclaim my woman before someone else took her from me while I was in chains. But first...

“I’m good enough to kill. You? You’re nothing. Have you ever killed a man? Felt the life flow from his body as your hands wrapped around his neck?” If he wanted a war of words, he’d get one. Bhif backed down from no one, man or giant alike.

“Yes,” he stated bluntly. “Hundreds.”

Dammit.

I was taken aback, unexpected the answer. I thought he wanted a war of

words? I saw his game. He wanted me to *think* he wanted a war of words, only to turn around and shorten the amount of words to confuse me into using shorter words.

One of the other passengers piped in, giving me a moment to think. The wolf, the chicken, the bar, the jail, the judge. Nothing was going the way I needed it to go. Dammit. I should have fucked her ass when I had the chance.

“You’re in the Wardeners,” I heard the other passenger say.

This tidbit of information piqued my interest. “What the fuck is a lieutenant of the troopers doing here?”

“Waiting for my turn to die, just like all of you.”

Cryptic. But Bhif will not die! No, Bhif will be the victor. No man or giant can kill Bhif. A ground of blood will show to the world that only Bhif can kill Bhif!

“We’re to fight in the arena,” I informed them all in case there were any who didn’t understand. “But, do not test Bhif, cause if any of you do, then you’re *all* dead.”

Chapter

Six

“**G**et the fuck out!” One of the guards commanded when the Powerdrop Wagon stopped.

This was it. No one spoke as we followed the guards to the back of the arena. They freed us from our chains, and soon we were standing on the sands with thousands of people from across the world staring down on us.

Damn.

I surveyed the three other tunnels at opposite ends of the arena and across from where we exited. I was the runt of my family, one of the smallest giants around, but I would soon be a target. To these people who rode with me in the wagon, and whoever came out of those tunnels.

Fuck Judge Viscardi for sentencing me to die.

Fuck Bailiff Zachaeus and his small cock.

And fuck that chicken!

Bhif will win the day.

My mind went over all the possible outcomes of *how* I could win the day, when the Wardener’s hushed voice stole my attention.

“When the trumpets blow, we stand together. No matter who comes out of the doors on the other sides, we face them.”

Stand together? Fuck yeah!

“Why?” The woman asked.

Fucking hell. Who the fuck cares, woman? This man has a plan that can help Bhif make it back to Mia.

He locked eyes with her and I wondered if they knew each other prior to this—the look they gave each other was too familiar, too intimate. “Because we either fight together, or we die alone.”

An unfamiliar voice behind us chimed in. “You’re all going to die, anyway.”

I didn’t recognize this man. He wasn’t in the wagon. How many more new people were they going to throw in the festival last minute? His whistling was annoying. The moment he stopped next to the man with a sword, I knew they were connected. It was too coincidental not to be.

“I’m going to win this.” My eyes snapped to the one who came in the wagon with a sword. “I have to.”

“What is your name, friend?” I asked.

Wherever he was a moment ago, he returned to the moment and saw me.

Names flew back and forth but I couldn’t take my eyes off him. His features burned into my memory in case there was a spy in our midst.

“Because I’m going to end it all,” the man named Ridley admitted.

The woman straightened. “Then our reasons align, and I’m as determined as anyone. When I win, I’m going to end it all.”

I was tired of their blabbering. “Bhif has a reason to end it all too. I’ve got to make it back to my woman, and I will. Bhif is not a liar. Burn it all, and no man will ever be separated from his love again.”

“No man, or *woman*,” the woman added.

I gave her a nod, and felt a sense of regret for making jokes at her expense. Bhif will be a better man than that from now on.

“Is there anyone here who fights for a reason *other* than to end it all with their wish? I’m Torrin.”

“Hunter.”

“John.”

“Amira.”

“I’m Bhif—” I started but was rudely cut off by the newcomer, Hunter.

“What is your gift?” Torrin asked Ridley, who only stood there like a simpleton. We needed to get on with this.

“I’m a giant,” I declared.

“Yes, we know Bhif,” John sighed. “You’re a giant.”

My nostrils flared. I didn’t like this John fellow. He reeked of hatred and superiority complex. I needed to put him in his place.

“I’m a giant. But I’m not stupid, little man,” I glared at him. “Don’t treat me like I am, or you’ll be the first to see Bhif’s power. Ask the wolf.”

I could still feel his blood coating my fists.

John raised an eyebrow. “Wolf?”

I took a step forward, towering over him and growled. How easy would it be to snap his neck right here and be rid of the nuisance before the festival began? He found his senses and stepped back from my challenge.

“What’s your *power*, Bhif?” Torrin questioned. “You’re big, but I’ve seen bigger giants, so gigantism can’t be it.”

I didn’t like any of them, but if we are to survive this, we would have to work together just like Torrin said. “Ice generation,” I gritted out.

Ridley’s eyebrow raised. “A distance fighter?”

“They’re pretty nasty,” Torrin sighed.

I raised an eyebrow and tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

Torrin shrugged. “Just a hunch. You do fight with a level of tenacity, right?”

How dare he try to put Bhif in a box.

“Bhif doesn’t fight with teeth,” I corrected. I was way too skilled a fighter to only rely on my teeth. He must be really stupid to think I would fight like a beast.

But of course, they didn’t know I valiantly felled the creature that threatened my Mia and her animals. Bhif had taken down plenty of worse

things in his lifetime.

“That’s not what tenacity means,” Ridley corrected.

It was no wonder they were all thrown down here. All their attitudes needed adjusting. “Bhif knows what teeth-nasty means. I can get up close and personal. I’m quite comfortable in close proximity. I don’t use my teeth to fight.”

“But?” Amira asked.

I tired of all this pointless talk when we needed to plan our survival. I needed to get back to Mia.

I threw out some ridiculous answer to satisfy them and turned my attention to the crowd as they roared. The other combatants had entered into the arena and all told, we numbered around fifty. Fifty combatants ready to fight to the death. These men and the woman all had lofty ideals, but were saying nothing concrete, so I tuned them out. It was as if they were on repeat, saying the same things over and over and slowing us down.

“We all wound up on the same wagon. This is no accident,” The woman said.

I ran my hand over my face. She was right. I’d work with them and let the afterlife sort it out later.

“We fight together,” Torrin summed up, “so that none of us die alone.”

“And in the end?” I asked. It was the question we all needed to concentrate on.

Torrin balled his hands into fists and said the words I needed to hear. “We bring it all down.”

Fuck yeah! Mia...I’m coming home to you.

I balled my fingers and chilled my hands. Everything in my life had prepared me for this moment. My time with the Peace Protection Group. The wolf. The insults hurled at me disguised as terms of endearments. My father. My mother. My sister. It all prepared me for this.

Time to be a liontalon.

Chapter Seven

The arena smelled of bloodshed. Splotches of crimson stains littered the ground. The crowd was full of energy, staring at us with hunger for death and destruction—the puppets thrown into the festival for their entertainment.

I was used to attention, but this kind felt like poison seeping under my skin. It was the same feeling I got following bad orders during the skirmishes back in the Giant Empire. I was no one's executioner. I no longer allowed a higher authority to use me for their evil ends. The energy in this place only fueled my rage at being kept away from Mia.

“Bhif doesn't like this,” I growled.

“Stand strong,” Torrin demanded. “As long as we stay together, we have a chance.”

As long as they stayed out of my way, they wouldn't die by my hands as a casualty.

Hunter chuckled. “You're all going to die.”

He would be the first to die after I took out our new enemies.

I concentrated on our new opponents and the way they circled us like predators. None of them were as big as me and that in itself made my ego swell. The others were arguing while I watched their footwork ahead of us, trying to determine who would be the first to feel my wrath.

“But be careful what springs from the ground,” Hunter wrapped. I didn't

trust that man as far as I could throw a spear and Bhif was the best spear thrower within the entire southern region of the Giant empire.

Trumpets blared and directed our attention to the dias in the center of the arena set above the entrance of the hallway opposite us. Everyone on the arena floor pivoted to face the royalty as they entered. It was amazing to see how such a small body dressed in pomp and finery was able to win the last festival. The Emperor Supreme and his queen took their seats in the front row overlooking us all. Another group with a superiority complex judging by their expressions.

The moment the herald opened his mouth and let his squeaky voice boom forth, I stopped listening. His hands comically gestured wildly with his speech and I wondered why he was the one standing there and not in the arena.

I kept my eyes on our opponents, casting my gaze over everyone's heads.

The crowd cried out and cheered, making me turn to look over my shoulder and see the Emperor Supreme rising to his feet. He opened his arms wide and soaked up the attention.

"Listen to me," Torrin whispered. "When he makes his move, partner up and protect each other."

"The pompous prick is milking this till the end," John noted through gritted teeth.

"And you can continue to bear your hatred for Sepawns, or you can take a look at the men and women who encircle you, all with the same murderous intentions, and work with me and live," Torrin challenged.

I respected his sense of fearlessness in the face of formidable odds. It was no wonder he was put in the position of leading troops under him. If John was smart, he would listen. He didn't have any other options unless he wanted to fight this battle alone.

John blew out a soft breath. "What would you have me do?"

"Bhif fights alone mostly, but even he recognizes when a different option

should be considered,” I reiterated.

“We’re with you,” Amira said softly.

“I’m in as well,” Ridley whispered. “We can resolve our differences once it’s down to us, and only us. There are too many here to battle without a solid plan. You seem to have one, Torrin, so I’m in. Regardless of our motivations, we’re all striving for the same thing, and that’s to end this madness. There’s honor in that. There’s beauty in that. There’s a chance for victory in that. I’m in.”

He talked too long, and too much, but was not as dumb as he looked. He’d come to his senses quicker than John. I noted this in my mind.

Torrin gave a slight nod. “Here’s what we do. When he gives the signal, Ridley, you and Bhif go left. Protect each other.”

Good. I’d had as much chance to kill John as I had to work with him. I tuned them out and focused on Ridley. We were to work together, and maybe, just maybe we’d make it to the end. I breathed slowly, bracing myself for what was to come.

The Emperor Supreme sped his hands together in a loud clap and the noise from the crowd began to rise in thirst for bloodlust.

Chapter
Eight

“**B**egin!” The herald declared, and we did.

The fifty or so combatants were immediately reduced to around thirty by quick strikes from other combatants once the Emperor Supreme clapped his hands. It was clear from the start, it was a bloodbath—everyone for themselves. The Sepawn had come up with a brilliant idea. An alliance would give us an edge within the fight.

“To our left,” Ridley said and pointed.

I nodded. This little man was ready. I let him know I was as well. “Bhif needs no reminders. I’m way ahead of you.”

This is off to a wonderful start.

I circled my hands and formed an ice shield tall enough to cover us from head-to-toe, countering a solar blast in the nick of time.

“Nice,” Ridley shouted and patted me on the back as he stood behind me.

“Bhif told you he needs no reminders. Bhif knows what’s at stake and agrees with the plan. We all make it to the end and decide from there.”

“Let’s get to the wall.”

Ridley had an annoying heroism about him, but I ignored it and created another large ice shield. I felt Ridley’s back as he leaned against me. I wedged the pointed end of the ice shield into the sand below, and lowered my profile. Ridley had my back and would handle any threats from that side as it

was also in his best interests to do so, so I would handle the front.

In a normal situation, the sand would be an impediment to my powers as it would absorb most of the moisture in the air, leaving Bhif with very little to form ice with. However, in an arena with combatants providing a ready supply of sweat and blood, a lack of moisture was not a problem.

I twisted my wrist and pulled from the air. Four pointed icicles appeared and hovered, waiting for my command. And I knew just where to direct them.

From my vantage point behind the ice shield, I'd observed serious threats to my desire to remain alive. A group of Intellects had begun to fight together. At first they'd been on separate parts of the arena, but somehow made their way to each other. I wasn't sure if they knew each other prior to the games, but they had to go. Intellects were among the more difficult of the powered people of the world to kill due to their gifts.

I could tell one of them had the Precognition power from the way he fought. He'd singlehandedly taken out three other combatants without a scratch and it had to be because he could foresee possible outcomes. Thankfully, his back was to me.

See this.

I pushed forth, and sent the icicles speeding through the air. Bhif preferred to meet a man face-to-face before dropping him to his knees, but a Precog would be tough. As the projectiles fired forth, the Precog spun on his heels and ducked. I rolled my eyes at his success. Of course, he'd already seen the possibility of being dead by ice.

But, every power has its limits, as his allies found out. When the Precog Intel ducked, the icicles continued their path and impaled themselves into an Intel who'd been fighting beside him. I think he had Shadow Camouflage as he had been routinely ignored by the other combatants. As long as he remained in the Precog's shadow, he'd been virtually invisible. Except, my icicle projectiles only followed my flight plan and didn't deviate, so when the

Precog Intel ducked, he doomed his buddy.

Which didn't sit right apparently with another one, because the Precog began to wobble, before the tip of a spear appeared from the other side of body and through the front of his chest. Seems like another Intel who had Vertigo Inducement didn't appreciate the death of their ally. I purposed in my mind to keep Ridley alive. If our alliance were this fragile, none of us would make it.

"I've got you, little man," I called over my shoulder.

I willed the ice shield to charge forward, and used it as a battering ram to clear a path. No one would stop Bhif as I rammed combatants and shoved them aside. Arms and legs went flying, removed from their homes as Ridley used his sword to mop up any who sidestepped my ice plow. We reached the left wall of the arena and pivoted, keeping it to our backs and surveyed the scene in front of us. The Emperor Supreme on our left was on his feet, eyeing us in an effort to determine what we would do next. Bhif's prowess had garnered a grand spectacle for them all.

"What's next, little man?" I asked.

"We fight," he said, with a humbleness in his tone which hadn't been present in our previous conversations. "Together."

"Together," I agreed. "These people fight with no honor."

"It's something that seems to be in short supply these days."

"Perhaps it will come down to you and I in the final fight," I answered, "but in this moment, you and I are allies. Bhif will not have you die at his hands before then."

"Thanks, Bhif. And you were right," he sighed as he surveyed the scene of destruction before us. "I had heard the virgins singing songs of your mighty exploits."

"Some would say you are a fool," I inhaled and looked at him. "But Bhif says to hell with them. Another may call you an enemy, but Bhif shall name you friend."

“Then Bhif is the fool,” he said with a smile.

“Ha! Bhif has been called much worse than fool in his life,” I crowed and patted his shoulder with my massive large hand. “Come now, let us get back into the fight. Bhif yearns for blood and cunt, and he cannot have the later until he has satisfied the former.”

Mia, baby. I’m coming for that ass. Literally.

“Bhif is a strange man,” he responded with a tilt of his head.

I narrowed my eyes. “Any man who doesn’t yearn for blood and cunt is the strange one,” I countered with an unsettled laugh.

Bhif didn’t know why this little man didn’t yearn for blood and cunt, but I had no time to debate. I lifted my ice shield, grabbed Ridley by the arm, and together we charged into the narrowing field of flesh. And then something I hadn’t known possible happened, and halted my steps. I looked at Ridley who’d lost all color in his face.

Mia. My stretching your asshole out might be delayed.

Hunter had split into a large number of replicas to outnumber us at least three-to-one.

“Kill them all,” he commanded and glared at me.

Chapter

Nine

I grabbed Ridley by the arm and forced him to follow as we made it to the center of the arena. We joined the other wagoners before the first replicas. They charged at us, screaming death. Ridley had been paralyzed by fear, and I was sure the rest would need Bhif's guidance. My time in the Peace Protection Group would be invaluable, thanks to that cunt Judge Viscardi.

Perhaps after I win this thing, I won't have your cock removed, Judge, and fed to the pigs.

"Back-to-back!" Ridley stuttered as he recovered from his fear-induced stupor.

"Don't let them touch you!" Torrin bellowed. "Amira! To the center!"

"Give her space!" I roared.

Amira moved into the center of our circle, while I, Ridley, Torin, and John surrounded her. Our backs were inward to her with my massive girth serving as the main barrier between her and death.

"What do you see?" Ridley shouted to Torrin.

"Amira, use your Sense Manipulation to blind any Hunter that comes close," he answered.

"Good idea, little man. I, Bhif, shall make an ice moat in front of us to rob them of their footing. My sheer strength will enable me to maintain it as long as you can. Ridley, you, John, and Torrin cut those bastards down as

soon as they get close.”

“Bhif,” Amira breathed, “you’re amazing.”

“I know,” I called over my shoulder. “But now is not the time for the sucking of Bhif’s cock. We. Must. Fight!”

Bhif formed a long, sharp ice sword and tossed it to Torrin. I could not leave him weaponless.

Hunters were everywhere and attacked from all sides. Those who didn’t rush us, decimated the other combatants, or climbed the walls and massacred the crowd. The original Hunter was in constant motion. He vibrated like a dildo, creating more and more Hunter replicas.

I had to stop him. Watching him vibrate like that made my cock hard as I thought about the sex toys Mia had and how I would use them to pleasure her. I whipped his hands around his head in a wide circle and then pushed up. A wide, thick, ice moat emerged from the ground and I circled it all around. The replicas had no time to stop, slipping on the ice as it appeared in their path.

“Now!” Screamed Torrin.

I didn’t know why he screamed, but I assumed he panicked. I formed a giant ice ax, in remembrance of the wolf whose actions brought me here today, and swung it with murderous intent.

I hacked and slashed through Hunter after Hunter until my arms ached. When my ice ax melted to nothing, I wheeled my hands through the air and reinforced the ice moat, making sure the Hunter replicas wouldn’t have solid footing and saving my allies.

It was a cold cycle of death delivered on the strength of Bhif the Lionalon.

But, Bhif was as wise as he was mighty. I studied my friends as they fought valiantly in an attempt to keep up with me. When I noticed they began to suffer from fatigue, I knew we’d have to act.

“Ridley, find this bastard’s weakness,” Amira called from behind me.

“I already know it,” I answered. “Powers are like muscles for smaller men. Even this fucker has a limit, for he is not like Bhif. He will eventually tire, and when he does...I’ll kill the cunt!” Bhif shouted victoriously.

“No, you won’t,” John yelled. “He...eats death! I saw it! He absorbs it and gets stronger!”

Coward.

But perhaps he was right. I had a virtual limitless supply of moisture between the blood and sweat in the air. Maybe Hunter was similar. Not better, but similar.

I couldn’t allow my fellow wagoners to fall due to the wave after wave of replicas. It wasn’t their fault they weren’t born with my superior genes.

“Somebody better figure something out quick!” John shouted. “At this rate, we’re going to be overrun.”

“Bhif doesn’t like the sound of that,” I said. “Grow a set and face this. There’s no room for cowardice here!”

I had to snap him out of it. John would be no good to us if I had to keep covering his insecurities. I motioned and pulled, reinforcing the ice moat in areas it had thinned.

“Ridley,” Torrin called as he fired the remainder of his ice sword into the heart of a replica. “Give us something, man. Or we’re all dead. Bhif!”

“I’ll save you all,” I answered and tossed him another ice sword. “Just stay with me! Do not give up, do not falter. We. Shall. Prevail!”

Despite my efforts, my companions were fading. I had to do something. I scanned the chaos before me, searching for one particular person. When I locked in on the original Hunter, it was as John had moaned. He wasn’t just bitching. The original Hunter walked through the rivers of flowing blood from the bodies strewn throughout the arena and would kneel when he came to one. He touched the body, closed his eyes, and his hand would glow as he absorbed the death of the person he knelt over. A few seconds later, he rose back to his feet and appeared taller and stronger than before.

“We’re fucked,” Ridley bawled.

This is all on me. I can’t lose sight of what I’m fighting for. Evil like this cannot exist as long as Bhif lives. I must lead us to victory. For them. For Mia. For the world.

“Snap the fuck out of it!” I demanded.

Fuck this. I know what I have to do.

“Listen up everyone! Bhif will form an ice path from us to the original Hunter, and put us in a direct line on a collision course.”

“Whaaat? I don’t like the sound of that,” John bitched.

“Do you like the sound of your own death instead?” I snarled. His cowardice had made me angry, and I would hear no more of it. “When Bhif makes the path, climb on board. John, make a couple of replicas. Their better fucking do their job, which is to push us down the path and get us to the original as quickly as possible. If they die along the way, that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make. And if they don’t get us there, I’ll kill *you* first before any of us die.”

“Fuck you,” John spat.

“Do it! Amira, keep the Hunter replicas off balance and when we reach the original, focus all your strength on the original. He’s strong right now, probably stronger than you since he’s been renewing his strength, but do the best you can.”

“Got it,” she cooed. “Bhif...when this is all said and done, can I...can I be with you?”

“Not now,” I declared. “I need you to focus on your job.

“Okay,” she mumbled and bit her lip.

“Torrin, you call out any incoming traffic to us. Point out any attackers, and any that get through Amira and John will deal with us.”

“And what happens when we get there? To the original Hunter?” Torrin asked.

“What do you think? I’m going to end it,” I roared. “Now, everyone,

climb aboard.”

I waved my hands and pushed out, forming a solid path of ice which cut across the arena and directly in the path of the original Hunter. I stepped on the ice and raised his hand, showing them it was safe like the leader I was, and locked my feet in the ice. The rest piled in behind me and grabbed hold. When John finally got hold of his cock and vibrated into two replicas, I raised my hand and locked their feet in the ice.

“Fuck that’s cold!” John screeched.

“Let’s go,” I thundered.

The replicas grabbed hold and pushed, hurtling us forward. I steered us down the path, sped us towards the death of Hunter. I saw him just as I saw the wolf—nothing but another obstacle between me and Mia’s cunt.

The original Hunter looked our way and I stared at him, communicating his impending doom. The smirk on his face was full of nervous energy.

He knew it.

I knew it.

Seconds later, I split my hands wide and the ice path melted into the ground. Because of the speed at which we traveled, I used the momentum to continue forward, while the rest of the pack tumbled.

Thank you, Judge Viscardi. Your shortsightedness by sending me to the Peace Protection Group gave me the necessary skills to save the world.

I dove head first, rolled into my fall and came up on my feet in front of the original Hunter.

“Very dramatic,” he snarked.

“Your time is up,” I fired back and clapped my hands sending a bitterly cold frost wave slamming into his body.

“Argh!” Hunter exploded.

He was strong. All the death he absorbed had strengthened him beyond what I’d ever experienced. But Bhif was stronger

“Amira!” One of them shouted behind me.

“Bhif! Do it!” Someone begged.

I created an ice sword and drove the blade into the chest of the original Hunter. He dropped to his knees, threw his head back and roared to the sky.

“You may be a wolf,” I said. “But I’m The Liontalon.”

I ended his time on this planet by driving the tip of my ice sword into and through his brain. The crack of his skull was louder than the resounding cheer from the crowd. Hunter shook and spasmed as I stood over his dying body. As each of his replicas screamed as they dissolved, and filled the arena with the agonizing cries of death, there remained only one question on my mind.

Had Mia found another chicken?

Chapter Ten

The royal herald faced me with the Emperor Supreme by his side. “You fought with honor today, and on this, the darkest of days, we forgo the normal rules and declare you the winner of the The Chaos Games, and bring the Midsummer Festival to an end.”

“No,” I said.

“No?” He echoed dumbfounded.

“No. These men and this woman followed me when no one else would. They will be given charge of their individual territories, establishing them as sovereign kingdoms in their own right for the next decade, and I will lead mine. There are five winners here today.”

“Oh, Bhif,” Amira gushed. “You are as wise as you are heroic. You make me so wet!”

The herald shrugged. “As you wish.”

“And him?” I asked and pointed at the Emperor Supreme.

“Since there was not one clear and definitive winner, the Emperor Supreme will not be removed from power completely. He will continue to rule, however, as he is a Sepawn by nature, he will assume your friend’s responsibility and rule over Sepawn Island.”

“That’s bullshit,” John spat. “That cunt did nothing to help in this fight except cower in the dias with the rest of you fucking cowards.”

“Don’t *you* talk about cowardice,” I seethed.

John backed away, and I shifted my focus back to the herald.

“Continue, Herald. Bhif commands it.”

“Yes,” the herald remarked thankfully. “This is the best we can make of the situation. There has been enough bloodshed on this day of death.”

“Agreed,” Torrin said. “But, what of the wish?”

“Wish?” The herald asked.

“The wish. Each winner gets one wish to be granted.”

“We’re not giving you each a wish,” the herald scoffed. “That’s insane!”

“No need,” I answered. “Because I have already thought this through. You will only grant one wish, and in doing so, fulfill the Midsummer Festival traditions.”

“Oh?” The herald asked. He looked at the Emperor Supreme and smiled. “I think we can do that. Sure, why not? What is this one wish for the five of you? Riches? Glory? More women than you could ever possibly hope to dip your stick in? How can we fulfill the traditions and in so doing, bring the Midsummer Festival to an end?”

“I’m going to end the Midsummer Festival.”

“What?!” the pompous man wailed.

“You heard him,” Torrin declared, emboldened by my choice. “This is to be the *last* Midsummer Festival ever.”

“The wish is to end it all.” I commanded.

And ass. I definitely wish for ass. But I don’t need you to fulfill that. I only need my Mia.

Chapter
Eleven

Who would have thought Bhif would be the ruler of anything, let alone an entire empire to the north?

The train continued on the tracks as I stared outside the window at the freshly fallen snow. The trek on foot was a hard one from O'lind. Their metropolis was vast and overwhelming. I was happy to be returning home to simpler cities and villages. Though their majestic forests were a wonder, it held nothing in comparison to the Giant's wilderness.

We were just cresting across Intel territory and back toward our nation's lands. Our territory was vast and far reaching, one of the biggest territories in the world. It was a source of pride to many of us. It sat at the top like a crown over all other nations.

A crown I now carried.

I was nervous to say the least, though I didn't show it. Our previous leader was a tyrant in many ways, cruel and oppressive. Though it was probably because of his cruel nature we'd gained so much land and held onto it. It was also part of the reason why my life turned into making counterfeit money. King Frar's claws on the empire's treasury took a toll on civilians who were only trying to keep their head above water.

I leaned back into the seat with my arms folded behind my head contemplating what kind of ruler I would be. The chicken clucked under my

seat in its cage and I kicked it a little to get it to hush, rattling the cage and quieting the bird. The ticketmaster wasn't pleased with my cargo, but who was he compared to The Lionalon. Once he knew who I was, and what I planned to do with said chicken, he shrunk away.

Groaning, I rolled my neck and crossed my arms and got into a more comfortable position. Perhaps I'll have to take a look at all King Frar had hoarded and see to distributing it to the people so everyone could live more equally with even opportunities across the board.

Yes. It sounded like a simple solution. That was exactly what I was going to do.

Looking out the window again, I watched as we passed by the bulk of the cold regions and toward the heart of our empire. Once we started crossing simple villages on the outskirts, my mind went to Mia and her cabin, wondering if she had enough chopped wood to keep her warm. The snow didn't reach her town of Ferncombe this early in the season but the chill did.

The chicken clucked again but quickly quieted down. I needed to see her. I needed to make sure she was alright while I was gone. The thought of another male warming her bed blipped in my mind but I quickly casted it aside. It was impossible. She wouldn't replace me that quickly.

She couldn't, could she?

Bah!

I was king! What more could she want than King Bhif the Lionalon, the Wolf Killer of O'lind.

I leaned forward with my head in my hands, rubbing my scalp. Mia had a way of pulling the rug under me and keeping me coming back for more. What was this hold she had over me? Why couldn't I get her out of my damn mind? And why did I go out of my way to buy her an exotic chicken in hopes of gaining her forgiveness for a simple mistake I had made?

Groaning again, I leaned back and closed my eyes with my hands clasped in front of me.

I must have dozed off, because the train had come to a stop and the ticketmaster declared we'd safely arrived in the city of Lefran, west of my destination of Nenaderine.

There were no trains to the capital. King Frar was too paranoid for that, for good reason.

Reaching down to grab the cage, I made my way off the train and breathed in the fresh open air. Coughing from someone's pipe nearby, I glared at the bastard and knocked him in the shoulder, as I made my way eastward from the platform.

The sounds of the bustling city kept me on edge as I moved through the streets strictly from memory of the map given to me back in O'lind.

I'd never ventured this far into the heart of the Giant Empire. My lifestyle of counterfeiting kept me on the outer edges of society. I walked boldly eastward. Most of the residents of this city gave me side looks as my attire was far from theirs. Wrapped in fur pelts, and leather pants, I stared at the location of the sun to determine my direction toward Nenaderine.

"He looks like a barbarian's runt bastard with his size," someone whispered and I grinned in their direction.

This runt did what no other giant could do.

She scuttled back and jumped off the sidewalk, quickly crossing the street.

The people of Lefran were all of a lighter complexion than I was. Their lives in the city treated them well as they pranced around in their more refined linens and cotton britches.

Of course, the stares could be because there was an exotic chicken in a cage in my hand. But Mia was worth all the ridicule and all the chickens in the world.

The journey toward Nenaderine was longer than I expected. Once I exited Lefran, it was another hundred miles northeast. The supplies I bought were enough to make it through the cold weather.

“Just over this hill, Hythe and we’ll finish our journey.” I didn’t know when I started calling the chicken by name but I figured it was better than just addressing the creature as chicken.

The road changed from dirt to cobbled streets as I entered the city limits. Nenaderine was much bigger than the last place, the dwellings and storage facilities made from stronger foundations of stone, peat and sod turf. The wood of the roofs looked well maintained, strong enough to keep the worst of the elements out of the homes and structures.

Mia deserved a home like this. I would make sure she had it.

I walked past a small church building and thought about things that never would have crossed my mind in a million years.

When I made it to the hillfort that housed the previous King, I stood in awe as I drew in the magnificence before me. Built on higher ground, the stone fortress watched over Nenaderine as if on an earthly dias.

“Well, Hythe, it’s time I assumed my rightful place. If you’re lucky, Mia will agree to what I have planned and you will be by her side in a happy little chicken coop. Your own chicken castle. Just think of it.”

I was rambling to a bird, but I didn’t care. I strutted forward and ducked through the entryway where the sounds of people in merriment came to a hushed silence.

Everyone sitting at wooden tables and lounging about turned to look at me. It was a grand feast with a fire pit in the middle. Straight ahead sat a very unhappy man on a carved, wooden, high-back chair that displayed images of two dragon heads facing outward. The old man held his chin in his fist as he stared at me with disdain.

“Have you come to join the feast? I’ve never seen you in Nenaderine before.” His words were pleasant but his eyes spoke a much different language as his body tensed up into an upright position.

I slowly took my pack off and placed Hythe safely beside it with the fabric still covering his cage to block the cold.

“I am Bhif the Lionalon.” I crossed my arms and looked at him.

He stood up and stepped down from the wooden chair. “Bhif the Wolf Killer.”

If this fool had heard of my nickname from the festival, why was he still sitting on the throne as if he still ruled this kingdom?

“The very one. I’ve come to claim my throne.”

King Frar let out a humorless laugh. “No one will be taking my throne from me. I have worked too hard to create this small empire to the north despite the midsummer’s games. The moment a Sepawn won was the moment I knew a new age was coming to pass. One where I would lead.”

I scowled at his lunacy. “Your reign has come to an end. I will allow this one transgression as your new King. Leave now or regret your choices.”

Did he really think he could beat me? The man stood to my neck at most and was twice my age.

I stepped forward in challenge, and he did the same. I scoffed as he pulled his sword out and came at me without another word. Leaning back, I dodged his blade right before I threw my elbow into his jaw and pulled my own weapon out of the air.

We circled one another as the patrons all scooted back and kept their eyes on the show in the center of the room. King Frar moved behind the fire pit and I gave him a menacing grin at his cowardly move.

“I don’t mind having a little fun before taking my seat. There seems to be plenty of food and if you’re lucky, you’ll survive to eat the scraps.”

“You won’t be lucky at all!” He threw his blade across the flame and I dodged to my left right as someone cried out in pain and fell over to the ground.

I smirked. “The man was only trying to get a good meal in and you had to go and ruin his day.”

Frar ran around the fire pit and dove for me. I stood there and grinned as his body slammed into mine, toppling us both to the ground.

We grappled and his extra strength told me everything I needed to know about his power. Unlucky for him, as he twisted in my arms, his body slowly expanding in size, I wrapped mine around his neck. He struggled and kicked back, giving a valiant effort but too many years out on the fringes of the giant kingdom has constantly placed me in battle, keeping my body ready.

I flipped us over and got to my feet with his dangling above ground once he lost hold of his abilities. With one arm locked around his neck, my other grabbed the side of his head and titled it for my victory speech.

“Long live the Wolf Killer.”

Shards of ice solidified in my fingers, creating serrated edges of icicles as I pulled my hand back and ripped through the flesh of his temple and face, scalping him. He cried out in agony as everyone in the celebration stared on in shock, wonder and fear.

“Let it be known from this day forth,” I started, before shards of ice shot forth from my forearms and through Frar’s neck. His cries turned into gurgles as I dislodge my weapons from his flesh and tossed his body into the fire pit. The sound of his body sizzling was the perfect backdrop to the rest of my speech. “No one will challenge Bhif the Liontalon and live to tell the tale. I am your new King.”

I slammed my chest in emphasis and the first few men stood from their seats with their cup held up in the air.

“King Bhif, the Wolf Killer!”

“To King Bhif!”

“King Liontalon!”

I roared and held both my fists up in prowess, Frar’s blood still running down my arms.

The Giant Empire was known to respect strength. Our history was rooted in an honor system that Frar had betrayed. I accepted his challenge even when I didn’t have to. Tales of the tournament had already made it here in Nenaderine. He’d chosen his fate.

As the celebration continued, many of the people came up to me with their glasses and toasted their new King. I accepted their congratulations with a smile and drank a cup or two to join in the festivities.

As the servants came by to refill drinks, some of them looked my way but my mind was elsewhere. I quietly made my way back to my bag and Hythe, gently picking him up. He had been quiet, allowing everyone to ignore him. Smart chicken he was. He was a good pick for Mia.

The festivities continued boisterously as I made my way beyond the wooden throne and into the back rooms. As much as I wanted to celebrate with everyone, there was one mission I couldn't fail.

The back of the building housed a few rooms and a bathing area. I dropped off Hythe at the foot of the bed and went into the adjoining room separated by half a wall. Walking over to the basin sitting on a table, I dipped my hands into the water and watched it become tinted with pink. Washing the blood off my arms, I wondered if Mia had enough melted water in her home.

“I should have never gotten caught!” Slamming my hand against the basin, it crashed into the nearby wall with a metal clatter. I leaned onto the table on my elbows with my head in my hands.

When I lifted my head up, I stared into the mirror at my reflection. “What are you going to do now, Bhif? She's not going to come to you, not with the way you left things.”

Instantly, everything became clear as my eyes wandered to the room behind me. It was a king's bed, covered in the softest pelts and riches. Why would Mia reject me now?

I threw my head back and laughed as a plan formed in my mind.

Epilogue

“**W**hy am I here? I haven’t done anything? Let me go!”

Her voice ignited a fire in me, one that kept me going during the games.

I watched from the other room as some of my royal warriors escorted her as gently as they could to the open throne room at the front of the building. Her dark hair spilled around her shoulders, reminding me of the times when my hands were on her naked flesh and my lips above her collarbone.

The men gently nudged her forward and she hissed with a fierceness that made my cock hard. I stepped from behind the wall and around the wooden throne. Her head snapped to mine with an automatic scowl but quickly morphed into one of disbelief. Her hand covered her mouth as her eyes shifted.

I took another step forward but kept my distance, unsure of where we stood. In my heart I knew she would be the only one for me, and I would move the heavens to force her at my side if necessary. But I wanted to give her a chance to voice her opinion.

When she composed herself, she dropped her hand from her mouth and I smiled, ready to take her back into my arms.

“Where the hell have you been Bhif? Everyone told me you died!”

What?

Of all the things she could have spewed, this was not a statement I was ready for.

“What do you mean you thought I died? I’m Bhif the Liontalon.”

She threw herself at me with fists against my chest. Her fury was frighteningly beautiful and I allowed her a few more hits before I grabbed her wrists. The warriors behind her looked on with awe and want. I bared my teeth at them and they lifted their hands in supplication and stepped back.

“You bastard! I mourned you! I cried and shunned the world for you and this is what you do? You drag me to the throne room to break my heart again?”

“You slammed the door on me! How could I tell you what happened when I was captured!”

She struggled in my grasp and I loosened my hold, not wanting to hurt her. She slapped me in the face and my skin stung like a thousand bites of a Salagecs.

Slowly turning my head, I flexed my jaw and stared at her.

She jumped at me and I brought up my arms to block her only to feel her climb me like a tree, wrap her arms around my neck and slam her mouth onto mine. I groaned and encircled her little body, pulling it hard against me.

She kissed me with passionate anger and I reveled in every moment of it, letting her dominate my mouth. Lifting her higher, she wrapped her legs around me and I took us back toward the throne area with the plan of hiding her away in the bedroom while I had my way with her. But the moment she cursed my name and said she should have killed me when she had the chance, my cock took all the blood I had left in my head and I lowered her to the floor right beside the wooden throne.

My hands frantically pulled at her coverings, pushing her dress up to her waist and pulling the top down so her breasts would spill out for my feast. She grabbed my head and forced me down, making my dick weep with happiness.

“I’ve been dying without you Bhif.”

My mouth was full of her nipple, and I couldn’t respond to her liking. So, I just sucked harder, making her moan in pleasure.

Fuck, I missed that sound.

“I would have torn through a thousand men to get back to you, Mia,” I grunted as I withdrew from her breast.

She gasped as I took her other breast into my mouth. “And if I told you to kill a thousand more?”

She was testing me, I knew it. Mia always tested me. Bhif the Liontalon wouldn’t lose this battle.

I pulled my mouth off her breast and planted kisses on her skin up to the crook of her neck.

“Then I would bathe you in their blood so everyone would bow down in fear to their Queen.”

Her little hand shot between us and unfastened my pants, letting my hard cock spring free into the cool of the air.

She grabbed my shaft, and I thought I saw stars. When she stroked it right before shoving it inside of her, I thought I had truly died and gone to heaven.

She cried out as I invaded her to the hilt and covered her mouth with mine and swallowed her moans of pleasure, not wanting to share that part of her with anyone else at the moment.

We rutted on the ground, her breasts sliding against my chest as I lifted one of her legs up to get even deeper. The primal need to reclaim her was strong.

Right when I was about to spill, I gritted my teeth and pulled out, crawling down her body and covering her wet cunt with my mouth. Another battle I refused to fail. I feasted on her until she sobbed and pleaded for me to stop, but I didn’t.

I took in her taste until she was kicking me in the shoulders to try and dislodge me. She knew her feeble attempts would do nothing, but I praised

her for her attempts.

“You’re a bastard, Liontalon!” she whined.

“If worshiping my queen makes me a bastard, then I guess I’ll just have to be one.”

She then giggled in delight as I climbed back up and rammed my cock home, pounding into her until we both found our glorious finish.

The witch took all my energy as the last drop filled her. I fell forward, appreciating the very soft cushion beneath me.

“Bhif! Get off me, ya big brute!”

Oh, no. I wasn’t falling for her ploy this time. That was exactly what led us down this road to begin with. I shifted my weight to give her more breathing room but continued to pin her to the ground with my body, refusing to let her escape me.

One of her little fists hit me in the jaw and I groaned, nibbling on her arm. She squealed in delight and I laughed.

“I never agreed to be your Queen,” she declared boldly.

Her tests never ended. I was a wiser man now, however.

“I never asked you to. I’m commanding you as your King to reign by my side.”

She began pulling up the top of her dress and righting her clothes back into place, hiding her beauty from the world once more. “And if I chose to make your life a living hell for all that you put me through?”

“Then I will just have to conquer hell as well so there would be no corner you could hide from me,” I growled.

She sighed in satisfaction and I grinned like the wolf I killed, holding the best secret for last.

“Once you are done cursing me to the depths of hell, Bhif has gotten you a gift.”

She looked at me suspiciously and shoved at my chest. My warriors had abandoned us long ago before I threw Mia to the ground, unable to control

myself. I gave in and rolled off her but grabbed her closest thigh to keep my dick inside of her. I needed to make sure she was well and bred, the ultimate claim to my woman. I needed her swollen with my children and I needed to keep her that way so that she would never slip through my grasp again.

As if she knew exactly where my thoughts were, she scrunched her nose adorably.

“What is it?” she asked.

I finally pulled out of her, our combined juices flowing to the ground between us, splashing on her inner thighs. My nostrils flared with satisfaction at our combined scent. I should make it a mandatory ceremony for all couples to rut in front of the eyes of others in a claiming ritual.

A little slap on my shoulder brought me back to the present. “Bhif! what is it?” Her excitement was evident even if it was hidden under her false irritation.

I got to my feet and extended a gentlemanly hand to her. She looked at it dubiously and I contemplated tying her up to my bed so that she would learn to never hesitate again. I frowned and she smiled in response as she placed her delicate hand in mine.

I led her past the bedroom and through the building until we exited out the back.

She stopped and refused to move forward when her eyes landed on a small little cottage, much bigger than her cabin, surrounded by a large farm full of animals.

Her eyes shone with unshed tears as she bit her lip.

“You know, I sold everything.” Her voice cracked.

I scowled. What was she going on about? Was she not happy with her gift? Why did women always talk around things and never say what they truly mean?

I opened my mouth to say something but her hand squeezed mine and I stopped. She looked at me with raw vulnerability and my body tensed, ready

to fight whatever gave her worry.

“I sold everything in my search to find you. I lost your trail after the tavern. No one was willing to tell me anything. It was too late then. I couldn’t get anything back. I couldn’t... Bhif, I’ve been lost without you, living out my days thinking—” A tear slid down her face and I pulled her into my arms.

She buried her face against me but continued. “I thought I was widowed again. It was the only explanation I could find. Everyone told me to forget about you, but I couldn’t Bhif. I just couldn’t.”

I rubbed her back and swallowed my pride. I had hurt her. I had hurt Mia inadvertently through my choices in life.

Never again.

“Never again, Mia. Never again would you have to worry. We are to be wed come tomorrow and you will be queen of the Giant empire, to rule by my side until my dying breath.”

I cradled her face in my large hands and kissed the tip of her nose. “You will want for nothing. I will provide everything your heart ever desired so that you would not feel lacking ever again.”

Her hands clasped around my wrists.

“I just wanted you to come back home, Bhif,” she admitted.

I tilted her head and stared into her soul.

“You are home, Mia. *You* are my home.”

She searched my eyes and I knew she feared hope. Her last husband had been called to battle in a civil skirmish and never returned. Life as ruler would not put her at ease, but knowing that our customs would allow her to rule after me was a small relief. She was a fierce warrior at heart, stubborn enough to survive the toughest falls.

Stubborn enough to make one of the biggest men in the giant empire fall to his knees before her.

Clucks came behind us and we both turned to look.

Hythe was pecking around her feet, the giant exotic plume on his head

making him look like the world's stupidest bird.

Mia gasped and knelt down beside him. "And who are you, little fella?"

She cooed and awed and I found myself jealous of a stupid bird once more. But I wouldn't let my ego get in the way of my relationship. Not this time.

"I bought him for you, during my travels from O'lind."

She shot to her feet with the chicken secure in her arms. "O'lind! Bhif, was that where you were? How did you get to O'lind? Isn't that—"

I pulled them both into my arms. "A place I will never be again. I've had my fill of other nations for twenty lifetimes. My only place now is by your side."

I stared at the chicken who listened intently to our conversation and scowled.

"Not you, Hythe. Your place is in the field with the rest of your kind."

"Bhif! He can understand you, you know. Don't be cruel." She turned her attention on him and cooed once more. "So, Hythe is your name. That's a strong name for a chicken."

"He might end up on the dinner table," I threatened with a jealous growl.

She glared at me and jerked away from my arms, leaving me aghast. "We'll see if Bhif the chicken-killer's travels had taught him anything. Come, Hythe. Let's explore our new home together."

My jaw dropped as both my woman and her chicken turned tail and left me there in the back field of my kingdom standing alone.

Shaking my head, I followed her inside only to hear her cries echo from the front room. I ran as my heart pounded out of my chest only to come to a skidding halt when I saw her crying into Hythe and the cook standing there dumbfounded with a tray of fried chicken.

"What happened?" I roared.

"Y-Your majesty, I don't know. I brought the food out and was telling her about how lucky we were to get foul so cheap from a lady who was desperate

to sell her stock, a-and—”

I groaned in the middle of his explanation, running a frustrated hand down my face as Mia came barreling into my chest with Hythe clucking, squeezed between us.

Dammit. I fought off hundreds of killers, thousands even, all for one thing, and now I just know I'm going to have to wait to get her ass. I know somehow this will all be my fault.

Well played, chicken.

Well played.

Welcome back, blue balls. My old friend.

SEPAWN

——
TORRIN TATTERSALL



Courtesy Warning

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to invasion of body, kidnapping, violence, explicit scenes, themes that may be disturbing to some readers.

Chapter 1

Torrin Tattersall

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO...

The early morning mist refused to cede and make way for us as we subtly moved through the area. The shadowy Limitless Forest hid more than the men we searched for under its enormous trees and vines which dangled from the thick branches. The brush and vegetation played a clamor of animal sounds, most of it made up of noises belonging to varmint, and in harmony with the croaks of frogs in the nearby ponds. The ancient forest added life to a scene where we hunted for death.

The civil unrest had gone too far and King Clerebold decided to end the propaganda. High treason was not tolerated, resulting in a quick and gruesome death when the traitors were found. Deaths in these lands were sometimes used as a form of entertainment if mercy was graced upon them by the King. I had a feeling these agitators would be given nothing but a trip to the afterlife.

“The Deviants have gone too far,” the king bellowed in the Great Hall. “Find them and eliminate them!”

Placed on his throne at a tender age due to the early death of his father, King Clerebold grew to be a ruthless leader. I felt no sympathy for the traitors. They brought upon their own demise. They had also cursed us with our own repercussions if we were unable to bring them before the king.

“We’ll leave at dawn, my king,” Gerard responded.

So, our search began, and led us here. Men with their backs against the wall are capable of anything, and hunted men are even more difficult to predict. The Deviants used their extensive knowledge of the forest for cover and protection. We were on their territory, playing their game, and we were disadvantaged.

Gerard signaled for us to fan out and search in pairs. Each man carried his machine gun for support and moved ahead. On my left, Gerard walked in a

crouched position, while Elam to my right, carried his left leg behind him as he moved with his signature limp. The rest of the men spread as we moved in a standard formation to cover the most ground. With my forefinger ready to the side of my trigger, I trained my eyes ahead.

The forest's canopy allowed for the occasional beam of sunlight to steal its way through the disorderly shrubs like illuminated daggers, a foreshadowing of what was about to occur. Deviants were unruly, and needed to be contained lest we allow them to contaminate the people with their propaganda. At least, the king thought so. He requested aid from The Supreme Commission and he received it. We were but soldiers dispatched to follow the king's orders.

Those who couldn't be controlled were immediately eliminated, decreasing the chances of an uprising. Compromise existed only in the minds of the weak, and the last thing anyone would accuse Clerebold of being, if he could help it, was weak.

We were The Warden Troopers, and our tools to keep the peace were violent ones.

We came to a clearing of low cut grass, covered by the white wisps of the morning mist, and walled by the high trees. The perfect place for an ambush, if I ever saw one.

Gerard signaled for us to hold, and each man dropped low to camouflage themselves.

"They're out there, aren't they?" Elam, our youngest soldier, whispered.

"Quiet!" I whispered back, but with authority.

The difficulty in containing Deviants lay in their abilities. The group we pursued had them to spare. The mist ahead reminded me of the ocean, and within every ocean existed unknown terrors. Elam knew better than to reveal our location through verbal communication, so for him to speak at the absolute worst moment, could only mean he had started to lose his nerve.

"Incoming!" Darrak yelled.

“Pick your targets and don’t waste ammo,” I commanded.

Deadly Ice shards flew through the air, and I realized why the Deviants chose this area to launch their attack. The mist in the air provided them with an unending source of power.

“Fucking giants!” Elam yelled over the sound of weapons discharge, and ice shattering. “No one said they’d be fucking giants!”

“Get ahold of yourself,” I demanded as I dodge a particularly sharp ice shard the size of my forearm, and returned fire, as the shots rang in my ears.

He knew. We all knew. It didn’t matter who the enemy was. Completing the mission was the only thing that mattered.

“Fucking giant pieces of sh—”

An ice shard the size of my hand pierced through the flesh of Elam’s neck and out the back, spraying blood everywhere as he fell to the ground grasping desperately at his wound.

“Elam!” I stayed low, using the nearby brush for cover, as I made my way over to him and pressed his neck with my hand to try to stem the bleeding. “Hold on, Elam. I need a healer over here!”

My eyes darted wildly as I searched through the mass of bodies engaged in a struggle for survival because one man willed it so. “Darius!” I yelled with a wave of my hand. Darius crawled on his stomach under the exchange of ice and fire till he reached our location. “Elam’s hurt.”

Darius looked at me, then at Elam before returning to me and shook his head. “Elam’s dead, Torrin.”

I shut my eyes and exhaled, allowing all the anger I had to flow out of me in a smooth stream. Elam wouldn’t be the last person to join the beyond under the service of the king. Death was a given for any trooper, the only thing we were not privy to was the rate at which it happened and who it happened to. If we were lucky, we all came back alive. Luck had already flown out the damn window the moment we entered this field. I lifted my weapon and returned to the fight, determined to do my part to end it all.

Severed limbs were strewn left and right. Heads rolled, detached from their bodies, and blood sprayed across the living and the fallen equally. It looked like genocide with no one the victor in this massacre.

When it ended, forty-seven giants lay dead and sixty-five of our own were lined up beside them. I was pissed. Guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders as I stared at all of my fallen comrades. Each familiar face tore at my being as if it were my own death. But I couldn't let it cloud my judgment, not at this moment when the mission had yet to be completed to the satisfaction of the king.

As clean-up began, there was one final matter to attend to. Before us, on his knees with his ankles crossed behind him and his fingers interlocked behind his head, Fax Daardendrian awaited his fate. An imposing man standing at nine-feet-two-inches, the Deviant giant leader stared at me as Gerard approached. There was no fear, but a hint of sadness lingered in his eyes behind his bold stare. He was a man who had prepared for death on this day. We all had.

“Why is he still alive?” Gerard asked when he arrived.

“We're not judge-jury-and-executioner, Gerard,” I responded, my machine gun down at my side. “It's on the king to decide this man's fate. He'll face trial.”

I knew it was coming. I knew my stance on my morality grated him. He hated the fact I wouldn't allow his authority to decide my moral ground for me. Over the years, Gerard had self-appointed himself as an enemy to me despite us working under The Supreme Commission.

Gerard spat and glared at me. “This one is *not* a man. He is a Deviant. They're all Deviants, and they deserve no trial. Finish him and be done with it so we can go home.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” I repeated. “I will not execute a *man* in cold blood. The battle is

over, and we won.”

Gerard narrowed his eyes. “Are you disobeying a direct order, Lieutenant?”

“No,” I answered truthfully. “I’m disobeying an unlawful order.”

Gerard chuckled and looked to my right and left sides. “Seize him,” he commanded.

Rough hands grabbed my shoulders and arms, as the two nearest Wardens attempted to obey his orders. I quickly elbowed the Warden on my right with as much strength as I could muster hard in the chest before he had the opportunity to get a good hold of me, and doubled him over. I drew back and punched the one holding my left arm in the face with my right hand, using the recoil from the blow on the right to add extra power to the punch. The Warden staggered back and I pivoted to face Gerard when a searing pain flew up my leg. I hadn’t heard the gunshot, but the smoke rising from the barrel of Gerard’s pistol left no doubt. I grit my teeth as my hands flew to the hole in my leg while I sunk to the ground like a rock.

“Darius,” Gerard called. “Heal him. I don’t want him bleeding out.”

Darius ran up from somewhere in the crowd of Wardens who had gathered around to watch Gerard dole out his form of justice.

The wound on my leg throbbed in tune to my heartbeats as I kept myself still, my thoughts going through different scenarios. Darius assumed a seated position beside me on the grass and placed his hands on my leg. An otherworldly purple glow emanated from them as they began to knit and stitch my tendons, muscles and veins back together. Each second that passed was agonizing torment. A sharp pain plagued my leg and forced me to shift my body weight from one side to the other in the desperate hope of finding some temporary relief. It didn’t matter how many times one went through it, the torture was always the same. Cold shivers shot through my body and both my hands started to tremble as the hole in my leg finally closed.

“Sorry,” Darius said. “The body’s natural healing is accelerated through

my power, but it still causes some discomfort.”

“You mean it hurts like a bitch,” I responded through gritted teeth. My jaw ached from how long I had pressed them together.

“Hmmm,” Darius nodded.

Men like Gerard weren’t rare. Drunk on his authority, he allowed himself to succumb to the temptation of power and prestige—particularly the power over life and death.

Gerard changed his focus from me to Fax and lifted his weapon.

“No!” I roared. I looked at Fax as Gerard aimed his pistol at Fax’s temple and squeezed the trigger.

Chapter 2

Torrin

The ache in my leg wouldn't stop me. I automatically lifted my weapon and slammed the butt of it into the Warden's stomach who'd maneuvered behind me as Darius healed me, and leaped to my feet. I stared down the sight and fixed it squarely on Gerard.

His end was always going to be inevitably by my hand. If I didn't stop him, who would? He had been allowed to slip through the cracks, dealing out his brand of warped justice for far too long.

He jutted his chin and thrust out his chest. "Oh?" he asked with a smirk. "Is this the road you want to travel, Torrin?"

"You set us on this path," I sneered.

"The Supreme Commission set us on this path, and you know it. The king requested aid, they dispatched us, and we answered the call. I didn't set us on this path, but it is time to find out where it ends," he answered, and in a smooth, quick motion brought his pistol around and aimed it at me.

We were engaged in a dangerous game at this point, neither of us willing to back down or concede. The surrounding Warden Troopers didn't know how to respond, and remained frozen in place. Was it fear? Was it the feeling of dread which kept them from intervening?

I didn't know and I didn't care.

"Put down your weapon," I demanded. "This doesn't have to end this

way.”

Gerard’s voice was full and blustery. “You are in violation of code fourteen-A-subparagraph J. Insubordination of your commanding officer, which is punishable by death. Troopers! Eliminate that man!”

“Countermand!” I ordered. “He is the one in violation. He gave an unlawful order that *none* of us have to follow and illegally executed a prisoner in cold blood, denying him the opportunity for a trial.”

“They get no trial!” Gerard fired back. “Did you forget King Clerebold’s orders? High treason is to result in death.”

“He surrendered, Gerard,” I countered. “The giant surrendered. Look around you. Look! Look at all this death. Isn’t it enough? The point was made. We should take prisoners back and let the king judge them from there. Killing them when they are defenseless is the act of cowards. We are Troopers!”

“This man is in violation,” Gerard seethed through clenched teeth. “Eliminate him. I will not say it again.”

“*This* man is in violation. Chief of the Guard! Take the Vice Commander into custody, right now!”

The sound of my heart blasted my ears at the standoff. I glanced to my left and to my right to the men I’d served with and led for some time now. I knew for a fact some of them did not agree with Gerard’s leadership but were obligated to follow authority. We all were. But there had to be a point where moral choices trumped simple obligation and following orders. A line had been drawn in the sand. It would be up to the men to decide. Gerard commanded and I countermanded. It would fall to them.

They made their decisions. Each man raised their weapon and took aim, however, half pointed them at me and half to Gerard. He curled his lip into a sickening smile.

“Well...isn’t this a predicament?” He chuckled.

I pinched my left eye closed and maintained my position aimed at him.

“No. They made their choice. Just as you did.” I took aim and fired, hitting Gerard in the torso and dropping him like he was the Enioi he was.

The moment Gerard fell, chaos ensued. Everyone raised their weapons at one another threatening the entire team with crossfire.

“Put your weapons down!”

It didn't matter who gave the command. The team was divided. Gerard's followers and those who followed me. All it took was the first shot for everyone's gun to go off. Taking cover behind a nearby bush, another impromptu battle ensued. Brothers against brothers. I systematically shot at any who had sided with him, and they returned fire at me and the men who stood at my back. This was a decision I was willing to kill or die for. The likes of Gerard had to be stopped before he contaminated the rest of our men with his ideals.

The war game we played determined the outcome of friendships and families. I had to win. I sprinted to the nearest tree for cover and hid behind its trunk. Peeking out around and picking my spots, I fired at my brothers. My friends. All because of Gerard and his stupid sense of authority. If this was the world he wanted, then all who followed him would follow him to the afterlife.

I checked my weapon for ammo and damage, raised it, and exited my cover in a crouched position. The forest came alive with the sounds of gunfire as we all danced around one another, changing tactical positions and ending careers.

The man hidden behind the bush with only a sliver exposed? Shot to the visible crown of his head, dropping his body backward like a ragdoll.

The man in the open firing at some of my loyal brothers? Shot to the side of the neck, spewing blood from his artery, twisting his body into an open position where some of my other brothers finished him off.

The Trooper dodging and weaving opposite of my movements and closing fast? Shot in the foot to limit his motion, followed by a double-tap to

the chest and one to the forehead.

A bloody, deadly display of acumen entertained the animals on this day, and a buffet would feed the scavengers. When the final round fired, and no further weapon blazed with the heat of death, we stopped and looked around. The ground ran red with crimson pools and fountains, the air thick with the smell of excrement released by the dead. The field littered with destruction, blood, and shells. Red and pink drowned the blue of our uniforms. A long, destructive battle. But at the end, we stood victorious.

At a tremendous cost.

I knelt beside the body of Darius. He'd somehow been split in two and riddled with holes. It didn't have to come to this. We didn't have to lose this many more men. Jaye, Chief of the Guard made his way over to me, stepping over the fallen. "What now, Lieutenant?"

I brought myself up to my full height and studied the men. "There's no easy way to put this, so I'll speak plainly. You participated in an event in which the commanding officer was killed, and it was done by my hands. If you return to the Citadel, you're sure to be brought before the Emperor Supreme at The Supreme Commission's direction and executed at his command."

"Then what do we do?" One of the men cried out over the squawks of the birds impatiently waiting in the air to descend to eat. There was no simple answer to satisfy them. I told them the only thing I could. The only choice we had.

"Start again," I answered. "Go somewhere different from where you were before you became a Trooper. Go live new lives. As far as anyone needs to know, we died on this field with the rest of these traitors, and that includes friends and family."

I was asking a lot. Most of us only knew this life as a trooper under the Emperor Supreme.

"And how are we to do that?" Another man asked. "You ask too much of

us.”

“The Lieutenant is speaking. Quiet!” Jaye demanded.

“It’s okay, Chief,” I responded and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, then turned back to the men. “They need to know. We’re going to burn this field. Burn the bodies. Burn everything. We’ll leave no trace other than charred remains and let the animals sort it out. If you attempt to go home, if you try to reconcile with your families, there are sure to be severe repercussions. Not just for you, but for everyone you love. The Commission will not let this go unanswered.”

They were taking a big risk following my lead. I wouldn’t let them down. I couldn’t. If I had a chance to choose another path with what happened here today, I would choose the same. What’s right is right and what was wrong, was wrong. Plain and simple.

I opened my arms wide and waved all over the field. “Disappear. Live but live smart. You need to assume new identities and new habits. If anyone ever finds out you were part of this, then your family and anyone you ever cared for is dead. Do you understand?”

It was the risk they took when they joined the Troopers. But as deserters and possibly branded traitors back home, the risk amplified to heights we could never imagine. There were twenty of us standing. Twenty men who survived the giant horde and the traitorous actions of our brothers. Twenty men remained of the three hundred dispatched to bring the giants to heel. These twenty men each looked each other in the eyes, one by one, then nodded. We were in agreement. No one would ever speak of this day ever again. We would cleanse the area and quietly disappear.

At least, it was what I wanted for them. They needed to live and do it alone. They needed to completely detach themselves from their past lives in order to ensure anyone they cared for would survive. But I could never do it. There was too much at stake.

The men began to move. Bloodied and dirtied, we did what we needed to

do in silence beside each other. We stacked the bodies of our former comrades in arms and interspersed them with the remains of the giant horde. The smell of metallic blood was thick in the air, clogging our nostrils as intestines spilled out and excrements slid atop the corpses. I gazed upon Darius as the accelerant poured out, and then spat when my eyes fell on Gerard.

Fucker, I cursed to myself.

The fuse was lit, and the flames ignited, quickly growing into a living thing, dancing over the dead, and consuming and peeling back flesh from bone. The heat was overwhelming, so most of us watched from afar for a short while before each went our separate ways. The men to begin again and start new lives after this dreaded night was done.

I headed straight home.

Chapter 3

Torrin

It would be some time before the news would reach the Emperor Supreme, The Supreme Commission, and King Clerebold. I sat in on the mission, planning. The land where giants were the predominant race was vast. We weren't expected back for up to a month, so the fact we found the giant horde so quickly played in our favor. It gave each man time to strategize their best course of action in order to keep themselves alive, giving our nineteen survivors the opportunity to use the time to scatter. I had other plans.

As each man took a different direction across giant lands, none of us looked back. Our last goodbyes were made with grim faces, focused on what lay ahead. My muscles ached and my healing wound throbbed by the time I made it around transit in an unfamiliar location.

Quietly I snuck around out of sight of nearby villagers and secured passage by stowing away on the railway. The trip allowed me some reprieve from my aching muscles. Massaging my wounded calf, I let my eyes close and took in the outside air. I had left the door ajar in case I was found out and needed a quick exit point. The sound of the wheels on the tracks, loud and monotonous enough, lulled me into a meditative state.

After a few days of hiding, I made my way home to Srash. A small village of under two thousand, with an awful smell, known for its medicinal

plants and its lumber and forestry, but it was home. The mean-tempered and idiotic Vicky Andreanti, a round woman who reminded me of a billowing sandstorm, ruled over the village as the Exarch. She was the caretaker and in charge of the day-to-day function of Srash. The village itself looked rather dull and didn't see much in the way of tourism or visitors in general. With its black wooden rooftops, black wooden walls, and decaying trees, Srash had a desolate atmosphere.

The main attraction was the watchtower. Built eons ago, in a time before the Emperor Supreme was the sole ruler of the world and the threat of war was always prevalent, it provided a major vantage point for invaders. It'd been designed by the Intels, and constructed by the Ground Keepers, but since Srash was so far out of the way for any potential army, it served as more of a wonder. The village also had a failing economy. If there were more visitors, it wouldn't but as it stood Srash was mainly supported by carpeting, fletching, and leatherworking. The biggest strengths of the people, however, were the highly skilled thieves and rare herbalism. We lacked people skilled in farming. It was why I joined the Warden Troopers. Even though I loved the woods surrounding Srash, and would spend many an hour exploring through them, I had responsibilities which required money to handle. Not plant life.

Despite its strengths and weaknesses, Srash was most likely headed toward a luxuriant future under and in spite of the leadership of Vicky Andreanti. The watchtower was a wonder, and when it was properly marketed could definitely be an asset, but this remained to be seen if Vicky could do it. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to stick around long enough to wager which way the village would progress.

"Anne," I said in a hushed tone, as I opened and cautiously shut the door behind me.

Anne kept our home in excellent condition, despite the modest exterior. She knew how much time I spent and my love for the forest, so she had the

interior done in colors that reminded me of it. The yard I kept neatly-trimmed whenever I was home, but since I'd been away, it'd grown out of control. Knowing she expected me back to trim it again made my pride swell. Our father built this home over the remains of a house that was destroyed in a fire, and charged me with its upkeep. Anne knew I would always take care of it and her.

“Anne,” I said again in an even quieter tone. “Are you here?”

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. My training instincts kicked in, as I scanned the room. I darted my eyes everywhere and swiveled my head to take in the area. I searched for signs of her or for anything amiss. Satisfied there was no one hiding, I sucked in a large gust of air, went to the left side of the living room, and climbed the staircase leading up to the second floor.

“Anne,” I whispered as I moved up the stairs with my back pressed against the wall to cover the vulnerability.

The second floor had more of the same. Nothing but an eerie quiet. Slowing my breathing, my senses heightened from the blood rapidly pumping through my veins. I searched both her room and mine, and found no sign of my sister.

Shit.

My mind raced. There was no way word had reached the Citadel this quickly and they'd dispatched a response. It was impossible.

Or was it?

I started thinking back to the Warden Troopers we had with us on our mission to remove the giant horde as a threat. We were all Sepawns, normal human beings without the effects of the radiation coursing through our veins, and it was our job to keep the peace and enforce the will of the Emperor Supreme. Though, everyone knew he was mostly a figurehead. We followed the will of The Supreme Commission. It'd been that way since before I was born, and would remain long after I was put into the ground. The only powered person with the Troopers was Darius. Powered people weren't

allowed to serve as military in the service of the Commission, and could only function in support roles, so no communication could have been sent back that quickly through powers. I made it back to my home, so I assumed the others had as well. Each Trooper understood it was in their best interests to start anew, so I couldn't believe anyone would betray us to the Commission. To do so would surely mean their execution.

Anne, where are you?

Another option I had to consider—she went into the village to purchase goods. Srash had a tavern, a general store, and a church. She wouldn't be at the tavern, which left the church or the general store.

Damn.

Both options guaranteed exposure. The general store always had customers, and those damn Aruphy believers were growing in the size of their following. I couldn't wait for her return. I needed to retrieve her, and I needed to do it quickly without being seen. If Lieutenant Torrin Tattersall had returned home unscathed, while the rest of the Troopers under his watch were dead by fire and battle, it would lead to a most unpleasant outcome.

I had to make a choice, and I had to make it immediately.

As I resolved myself to head to the Aruphy church, the sound of the front door opening and closing reached my ears. I moved my machine gun strapped to my back, to my hands and edged along the wall of the hallway on the second floor and to the top of the stairs. I focused all my energy to the area despite the rapid beating of my heart near my ears. Someone had definitely entered our home. Holding my weapon high, I crept down the stairwell and into the living room.

The person had entered the kitchen.

I exhaled, emptying my lungs and steadying my pulse, and lowered to a crouched position. With the stealth of a predator, I entered the kitchen.

“Goodness!” Anne screeched and dropped the container she had in her hand. It splattered to the floor and a large amount of white liquid exploded

and gushed from its lid. “Tor? You scared the shit out of me.”

I shut my eyes, ran my palm over the rough stubble on my chin, and opened them. Anne stood there, in the kitchen wide-eyed and disapproving. I lowered my gun to my side, raised up my hands and swept my little sister into my arms, bear hugging her as never before.

For a brief moment, I thought they’d gotten her. I thought they’d stolen her and were hunting me. My death didn’t worry me as much as hers. She was all I had in this life. I was given a taste as to what it would be like without her and it cut me to the core. I had to do better. I had to make sure I protected her more than ever before.

“Goodness,” she said in a muffled tone with her mouth pressed against my chest.

I exhaled again, a loud breath this time, placed my hands on her shoulders and pulled her away so I could see, examining her body to make sure she was truly alright. My sister always had a peace about her, no matter the storm raging around her. Narrow brown eyes like two bronze coins, her thick, curly, midnight black hair was short and kept in a style which always reminded me of a river. Tall with a narrow build, my dark skinned sister tilted her head as she looked at me with suspicion.

“Are you okay?” She asked with a frown. “Did Clarice break up with you again?”

I chuckled. Her joke brought needed levity to my thoughts. “Anne...”

“What?” She asked. “It’s true. She probably had enough of your standoffish ways and came to her senses.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Standoffish ways?”

“Yes,” she answered. “You’re like a damn statue. So cold and rigid. It’s no wonder she finally quit.”

“First of all, she didn’t break up with me. *I* told *her* we should separate.”

“Right,” she answered with an exaggerated nod of her head.

“It’s true. You *know* what I do, Anne. I can’t get involved with anyone

right now.”

“Uh-huh,” she scoffed and rolled her eyes, ignoring me.

She opened the cabinet above her, reached into the bag on the counter and pulled out a couple of cans. One she set down, the other remained as she read its label. She was an annoying little brat when she gave me the silent treatment. But we didn’t have time for games.

Things had changed.

I took the can from her hand. “Anne. We have to go. Now.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Go where?”

“Go.” I said and jutted my chin upward.

Without hesitation, Anne nodded and hurried up the stairs to her room. This moment had been one we’d hoped would never come, but prepared for. We trained her muscle memory practicing countless times in anticipation for a day such as today. After a few tense moments, she came back downstairs with a small bag in hand. She stuffed a few of the food items she’d brought from the general store into the bag she had, and then followed me through the kitchen and out our back door.

Chapter 4

Torrin

“So, about Nisha...” Anne started as we walked.

We entered the portion of the Limitless forest which sat behind our house. Father was able to build it there since no one wanted to have their home situated that close to the forest with all of its mysterious and dangers. With my focus on our surroundings, it annoyed me that she had to bring it up, but I humored her anyway because she was my beloved sister. Plus, Anne knew how to get under my skin if I didn't give her answers.

“What about her?” I asked.

We needed to keep off the main path. The Limitless Forest didn't have many people strolling through it on any given day, we still needed to keep our presence concealed. It was a well known fact that many people braved the dangers of the forest to hide out in it. I'd much rather stick to the animals than face some powered person with a desire to get in good with the Commission.

I'd spent many an hour in these woods. I knew the trees and rocks, I understood the smell of the dirt and the howl of the wind in my ears. The birds who sang to me and the creepy, crawling things who scattered before me. I knew this forest intimately. Despite its drawbacks, it was the best way for us to disappear.

“She's a Wardener, right?” Anne asked. “She's a good match for you.”

Oh, sister. Such simple ideals and hopes you harbor. She didn't understand life wasn't as simple as she made it out to be.

Anne was young and full of life. I recognized she wanted the best for me, and a woman to fill my 'lonely nights' as she called them, would go a long way toward that end. But I couldn't.

"Wardener's aren't supposed to get involved with one another," I responded. "It's against the rules."

"Well," she sighed as she swung the walking stick she had from side to side chopping off the tops of the weeds and blades of grass along the way. "What *are* you allowed to do besides just wiping the collective asses of The Supreme Commissioners, hmm?"

I shushed her and she glared at me then proceeded to stick her tongue out. We couldn't draw attention to ourselves and the sound of something impacting grass could very well act as a magnet.

"There's no 'well,' Anne. Can't be done. I can't do it." End of story.

"You *can* do it. You just don't want to. But you *can* do it. There's plenty of women to choose from, who want you, Tor."

"Those women only want me because I'm a lieutenant in the Troopers. That's it, that's the reason, and I don't have time for women who want the status, and not the man."

They also needed to be worthy enough to be around my sister. I couldn't accept just anyone. If they were going to be part of my life, my life involved my beloved little sister and her utter acceptance of the person. It was more complicated than she realized, but I didn't have time to explain this to her.

We came to the edge of a bank with the ground sharply breaking off. A stream rolled beneath the edge against the crumbled accumulation of rocks, smoothed out by the constant lapping of water over time.

Anne looked downstream. "Are we going to find somewhere else to cross?"

I joined her gaze downstream then looked up, and saw nothing but robust

trees, their branches thick with leaves, and water. There was only one viable option. “No. We cross here.”

“We can’t just cross water blindly in the forest, you know that,” she protested.

She was right, of course. The Limitless Forest had dangers on land, and in the water. But I needed to project confidence. I needed her to follow me without question if we were to stay ahead of the Commission and any potential blowback. “There’s nothing in that water, Anne. No flesh eaters or anything else.” I bent down and scooped a handful. “See? Nothing attacking me. Besides, the water will mask our movements if anyone *is* following. No one will be able to track us. And if they’re a big chicken like you, they won’t dare jump in.”

I jumped in with a splash, ignoring the rush of cold from the water shot up through my body in exhilarating fashion as my clothing quickly soaked it up over my boots. She gave me a side-eye, as if she knew I was merely trying to goad her. The water, as it bubbled around me, settled around the level of my navel. I gave her a big bright smile, doing my best to prevent my teeth from chattering.

“Fine,” she sighed and waved me away with her hand. “I’ll go. Just stop smiling like that. It’s creepier than this forest.”

My sister was much shorter than I was. Once my footing was secure, I reached up and grabbed Anne under her arms to help her in. She yelped as the water surrounded her and quickly rose to her chest.

The time for games had ended. Any rush of water would threaten to separate us, so I grabbed her hand and forced it to hold onto my belt for security. We began the trek through the weight of our liquid prison—well, hers. My strong legs would carry us through to our next destination.

After a few minutes, I could feel the chill of the water seep into my marrows. My sister had a much smaller frame. I needed to move faster and get us out of this stream.

“You...st...sti...still haven’t told me...wha...what happened...yet,” she said. Her teeth chattered so loud, the clanging rose above the level of the water around us. “Wha..why...is...someone...tra...tra...tracking us, and why did we have to leave?!”

I secured my weapon high and then forcefully waded ahead, using my hands to cup the water from in front, to around and behind us. Once we were through the stream and onto the mud of the bank on the other side, I grasped her freezing hand and led us through.

The breeze greeting us didn’t help our temperature. I gritted my own teeth down hard to prevent them from chattering in unison with Anne’s. We weren’t going to be able to cover that much ground beyond this point.

“Let’s find somewhere to make camp and get some food in us,” I told her. “Then, I’ll share once I know we’ve put more distance between us and the village.”

Anne nodded frantically, her arms going around herself to try and preserve as much body heat as she could. It pained me to put my sister through this kind of torture.

Me?

I’d trained to endure the elements and suffer.

Not my sister.

She shouldn’t have had to go through this. My decisions had trickled down and impacted her life, and I hated myself for it. Guilt weighed on me, but I swallowed it, determined to do what I needed to do to help us start anew. I would make it up to her later, I promised myself.

A mixture of wild noises, caused by varmints, added life to the forest, and were in harmony with the barrage of other sounds coming from the stream behind us. I gripped her hand tightly as we moved. The music of the water began to recede like the setting sun, and made way for the moon.

“Sun’s going down,” Anne observed.

“I know.”

“We need to make camp, right?”

“I know.”

“Well, aren’t you mister sunshine.”

“Anne,” I sighed. “I know I haven’t told you what happened yet, but trust me when I say we need to put as much distance between ourselves and Srash as possible. I’m cold, I’m tired, and I’m not in a talkative mood yet, and I won’t be until I know you’re safe.”

“Until *I*’m safe?”

“Yes.”

Could she really be that naive? *Come on, Anne. I’ve taught you better than this.* Her comfortable life back at Srash has dulled her self preservation instincts. Perhaps it was a good thing the courses of my decision has led us down this road. Or was I just fooling myself in an attempt to hold the guilt at bay.

Anne pulled her hand away from me and stopped in her tracks. “Torrin. What did you do?”

My face tightened at the question. “Do you trust me?”

“You know I do,” she responded with a concerned and suspicious nod.

“Then let’s go,” I said and waved her on. “We’ll talk about it later. I promise.” I needed to get her warm and find us shelter from the elements. That was the current mission.

“I *know* what it is,” she said as we continued on.

“Oh?” I asked with a scrunched forehead. *How could she?*

“Sure do,” she sang. “You’ve arranged for me to marry the prince, and now you’re transporting me to the palace to ensure the marriage goes through. You wouldn’t trust anyone else to do the job, because you know how important I am to society.”

I was both relieved and worried for my sister’s sanity. Her head was always in the clouds. She was out of her mind if she thought I would simply hand her off to some stranger, prince or not. He would have to be

interrogated and deemed worthy of her hand before she even knew about the possibility of matrimony.

“You are important,” I chuckled. “To me.”

“And to society,” she corrected.

“Anne,” I said, the sourness in my voice apparent. “If anything ever happened to you, I would burn society to the ground.”

“Ew, that’s cryptic.”

“And now you see why Clarice broke up with me,” I admitted.

“I *knew* it!”

“I knew you knew it, but that doesn’t mean I have to play your game,” I said glumly.

“It’s okay, Tor. She didn’t deserve you anyway. Any woman that doesn’t see you for who you are, or doesn’t want you without your title is unworthy to become my sister-in-law.”

She pierced my heart with her statement, and twisted it. It was. Life had made me cryptic. I had accepted it long ago. I should be joyful she felt so proud of me, but at this moment, while trying to keep us both alive, I didn’t feel like I lived up to the image she had of me in her mind. But I was honored to have a pure soul such as hers as my sister. She was everything in this world I wanted to protect, the epitome of what I fought for, fought to keep safe.

“Spoken like a true Tattersall,” I told her.

“Only the best for us! What shall we dine on this evening?”

“Nothing but the finest bugs and leaves the forest has to offer, my good lady. You are in for a treat.”

“Goodness, how could I ever say no?” She batted her eyelashes like a loon and I chuckled.

We walked until I thought enough distance had been put between us and Srash and a glimmer of peace settled on the ground before me like the moonbeams lighting our path. Before long, we came to a large rock.

“We’ll take cover over there,” I said and pointed it out to us.

Anne scrunched her forehead. “Behind that rock?”

Why did she have to make it sound like I had lost my mind? *Little sister, you had much to learn.* “Yes. It’ll shield us from the wind and we can build a fire to keep warm and cook. It’ll do.”

We headed over to it. The ground was laden with bushes, twigs and other fallen material that had accumulated over time. One by one Anne and I removed them. When Anne tried to grab one of the larger branches, I slapped her hand away, making her jump. A viper slithered between the dead leaves.

“Anne, be careful of your surroundings. Really look at what you’re doing,” I scolded a little too fiercely, more so because I was scared to death for her.

“Torrin! I’m tired and trying to help,” she groaned.

Her emotions were high. I knew I asked a lot from her. From the moment we left home to now. Guilt rode me hard and I became more determined to get us shelter. After an hour or so, the area was cleared and ready. I started a small fire and Anne pulled from her backpack water and nutrition bars.

“How about we forego the bugs and leaves and eat these instead?”

“If we must,” I sighed jokingly.

The fire was warm, the food was sufficient, and the company was cozy. I loved my little sister, and as she snuggled up beside me and laid her head on my chest as we sat with our backs against the rock, I vowed to kill anyone who’d do her harm. Whether it was a future husband, or even a lifelong friend, I’d keep her safe from everyone.

No one deserved this precious gift. I barely deserved it.

My head sailed back like a boat after a storm until it rested against the hard surface. Sleep crept up on me like a snake. I didn’t feel its bite, but only the results of its poison. My limbs became heavy but I made sure to hold Anne tight to me. I drifted off to sleep and dreamed. A dream filled with violence.

The sands were gray and grasped at my feet like hands clawing from the ground. It was nightfall, and the sword in my hand was more than a weapon. It was a part of my hand. A part of my arm. It was me. There were a great number of men and women on the beach, each fighting against me. I parried their hits, struck their bodies and continued to defend where I stood, one at a time, two at a time, some even came at me in numbers of fours and fives, but I fought. I fought until blood oozed from my body like the sea.

The sea—its waves could be heard on my right side, crashing and angry, adding to the battlefield's atmosphere. Time stood still and at the same time felt like it went on forever as I continued to struggle against the enemies around me and never seemed to falter. Their numbers felt like they multiplied every time I successfully took a few down. The grains of sand gripped my ankles, my constant enemy from below, and threatened to swallow me whole as each one of my movements slowed until I suddenly couldn't move. I was surrounded.

The adrenaline that coursed through my veins wanted to come out in screams of anguish and frustration but all that I could do was stand helpless, in silence.

Then, a man made of the night itself struck me and I fell. I fell through the sands and was consumed into its belly.

But the sea. Its harsh, wet embrace pulled me from under my prison and crashed against my enemies on the beach. They resisted. They struggled against it, but the sea rose to indescribable heights like an open maw and swallowed them whole. As if it were a great water beast, alive and hungry.

The vision melded together until one couldn't decipher the image at all—that was, until everything became clear.

I was the sea. I was the sand. I was death and life all at once, and I was in the ground and above it.

I was a titan, and I was a nightmare.

The sharp snap of a twig startled me awake. Anne had moved from her

place beside me to her bag. While my mind tried to bring me to full waking, my ears keenly focused on our surroundings. There was nothing but the sound of insects crooning around us and a light familiar shuffling. I groaned and rubbed my palm across my eyes.

“Sorry,” she said. “I was restless, so I came for more water. Judging by the red I see in your eyes, I’d say you were restless too.”

“Bad dream,” I answered and stood to my feet. I reached my arms toward the sky, high and wide and stretched all the unease away, as Anne pulled out a canteen of water.

“Want to tell me about it?” She asked.

The images flashed through my thoughts as if I was still there, fighting for my life. The tail end of the dream was so clear, it made me wonder why that was. Why this particular dream stuck in my mind. Staring at my sister, she stood there with worried anticipation, the canteen of water still in her hands. So, I told her. The more she listened to me recount the dream, the paler her complexion grew.

“What?” I asked. “It was just a dream.”

“No, Torrin,” she said in a quiet voice. “It was a warning.”

Did she know something I didn’t? Was she warned of something ahead of time or were these only the thoughts of a worried sister?

“A warning?” I echoed in question.

“You are in for a great fight. A fight so terrible, it’s going to cost you everything you know. It will swallow you whole. But when it’s over, you will emerge a titan and a nightmare. You will be both death...and life.”

A cloud moved in front of the moon, masking its brilliance and leaving us with only the light from the fire. The flames licked and danced, casting shadows on her face as if she was a seer invoking some sort of inner ability I was never aware of.

In that moment, I saw my sister differently. She was no longer the young, naive girl I kept safely at home while I went out to fight battles assigned to

me.

She was a young woman who had probably seen her own fair share of life while I was constantly gone.

What happened to you Anne? Have I not protected you enough?

“And you got all that from a dream?” I scoffed.

“You should listen to her,” A scratchy voice called from the darkness.

Chapter 5

Torrin

“Impossible,” I declared.

“Yes,” the voice taunted.

I reached beside me and found the dagger I had missing. A fairly short, broad, straight blade made of crystal held by a grip wrapped in high-quality, gray cow leather. With a point as sharp as a razor, this weapon could cause my enemies to leak from thousands of holes before they even know what happened. And I had a good idea of where it went.

“Show yourself, bastard!”

Gerard stepped out of the darkness and into the light of the fire, a cruel smile on his lips. The clouds in front of the moon hadn't yet passed, allowing him to slink in and out of the darkness when the flames didn't cast their illumination far enough. He had maneuvered himself close enough without my detection where he'd be able to get to Anne before I would be able to get to *him*. My blood pounded behind my ears, my breathing slowed and my sights focused in. I couldn't let it happen.

He looked like hell itself manifested into a man. Tall, brown-skinned with cold, dark brown eyes, an angular face, very thin lips, and a small nose before our skirmish, he glared at me in the light with red, scarred skin. His hands were gnarled, and in his left, he tapped my dagger against his leg, reflecting the light of the fire back at me like a signal.

“How—” I started as I stared into the reflection of my own eyes in the flat of his blade.

“How am I alive?” he interrupted and completed my thought while brandishing the blade. “Or, how am I going to kill you?”

“How did you find me?” I hissed.

I tried to signal with my eyes to Anne but she was solely giving all her attention to our intruder.

He blew out a sharp breath and menacingly waved my blade in a slow arc as he spoke. “Do you really think Darius was the only powered person we had? Huh?”

My breath stopped for a second. I looked him up and down and saw him as if it were the first time.

“You’re a Night,” I stated. “You tracked me the entire time.”

“You know about Nights, huh?” He chuckled.

I nodded slowly. I knew more than he thought. Gerard had only seen me as a subordinate. “I do.”

“Good. Someone paid attention in training.”

I narrowed my eyes as we spoke. “I’m not a cadet fresh out of the academy.”

“No, you’re not.” His false grin morphed into pure hatred. “You’re a backstabbing lieutenant under my command who decided to burn me. But it’s good,” he continued as he moved a step closer to Anne, “because I suspected you were nothing more than a little shit, and you proved me right.”

“And you’re a lying bastard. How have you been a powered person all this time and able to stay in the king’s forces? It’s illegal.”

He laughed maniacally. “When a man’s why is greater than his how, he makes a way. Like now. It doesn’t matter how I found you, what matters is *why* I found you.”

He spoke as if his secret was astonishing. It wasn’t. “I know how. Nights have abilities in the dark.”

But I'm unsure of which you have.

“Then you know a Night—such as myself—never loses the trail of my prey,” he answered. “I can find you wherever you go in this world. Remember that, Lieutenant.”

I knew what he came to do, and I knew I had to stop him. I had to protect Anne. I couldn't afford to waste time.

No one ever accused Gerard of being a fool. You don't climb as high in the ranks as he did and reach the level of commander by being foolish. The respect level he garnered from those below and above his command impressed everyone, even though we all knew his aggressive, abrasive, and angry personality could create problems. He'd been disciplined by our superiors more than once for harsh treatment of his own troops, yet he continued to rise through the ranks because he got shit done. Gerard embodied much of what us Sepawns thought of powered people—the idea he was invincible and the toughest man alive.

To find out all this time he'd lied to hold a position of authority in the only place where Sepawns garnered universal respect, meant he was a man with a lack of morals. Such a man would not hesitate to harm my sister, which meant if the opportunity presented itself, I couldn't hesitate either.

I wanted to kill myself for my inattention to the details. I should have stayed to ensure every member of the betrayers who turned on us had truly met their end. But I didn't. I needed to get the men on their way as quickly as possible to give them the best chance for success, and I needed to get back to Anne. By not being thorough, I've endangered her instead. A mistake which could have catastrophic results if I didn't act and act *now*. I needed to keep him talking while I devised a plan.

I did my best to keep his focus on me by taking a step forward to try to close the gap. As I did, I glanced at Anne out of the corner of my eye. Her entire body, from her chin and lips down to her legs, trembled.

I will not fail you, Anne. You will live through this.

Gerard moved so quickly, he appeared beside my sister before either of us could move. He snatched the canteen from Anne's grasp and poured it over the flames, slowly reducing the light with a hiss. I took another step and he raised the dagger and pointed it at her throat.

"Don't," he commanded. "You take another step and I'll slice and dice her like a fucking goat," he threatened with a grin.

"Your fight is with me," I countered. I needed him to shift focus. I needed him to attack me. Gerard's pride was one of his downfalls. "Come on, Commander. How did it feel when I beat you? When I set you on fire and burned you like a stuck pig over a spit? If you want your revenge, I'm right here." I straightened and opened my arms wide, taunting and teasing him. "You want your payback? Come get me. Leave her out of this. She's done nothing wrong. Take your vengeance and kill me instead."

"Oh, no. I'm going to do much worse. Do you know what it feels like to burn? To be trapped in something so awful, so painful, you want death to come quickly?"

I pressed my lips together.

"No, of course, you don't. But you *will*. Death? No, death is too good for you. You'll long for the sweet release of death. But before that happens, I'll make sure you curse the day you ever betrayed your brothers."

"It was *you* who betrayed us," I snapped.

He was out of his damn mind.

"Tell yourself that when you wake on the other side. And tell yourself that while you know that the agony, the shame, the torture you're about to experience is nothing compared to what *she* will be going through."

"Anne!" I screamed and leaped toward her. Gerard doused the remaining flickers of the fire, and plunged us into total darkness. "Anne!"

"Torrin!" Anne's voice cried out to me with panic.

The darkness of the night surrounded me and threatened to strangle the very breath from my body. "Anne! Stay where you are. I'm coming."

I stumbled in the direction I'd last seen her before Gerard removed the light of the fire. My bones cracked as something hard slammed into my jaw and sent shockwaves of pain down my spine, staggering me backward. I tripped over something, probably a rock, and crashed onto my back. My head banged into the ground and I was never more glad for dirt than I was at this moment. Anything harder and I would have been knocked unconscious and I couldn't afford that.

"I see you," Gerard taunted in the dark. "I can still see you."

My thoughts were jumbled as I struggled to remember my training about Nights. Like all powered people, their abilities were not inexhaustible.

He said he never lost the trail. He has night vision.

It explained how he could see me and Anne, yet we couldn't see him in this thick darkness. I had to find his limits. Make him push past them. I had to tire him out, even though I was thoroughly outclassed. It was mine and Anne's only hope.

"Torrin! He's got me!"

Her cry vaulted me to my feet, only to have something strike me hard in the face across my jaw and launch me onto my side, crashing into the trunk of a nearby tree. I groaned in pain but quickly swallowed it down, getting to my feet and pushing my way forward toward where I thought I heard her voice originate.

Another hit landed to my gut, doubling me over, and forcing me to my knees. Before I fell, I grabbed his ankle and pulled it from beneath him. He grunted but quickly slipped from my grip.

"Anne!" I screamed.

Another hit to my face. Maybe his foot? Regardless of what it was, he continued to pick me apart until he had his fill. I needed to get to her. I needed to get my sister.

Laughs floated from the darkness, mingling with her screams of terror. I was helpless. I gritted my teeth and tried again, only to have something hard

slam into my back, flattening me to the ground.

My entire body ached. The small amount in my stomach wanted to leave me, but I bit down and pulled myself across the ground with great, painful effort. The loose rocks and dirt scraped my elbows. I was sure they left a bloody dirt trail in my wake.

A hit came at my side and shifted me across the ground and into the dying embers of the fire. I quickly rolled away while trying to catch my breath and keep myself from being burned. I needed to concentrate but my energy was waning.

The one thing I wanted to do was protect my sister. The one thing I *couldn't* do when called upon in her moment of need. I failed her. Gerard delivered a final blow, and darkness settled on me as freshly fallen snow would a pasture. I eased into the void of the unknown, and heard his voice as it slowly faded away.

“You’re never going to see your sister again. After I have my fun with her, I’m going to let the men have her. Then, she’s going off, and you?” He paused and I could only imagine the wicked smile on his face. “For you, I have something special in mind. You’ll go to your grave knowing you failed not only your brothers, but your sister as well. But not before I see you suffer.”

INTEL DYNASTY

— III —
AMIRA JAX



Chapter 6

Amira Jax

My breath caught in my throat as I ran for fear of my life. They were catching up to me. I didn't have enough energy to keep doing this for much longer. I needed to find somewhere to hide.

“Hey! Watch it!” someone screamed as I slammed into their body while looking back over my shoulder.

“Sorry! Make way!” I begged as I weaved and dodged bodies in the town's marketplace.

“Apprehend her!” the local authorities on my tail commanded and suddenly everyone around me looked at me with suspicion.

I lifted the hood over my head and sprinted. The forest was a few short steps beyond the next shops. I could make it! The Limitless Forest was a gamble for anyone seeking refuge with its secrets, but I could only hope it would give me enough obstacles to make my getaway.

The territory towards the Keeper Nation was full of forest and the unknown. Townships never built that far for fear of the creatures and rogues found dwelling within but I had no other choice.

My father was ill and all alone back home on the eastern side of my location while I ran west. It would make my journey back home a longer one but I needed to stay alive in order to make it back at all.

Stealing food from the grocery was child's play. I just didn't anticipate the

new clerk having precognition, foreshadowing my moves. I had done it so many times before, dulling the hearing senses of the shop owner, sneaking in to take what I needed and then simply slipping out as if nothing happened. If I chose a time of day with minimal activity, the clerks would never notice the change to their own bodies. The silence in their head would be a normal part of a boring day.

I should have known though, the moment I stepped into the shop and he looked knowing eyes on me. I was overly confident, all too sure he knew nothing of my plan.

Until he did.

The explosion of a gun went off and the bullet flew past my ear and hit the closest bush. I screeched and quickly slapped my hand over my mouth and dove into the cluster of trees, hiding behind the largest trunk to catch my breath.

“Why did they have to have extra patrols today? Why?” I groaned.

I only gave myself a few seconds before I moved again, weaving in and out, trying to memorize the foliage so I would find my way back. When I could no longer hear them, I slowed my sprint to a jog, doubling in different directions in case they were still on my trail. I was surprised I didn’t lose the loot and was happy with the something in my gut today which told me I needed to use my long strapped bag.

Perhaps I also have Precognition, I joked to no one but the joy bubbling inside me.

I easily manipulated it behind me and converted it to a back sack, making sure the top was tightened and secure against me. Since the first powers from the descendants of the First Ones began to manifest in the world, no one had ever had more than one. Sure, I’d dreamed, as others had, to have more than my Sense Manipulation power, but it was an impossibility. The best scientists and scholars throughout history had determined our bodies just couldn’t handle more than one at a time.

As the sun began to fall in the sky, I cursed under my breath, trying to quicken my feet and retrace my steps. Night fell by the time I made it back to the outskirts of Lerwick.

“Hold on, Pa. I’m going to try to make it back to you before daybreak,” I whispered. I needed the mental promise to keep me going as my own stomach growled in hunger. I couldn’t stop to eat, though. It would take up too much valuable time. My father needed a good homemade soup and the measly vegetables we had in our garden wasn’t hearty enough to bring his health back. He needed meat stock.

Slowing my breathing, I used my powers to dull the sense of hearing to those around me as well as manipulating their sense of sight when they looked at my face. It was all I needed, to look different enough for me to pass by without a second glance.

A bus trip through Lerwick cost me forty-five copper pennies, and I cursed myself for having to pay it. Halfway through, my arms held onto the back of the single leveled bus and plastering myself against it so that the darkness would further camouflage me when I began to get tired, and I was glad I did pay for the ride. I miscalculated with the clerk, and it cost us much needed money, but I needed to get back faster than I would if I walked. When the bus stopped, I quickly scrambled to get off before any of the riders could see me as they exited.

“Hey, are you alright?” someone asked right before he grabbed onto my shoulders.

I flinched in instinct and jerked away, mumbling my answer.

“Do you need any help?” He tried again and my paranoia increased.

“I just need to go home. No. Please. Thank you. I just need to go home,” I rambled.

“I can help you—”

“I said no!” Tucking my head further into my hood, I quickened my steps on the cobbled road until it became packed dirt, grasping tightly onto the

straps of my bag to remind myself it was still there.

A wave of dizziness hit me after a few moments and I shook my head to stay focused. To stay awake. I needed rest but I couldn't. I could rest when I was sure Pa knew I'd made it back safely. I could rest when my lower limbs fell off.

My feet felt like weights as I trudged along through a grimace, passing the village of Damerel. I was getting closer. Our home was only one more small village away—another hour at best.

Some of the locals looked at me with concern, while others ignored me. Everyone on the outskirts of town knew the hardships we faced living out here. Everyone lived on what the land offered and if they were lucky, were able to reap enough to bring to town for sale.

My father's farm had seen its day. Once well fertilized soil had slowly dried up these past few years until our harvest reaped less and less produce. Those copper pennies would have come in handy in the coming week, but thankfully I had taken enough from the shop to get us by if I exercised discipline.

The sun crested beyond the horizon and tears burst forth from my eyes, burning them. My shoes were worn and there would be blisters to heal once this was all said and done. I couldn't pity myself, not now. Pa has sacrificed too much for me for me to give up now when the final destination was just beyond the next group of hills.

When the front of our little home came into view, I sobbed aloud with relief, dragging my feet the rest of the way. I grabbed the knob, opened and shut the door behind me, leaning against it and sliding down onto the ground, stretching my legs out in front of me.

"Amira? Is that you?" Pa croaked out. It sounded worse than when I left.

"Yes, Pa! I'm home! Please, just give me a minute and I'll make you something to eat." I tried to answer with the strongest voice I could muster. I didn't want him to worry about me. The last thing he needed was to hear the

tears in my voice.

Gasping, I forgot the bag was behind me and twisted my body to remove it. Frantically pulling the drawstring, I peered inside and sagged with relief to see the bones and small packages of meat were a little smashed but still whole.

I forced myself back onto my feet, groaning as I moved, and made my way toward our modest kitchen. The soles of my feet didn't ache as much once I could stand in one spot and chop the vegetables I'd laid out earlier before my adventure.

Humming and getting lost in the monotonous movement, I started the broth and the house smelled like heaven. Ignoring my hunger pangs, I dumped the vegetables into the soup and slowly stirred, letting it simmer. Wiping my hands on the ragged kitchen towel, I gritted my teeth and made my way up the steps to the second floor.

My father laid there in his bed, his frail arm outside of his blanket. His salt and pepper hair was greasy, and his expression of love and relief of seeing me, shattered my heart to a million pieces.

"You're home," he whispered, reaching his arm toward me.

All my body's aches numb as I quickly made my way to him, falling to my knees and holding his hand against my face.

"I'm sorry I took so long. I'm sorry I worried you."

"Get up. Don't do that. I'm alright." He tried to stifle a cough and my guilt kept me on my knees.

My father's once sun kissed skin was now palid, the years of his labor and toil out in his farm taking a toll on his body. He had me at an older age, seeking the hand and marriage of a much younger woman.

Ma had caught some sort of flu and by the time the village healer made it to our home, he told us we needed to prepare for her last moments because the sickness was too far along in its course. I stared at my father now, in silence. I wasn't sure if it was the same sickness and couldn't wrap my head

around the fact it never passed to me.

“Amira, if anything ever happens to me—”

“Nothing is going to happen to you because I’m making you some amazing soup. Can’t you smell it, Pa? Doesn’t it smell amazing? I bet your stomach is crying for a taste. Let me get back downstairs and get you a bowl. I’m sure it’s simmered enough.” I avoided the topic. I couldn’t stand any kind of talk of finality. I couldn’t imagine my life without him.

Getting to my feet, I gave his hand one last squeeze before descending the steps and heading toward the kitchen.

Before I could get there, a wave of dizziness hit me like a flour sack to the head. I shook my head and couldn’t dislodge the feeling. This wasn’t normal. This wasn’t right.

Someone came up behind me and put a bag over my head before I could figure out the cause of my nausea. I kicked and screamed, but my body was still much too tired from the exhausting trip.

“I would have taken you home, if you had let me. I was only trying to be a gentleman.”

I stopped for a second, as the familiar voice jeered. It was the same man I ran into after the bus. My heart beat out of my chest as I began to struggle again.

“Go upstairs and see who’s there. That’s a big pot of soup for one person.”

I screamed and elbowed him, making him grunt but he only kned the back of my legs and took me to the ground.

The accomplice didn’t miss a beat. “You got it. Hopefully she has a sister. I know you’re not going to share.”

The man on top of me growled in my ear. “I fucking saw her first and I know damn well this was the girl the authorities were after. Maybe I’ll have my fun and then turn her in for coin. Win-win all around.”

I trembled beneath him. The oppressive feeling of helplessness made me

want to choke.

“Who are—” I heard my Pa ask with authority before his screams of agony echoed down the steps.

The sound of his body tumbling down and hitting the walls gave me the willpower to struggle again. Throwing my head back, I slammed into his face, sending a sharp pain through my skull. But I’d rather have the pain than the Vertigo he induced onto me with his powers.

He cried out in anger but his grip had loosened. I ripped the bag off my head, elbowed him in the neck and toppled him over to the side.

The other asshole leisurely walked down and stared at the bottom of the steps. My eyes focused in the same direction and saw my father’s body twisted with his neck bent at an awkward angle.

“Pa!” I cried out, screaming his name when I was grabbed by the ankle and pulled down. My face hit the floor so hard, I saw stars. But my hands clawed against the wood floor until my nails dug into its flesh, anchoring me there.

I couldn’t take my eyes off him. His were open and empty, devoid of life.

“She’s a feisty one. You sure you ain’t gon share, Leo?”

“You fucking bitch!” His hands crawled up my thigh and I kicked him in the face. His nails dug into my flesh, scraping the skin off but I gritted my teeth and crawled toward Pa.

A kick landed in my gut as the other man stood over me and crouched down.

The pot of soup softly boiled in the background as my world was turned upside down in the blink of an eye.

He fisted my hair and jerked my head up, forcing my attention on him. I glared though my vision had clouded.

“Maybe she’s worth more than coin, Leo.” His face broke into a smile and true fear crawled up my spine.

I didn’t want to use my powers. I’d pushed myself beyond my physical

limits to get home to Pa, so my powers wouldn't last long. And if I showed them the potential of what I could do, they'd be wary of it. I had to be smart. I didn't need them to know any more about me than they already did. It was the only advantage I had left in this situation.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Ebrim?” The other guy finally let my leg go and got to his feet. He twisted his jaw back and forth and I could see blood vessels had bursts near his pupil.

Both tall and dark haired, they could pass for siblings. Maybe they were.

Ebrim stunned me by slamming my head into the floor two more times. When he let go of my hair, I couldn't move.

I tried to listen, tried to will myself to ignore the pain as the two invaders—murderers, spoke about my future.

“The King is looking for candidates for the festival.”

“Yeah? What about it? You're not seriously considering this pathetic excuse are you? She's a woman. They'll eat her alive.”

Ebrim chuckled. “You saying you care, Leo? The most we would get from the authorities is a bag of coin. The King? We might come out with more. There aren't too many Intels dumb enough to risk their life in the games, so he's going to look pretty stupid if our kingdom-territory doesn't have a representative at all. This way, he gets what he wants, and we get what we want.”

“That's a big gamble. He could also have our throats slit right then and there.”

“Where's your sense of adventure? I'll Mind Exchange with her and play the part. Move her like a puppet so it seems she's a willing volunteer.”

“Fuck, you are a genius.”

I blinked a few times, trying to stay conscious. My brain felt jumbled and the room was moving again.

“You'd like that, wouldn't you, princess? I can get inside of you in more ways than one. I say we go pay our King a dear visit and see how much

you're really worth."

"Go...suck...a dick..." was the last thing I croaked out before the blackness of nothingness consumed me.

Chapter 7

Amira

I awoke to the strangest dream. My body moved, but I didn't control it as it did.

“Yes, I want to offer myself for the games at the Midsummer Festival in the name of the Intellect Dynasty. I will be our champion at The Chaos Games and represent the Intels with class and dignity,” my voice said. The words came from my mouth but I'd not uttered them.

This wasn't a dream at all.

The King stared at me and then at the man beside me.

“Our champions have only been men in the past. What makes you think a peasant woman like yourself would stand any sort of chance against the other nations?”

“I can answer that for you, your majesty,” came a voice from beside me.

It was the asshole who came up with this whole plan. I glanced down and noticed the pinky finger on his right hand brushed the back of my left. Somehow, his touch enabled him to take control of my body. I felt like I was sitting back in a separate room, watching everything unfold.

“Go on,” the king waved his hand. His face was full of impatience and in my periphery all I could see were the king's guards surrounding him in this opulent throne room.

“My wife here is only half-intel, so she's not as intelligent as the rest of

us. However, her hybrid power will give her the upper hand, and she's a sworn citizen of the Intel Dynasty."

"What is this hybrid power she wields?" The King asked.

The scourge beside me placed his free hand over his chest and shook his head slightly. "My king, in order for this to work, we will have to omit that information for the time being—in case there are spies. You understand."

"Spies?"

"Yes, my King."

"You think the Intel Dynasty, with all of our intellectual capability, could actually be fooled by spies from other kingdom-territories?"

"My king, the Emperor Supreme rules the world, but you head the greatest kingdom *in* that world. Is it not possible the other kingdom-territories would be so threatened by our intellectual prowess that they'd send others to find out how we plan to win? The other kingdom-territories would hate to see a member of our society with the chance to rule over them."

The King rubbed his chin.

I'd never seen him before, only hearing his name whispered on the lips of the commoners. It was said he used to travel down from his throne and visit his lands consistently, until he became the age of forty-five. From there, only gossip and rumors circulated about him, but nothing concrete was proven.

I never paid much attention since surviving the next week with my family was my number one priority.

"You've given me a very interesting proposition..."

"Ebrim, sire. Ebrim Hunt of Yarrin."

Yarrin? What was he doing—

"Yarrin? You've traveled a long way to make this proposition. And what guarantees do I have that if she wins The Chaos Games, she won't seek to make wholesale changes to the Intels? She's only half-intel as you say."

"On her mother's side, my King."

The lies!

“Should you win the games, you’re saying you would continue to support my reign over the Intel Dynasty?”

My head nodded, but not by my command.

The king leaned forward and his eyes sparked with interest. “And you would risk the forfeiture of your life for the Intel Dynasty?”

He stared directly into my eyes.

I willed myself to spill everything that had happened to me and my family, but the moment I opened my mouth, the only words that came out were, “Yes, your majesty.”

My body bowed and I stood with my shoulders back and head held high. “It would be an honor to fight in the name of King Morrow of the Intel Dynasty. We will prove ourselves to be the greatest nation and I will gladly forfeit my life in support of your cause.”

The king leaned back and his face softened. “She really is only half-intel. I’ve had trouble getting Intels to volunteer to represent us. Most feel as if it’s not the most intelligent thing to do. What was your name again?”

“Myra, Myra Dupree of Yarrin, sire.”

No! I am Amira Jax! Daughter of Odessa and Jira.

“Okay, Myra. Even though you are a hybrid, I accept you as a full representative of the Intel Dynasty. You will enter The Chaos Games at the Midsummer Festival as my representative. Win, leave me in control, and together we will lead this world to heights it’s never seen!”

A smile formed on my lips belying the anguish I screamed internally the moment King Morrow accepted the offer.

We walked out of the throne room and down the tapestry-lined walls. Blues and whites of the guards’ uniform were pristinely pressed with the emblem of a golden tree within a circle right in the middle of their chest. Each soldier had their faces stoic as they stood in the halls, their attention on their surroundings.

“Myra, you’ve never seen the castle before, have you? Our kingdom is

one of the greatest. Wouldn't you agree?"

My mouth answered him and I cried out in frustration as this man continued to control my mind, continuing a conversation with himself. I felt victimized, beyond naked and vulnerable. *I felt violated.*

"No, Myra! We'll celebrate when we get *home*," he mused aloud, to the smirks of a few of the guards. I could feel the lust in their eyes as they devoured my body when we passed by.

We continued forth until we exited the castle and walked along the paved road until the outer guards were far from view. It was as if shards of serrated knives were being pulled out of me, my mind stretched beyond its fathomable recesses. My internal consciousness screamed and rallied against the barrier that had been erected around me like an invisible prison. It was an experience which would burn into my very soul for the rest of my days.

Suddenly, my body collapsed and I gasped for breaths before utter darkness consumed me again as my mind shut down completely.

THE ROCKING WOKE ME. AN ABNORMAL, ERRATIC CADENCE WITH NO RHYME or reason to it. My head pounded with sharp pains that pricked again and again—it felt like my soul hadn't returned to its shell quite yet. It served it right. It didn't want to return to what was left of me, left of my body as a mere vessel. I groaned softly, holding my head in my hands until the feeling of residual vertigo abated. Once it did, I blinked a few times to look at my surroundings.

Light pierced through slats, casting lines across my skin.

Sitting up, the sounds of chains sent a chill down my spine. Why was I in chains if I had offered myself to the king? What happened between the meeting and here? Why couldn't I remember?

The doors of the wagon dramatically opened and I was blinded by the

rays of the sun. Holding my hand out to block the light, I spoke to the unknown.

“Why am I here? What’s going on? Where are you taking me?”

“You have a silver tongue on ya. Don’t play dumb with me, lady. You and that husband of yours tried to steal from the king and then pretend to barter yourself for the reward afterward. Double dipping. Ya got greedy and that’s what got ya caught.”

Then where is Ebrim? Why am I the only one chained up here?

“What? I don’t—”

“Ya *don’t* have a choice. The king needed a champion anyway and threw you in here. Now, shut up while I go pick up the rest of ‘em.”

I tried to crawl toward the open door but my chains were too short. My eyes burned with unshed tears at this stupid turn of events. How did things go from worse to unbelievable?

What happened while I was blacked out? I tried my best to feel within myself, to see if I was bruised between my legs but I couldn’t.

And that was the scariest thing of all.

The man came back after a few minutes and tossed another body in, landing it close to me. I skidded back, unsure if he was dead. My captor hopped into the wagon and gave me a wretched smile before he shackled the new visitor in.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t. Or better yet, try. Those powered chains aren’t the only thing I got. I got a whip ready for just the situation. I bet you’d like that.” He leered at me from head to toe and I shrank into myself, bringing my knees up. If I had to die, I’d rather die in the arena than by whatever he had planned for me.

“Suddenly your tongue goes missing, eh?” He laughed as he exited the wagon and slammed the door. The sound of the large deadbolt locking from the outside had secured my fate.

Chapter 8

Torrin

The rocking stirred me from the deep unconsciousness which trapped me. Or was it the smell? My eyes peeled open, sore and painful from the beating Gerard gave me. My vision blurred and hazy, I could barely see through the slits my eyelids could muster. Across from me seated on a bench were people. A group of men and one woman. Some were chained to the floor through a large metal loop in front of them, their hands and legs bound by cuffs and a heavy metal chain ran through each of their loops linking them together. Their ripped and tattered clothing hinted at past trauma, but their abused faces and battered bodies told a much fuller story. Whatever they'd been through, whether separately or together, had been horrendous. The others who weren't chained, eyed me as I stirred or looked out the window on the wall opposite where they sat.

We were moving. I lay on my left side on a hard wooden bench mirroring the ones they sat on. Expelling the air from my lungs, I pushed and leaned to my right. Agony coursed through my body and exited with a loud groan.

"You're awake," the woman said to me in a hushed voice so low I almost didn't hear her.

I willed my eyes to open wider and ignored the agony in them to survey my surroundings. We were in a Powerdrop Wagon, a jail on wheels used to transport prisoners and slaves. They wandered across the kingdom, picking

up powered and nonpowered people, and transported them to either the arenas, the jails, or the mines. Most wagons were out two to three months gathering their cargo, but judging how full this one was, it must've completed its mission and was headed to its destination.

"My sister," I groaned.

"What?" The woman asked.

"I was with a woman. Where is she?" I croaked out.

She shook her head. "Sorry. You were alone when they loaded you."

I attempted to ease myself into an upright position through the residual aches and pains when I heard it—the chains. Heavy metal bracelets bound me to the floor and encircled my hands and wrists, their weight scraping against my skin and leaving impressions.

"Energized cuffs," one of the men explained to me. He was unchained and sat with his legs folded and an air of regalness about him. "Try to break through them and it's the last thing you'll do. Those men out there have the controller and are itching to use them on one of you." The man pointed to a regiment of guards following behind the wagon on horseback.

This is what you've done, Gerard.

I cried out in frustration within me, gritting my teeth so hard, I was sure they would break.

Anne is lost to me, and you've condemned me to die before anyone strikes a blow.

I looked over my shoulder and out the large window carved into the side of the wagon. We were on the Asster Passage, a stretch of road over fifteen-hundred miles in length, and headed south. Which meant we'd soon be in O'lind, the traditional host city. There would be only one reason for a Powerdrop Wagon to be headed there.

"I'm sorry for your loss, friend," a masculine voice broke through the awkward silence. "It's always best to face death on your feet, than on your back."

“There’s one here I want to see on their back,” another man’s voice said. My chest heaved as I turned my face to look upon the people beside me.

The first man who spoke, had a voice like a fly. A cream-skinned man with light brown eyes, narrow lips, a broad nose, curved eyebrows, and hollow cheeks. Bald, but with a very long, wild deep red goatee. The second man with the innuendo spoke in a baritone voice and looked like a muscular boulder. Ruddy-skinned, blue eyes, a wide face, large lips, and wavy, light brown hair.

He stared hard at the woman in an attempt to capture her attention, but she noticeably ignored him. I only gave her a glance, my mind still focused on what lay ahead and Anne. But it was enough.

A natural beauty, I could see why he focused on her. This soulful woman had absolutely gorgeous almond-shaped brown eyes that brought out her true beauty beneath the lashes. Her thick, curly, black hair reminded me of a wave of water right before it broke along the sands. Brown skin with thick eyebrows and small feet, even seated with chains I could see she had an hourglass build. Covered in dirt from head to toe, she’d been roughly handled but her beauty remained.

If we were in another lifetime—not chained and bound—she would have made me wonder. But traveling to a place I knew meant the end of days for me, I didn’t have the privilege of entertaining such thoughts.

“Hey,” the second man called out, demanding she acknowledge him. “I’m talking to you. How about before we get out of here, you let me fuck the dirt right off of you?”

A noticeable shudder ran along her skin, and she tucked her chin protectively in response.

Anne, are you going through something similar right now? I grimaced, not wanting to imagine the horrors she might have already gone through by the time I awoke in this wagon. Instincts kicked in and my mouth automatically responded.

“Leave her alone,” I grunted out.

“What did you say?” He scowled and shifted his focus to me.

“I said, leave her alone. Can’t you see she doesn’t want to be bothered with the likes of you?”

“Oh, she’ll be bothered, and then maybe after I bother her, I’ll bother you too.”

I shook my head and sucked through my teeth. “Tsk. You’re one of them.”

He tilted his head. “One of who?”

Was I destined to always be surrounded by the likes of Gerard in various forms?

“Big man with tough words. Trying to impose your will on others through your words. Testing all those around you to see who the cowards are so you can exploit them.” I leaned in, never taking my eyes off of him. “Well, the others may cower, but me? I’m not cowering. You don’t even register to me.”

He pulled his hands hard into his chest, rattling the chains and causing the others chained on the same line to lurch forward from his sudden movement. “I don’t register? Do you know *how* I got here?”

“Probably fucked the wrong farmer’s goat.”

“What?!” He roared.

I returned to the window and my view of the road leading to my death. “Listen, friend,” I sighed. “I don’t care how you got here, but leave the lady alone.”

“You little punk. Look at me when I’m speaking to you.”

I exhaled a painful breath and pinned my elbow to my ribs to add comfort to the task. Words. Words. They’re all the fucking same and my tolerance was getting short. I shifted on the bench so I could see him. He leaned closer from his side of the wagon. Releasing his pull on the chain, he let the others return to their positions from the regained slack in the line.

“I killed a man who dared to look at me,” he snarled. “I was only joking

with her, but I'm not with you. You're going to be next."

"You want to fuck *me* next?" I asked and scrunched my face. "Sorry, friend, but that's not a kingdom you'll be conquering."

"That's not what I meant!" He roared. "I mean, I'm going to *kill* you."

"Right," I gibed and nodded my head sarcastically. I held up my wrists. "And I suppose you're going to kill me with these chains we have on our wrists."

Dumbass.

"I can kill you with or without the chains," he bragged. "Bhif the Lionalon, can do it all!"

"Who?"

"Me. I'm Bhif the Lionalon. No doubt you've heard the virgins singing songs about me in the hills."

He can't be serious.

I rolled my eyes. "Sorry. Never heard of you. And why would virgins be singing about you? They only sing about heroes. Look around," I flicked my wrists at both ends of the wagon. "There's no heroes here."

He snatched the chains back again, lurching everyone forward. "I've never heard of you either!" He bellowed. "You're probably some...some chicken fucker."

"You're not very good at this, are you?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm good enough to kill. You? You're nothing. Have you ever killed a man? Felt the life flow from his body as your hands wrapped around his neck?"

"Yes," I stated bluntly. "Hundreds."

The man called Bhif opened his mouth partly then shut it, and scrunched his forehead as he studied me.

"I thought I recognized you," a third man said. "I know you."

"I don't think so, friend," I answered and shifted a bit to stare out the window, turning away from him.

“No...no, I *do* know you. You’re in the Wardeners. You’re a lieutenant.”

I maintained my stare at the road. I’d traveled this road enough times to know it wouldn’t be long now. “I said, you don’t know me. I’m no one.”

“Lieutenant Tattersall.”

A shudder shot up my back.

“I’ve heard of you,” one of the others said.

I sighed and returned to a position where I could see each one of them.

Bhif’s face reddened, and he stared hard at the one who’d heard of me, before turning back to me. “What the fuck is a lieutenant of the troopers doing on a transport like this. And chained? What the fuck is going on here?”

I opened my palms to the heavens. “Waiting for my turn to die,” I shrugged. “Just like all of you.”

“You may be,” the unchained man said in response, but kept his gaze focused out the window. “I’m not.”

I looked at her. She lowered her eyes when he spoke, but I saw it. The innocence had been hardened over time and mistreatment, but still existed. “No,” I explained.

“We’re to fight in the arena,” Bhif added and nodded.

“No. We’re to die in the arena,” I corrected. “This is an execution for sport.”

“I thought only Sepawns could fight in the Troopers?” one of the men asked.

I shut my eyes hard, then opened them. “Yes, that’s true. One of the Emperor Supremes in the past decreed only Sepawns are allowed to fight.”

“Then why are you here?” The unchained man asked. “Are you secretly powered and got caught?”

“No,” I stated and returned to my view of the road out the window.

Bhif chuckled. “Heh. Then *you’re* dead.”

“You first,” I answered back.

“Best to face death on your feet,” the first man said, repeating his

statement from earlier.

Than on your back.

Chapter 9

Torrin

Built on the banks of a natural harbor, the city of O'lind existed as a state-of-the-art metropolis. With the backdrop of majestic forests, its elegance is what helped shape the city to what it is today. The riches The Supreme Commission collected on behalf of the Emperor Supreme from all of the kingdom-territories were of great importance, when it came to architectural designs as the vast majority of buildings had been built with both materials and stylistic shapes of the forests.

The Powerdrop Wagon entered O'lind and slowed so the citizens could gather at the marvel of the passengers as we passed them on the decaying, paved rock street of broad flagstones, decorated with garlands and streamers. I looked at my fellow passengers and took pity on them. Being a member of the Troopers, I once guarded the arena. They had no idea of the spectacle to come.

It was the time of the Midsummer Festival, and the Emperor Supreme would enjoy his final moments as the world leader. The people lined the street to get a look at the prisoners. From somewhere in the crowd, a mother warned her willful son of the dangers in store for him if he didn't mend his ways, holding us up as the example. It was a terrible responsibility.

The Powerdrop Wagon slowed until it stopped and the rear doors flew open. A group of three armed men with guns at the ready waited outside as

the nearest one to the door unlocked the chain from its connection on the rear wall.

“Get the fuck out!” One of them commanded.

We all stood to our feet, though some of us rose slower than others, and descended the stairs on the back of the wagon to the ground below. The wagon moved forward, leaving us behind, with the sound of the horses clapping away as the final medley of our transport.

We were led to a door in the back of the arena and escorted through a long hall. At the end of the hall, light from the opening streamed in to hasten us to the field. Those of us in chains were unlocked and freed by the guards, who then moved to the rear with their weapons readied to ensure none of us attempted to leave. We were committed. It was either move forward, or not at all.

Anne. Fuck that, I'm not going out like this.

“Listen to me, all of you,” I called out to them in a hushed tone. “When the trumpets blow, we have to go out there. No matter who comes out of the doors on the other sides, we face them together.”

“Why?” The woman asked.

I locked eyes with her. “Because we either fight together, or we die alone.”

An unfamiliar voice behind me chimed in. “You’re all going to die, anyway.” I looked over my shoulder and a man who hadn’t been on the wagon with us, strolled down the hall, whistling a tune as he walked. He settled next to one of the few on the wagon who’d not been shackled.

The unshackled man never looked in the new guy’s direction. He stood there, tense and ready, with beads of sweat on his forehead. “I’m going to win this,” he said, but more to himself than any of us, and looked past me as if I didn’t stand in his direct field of vision. “I have to.”

“What is your name, friend?” I asked.

Wherever he was a moment ago, he returned to the moment and saw me.

“Ridley.”

“Well, Ridley. We all have our reasons for wanting to win this, but if we stand together, we increase our odds to—”

“Let me stop you right there. I don’t *want* to win this, I’m *going* to win this. I *need* to win this. It’s so much more than a want for me. You have a reason? I have a purpose.”

“Why?” The woman asked again.

“Because I’m going to end it all,” he answered. He then looked to the new guy who merely smiled in return.

The woman straightened and brought herself up to her full height for the first time since I’d been observing her. Gone were the hunched shoulders and tucked chin and a voice of determination sprang forth. “Then our reasons align, and I’m as determined as anyone. When I win, I’m going to end it all.”

“Bhif has a reason to end it all,” Bhif called from the side. “These games breed nothing but greed and lies, and Bhif is not a liar. Burn it all, and the lies go with it.”

I nodded my head and looked at each of them. “Is there anyone here who fights for a reason *other* than to end it all with their wish?”

The silence which followed was as sharp as any sword.

Ridley jutted his chin. “What is *your* name, friend?”

“I’m Torrin.”

“Hunter.”

“John.”

“Amira.”

“I’m Bhif—”

“We all know who you are,” Hunter interjected. “Bhif the Liontalon. We get it.”

“What is your gift?” I asked Ridley.

He pressed his lips together and stared at the opening.

“I’m a giant,” Bhif declared.

“Yes, we know Bhif,” John sighed. “You’re a giant.”

Bhif’s nostrils flared and he lifted his chin. “I’m a giant. But I’m not stupid, little man,” he responded and glared at John. “Don’t treat me like I am, or you’ll be the first to see Bhif’s power. Ask the wolf.”

John raised an eyebrow. “Wolf?”

Bhif took a deliberate step towards John and growled. John raised both hands to his shoulders and showed his palms before taking a step back.

“What’s your *power*, Bhif?” I repeated. “You’re big, but I’ve seen bigger giants, so gigantism can’t be it.”

“Ice generation,” he gritted through his teeth.

Ridley’s eyebrow raised. “A distance fighter?”

“They’re pretty nasty,” I sighed.

Bhif raised an eyebrow and tilted his head before he spoke. “What does that mean?”

I shrugged. “Just a hunch. You do fight with a level of tenacity, right?”

“Bhif doesn’t fight with teeth,” he corrected.

“That’s not what tenacity means,” Ridley corrected.

“Bhif knows what teeth-nasty means. I can get up close and personal. I’m quite comfortable in close proximity. I don’t use my teeth to fight.”

“But?” Amira asked.

Bhif looked at her from out the corner of his eye, before exhaling a huge gust of air. “But...if Bhif is honest with you all, distance fighting is his greatest weapon. Bhif is by no means weak, but he’s strongest fighting from afar.”

“Interesting,” Ridley said and rubbed his chin. “I’m a practitioner of the Deochaju arts.”

“A defensive fighter,” John observed.

Ridley rotated so he could see John better, and folded his arms across his chest.

“I’m a sailor. I transport cargo throughout the world. I’ve seen your kind

before,” John explained. “You probably have something like Shadow Marionette as your power.”

Ridley’s jaw set.

“Figured as much,” John said with a nod. Then he pointed a finger to them both. “You two are a perfect match for each other. He fires from a distance while you defend attacks looking to exploit weaknesses. The only way for your opponent to do anything is to get in close. Except, if your enemy somehow made it past the ice projectiles, you’re both very comfortable fighting on the inside. Hell, by that point, *you* probably already figured out their weakness. It’s almost an unbeatable combination.”

“Almost?” Amira asked.

“Replication,” Ridley noted in reference to John. “How else would he know so much? Because he’s a sailor? I’ve known too many of them to know most are nothing more than drunkards trying to get through a job so they can get to their next drink. And the average person doesn’t know the details of powers from around the world. No, he’s something more than that. He replicates himself so he can be in more than one place at one time for a few minutes. Probably uses it to spy on people. That’s how he knows.”

John scrunched his forehead.

“*Figured* as much,” Hunter said.

“And you?” I asked Hunter.

His response was to smile at me and start his whistling again.

Amira shrugged. “I can dull the senses of others at will. Kinda my own personal suit of armor.”

“Another defensive and offensive combination,” I said.

“How so?” She asked.

The roar of the crowd caused the walls of the hall to shake and move as battles raged beyond us and through the tunnel’s opening. But within the hall, all became quiet and still.

“So, we fight together,” I said, breaking the silence. “You all will use

your gifts—”

“Why do you keep saying, ‘gift,’ Torrin?” Ridley asked.

“Can’t you tell?” Bhif said with a chuckle. “He’s a Sepawn. He has no powers. That’s why he thinks of them as gifts.”

“Sepawns,” John spat. “I’m not fighting beside a Sepawn.”

Ridley moved closer to me and squared up. We stood toe-to-toe. “Your kind killed my brother. How? How can someone with no power beat one of us? You’re dead as soon as you walk through that hole.”

“By you?” I asked through narrowed eyes.

Ridley sighed and shook his head. “No. I have no quarrel with you outside of winning these games. Someone else will likely do it. But Sepawns won the last tournament and ruled for a decade. How?”

“We won, because we’re underestimated. To be discounted *is* a gift.”

Ridley opened his mouth and then shut it.

“To be discounted *is* a gift,” Hunter observed. “To be forgotten is a curse.”

Every man in the tunnel focused on him. Amira’s eyes locked with mine as if she was looking solely to me for guidance. That bit of trust made my pride and determination indurate.

Ridley coughed and then stepped to the front of the hall, beside the gate separating us from the end game. “We all have the same end goal, to end it all. Our powers seem to be complementary to one another.”

“And we all wound up on the same wagon,” Amira added. “This is no accident.”

“No,” he sighed. “This is providence.”

“Then we fight together,” I acknowledged, “so that none of us die alone.”

“And in the end?” Bhif asked.

I balled my hands. “We bring it all down.”

Chapter 10

Torrin

The gate blocking the opening swung wide and those of us inside the tunnel proceeded forth to the raucous sounds of trumpets blaring and people cheering. As we pushed through, the brightness of the day greeted us and caused my eyes to ache from the constriction of my pupils. The sun held its position in the afternoon sky as if it also wanted to get a glimpse of the action, though the heavily clouded atmosphere masked its exact location. I looked at Ridley who'd also studied the heavens and noticed the wrinkles in his brow. No sun meant no Marionette. He would be disadvantaged.

Will you still fight with us, Ridley, because I'm a Sepawn? Or go at it alone? The shadows aren't long since the sun is hidden. To go at it alone is suicide.

Used for centuries, the arena was an ancient stone structure which circled around a dirt ring. The crowd, made up of mostly people of all social strata, were already lathered up from the previous contests of the day. The most exciting combat was left for the end of the event, and they were frenzied from anticipation. We *were* the main event. The entire scene reminded me of a starved animal waiting for food.

"You realize, Sense Manipulation is one of the rarest of all?" I whispered to Amira.

"Which is why I don't show it," she answered. "People have no idea what

I'm capable of, and it's a good thing too. It would have been so much worse for me if anyone found out. But it's too late for that now."

She stared into the distance as she spoke.

"No, it's not," I countered. "Don't display it, even now."

"What?! You're Sepawn. You'll die if I don't cover you." She looked at me with grim determination and I had to admit I secretly enjoyed her display of favoritism.

"Nah, I'll be too busy protecting you to die," I answered with a wink, watching her face redden and turn away.

On the possible eve of our deaths, these little moments were the only joys we had left. Amira was the kind of woman I would have pursued if life had a different course. Then again, if it wasn't this course, I would have never run into her in the first place. No, the universe brought us all together for a reason and that reason lied beyond the gate.

The arena floor was vast and covered in white sand. Everywhere my eyes fell, splotches of blood displayed prominently where the previous activities of the day had concluded. The crowd was seated on wooden benches extending so high it seemed the top row could reach their hands and they'd capture the sky. On either end, and directly in front of us, the other gates swung wide to reveal a number of additional participants in this final event.

"Bhif doesn't like this," Bhif growled.

We had no choice.

"Stand strong," I demanded. "As long as we stay together, we have a chance."

Hunter chuckled. "You're all going to die."

"And you're not?!" I fired back, but in a hushed tone.

Hunter whistled in response.

"I'm not going to die," John countered. "And I'm certainly not going to fight beside a Sepawn. You're on your own out there, and if it comes down to me and you in the finals? Well, rest assured you won't win this contest like

the last fucking Sepawn did and subject us to another decade of this madness.”

“My *brother* lost in the last games to a Sepawn,” Ridley said.

“Then your brother was a coward and incompetent,” John retorted, “and the reason this world has gone to shit. The best thing a Sepawn can do is be put in the ground.”

“I agree,” Hunter added.

My blood began to rage within me. This rift of division would consume us and ensure our downfall before we could even begin.

“But be careful what springs from the ground,” Hunter continued. “It can potentially heal you, or poison you. It can be death or life all at once.”

My dream.

Images of the vivid scene flashed before my eyes, brought back by Hunter’s words.

Was this what the warning was about? The games? Am I meant to die on the sands of this arena in front of thousands as a form of entertainment? Does my life have so little meaning? No. It can’t be.

A feeling of dread crept up my spine, and brought with it a warning. There was more at stake here than the winner of the games ruling the world for a decade. More at stake than even our lives. If I didn’t figure out the meaning of my dream, catastrophe would strike. Somehow, I knew the fate of the world rested in the balance of what we did here today.

Trumpets blared and directed our attention to the dias in the center of the arena set above the entrance of the hallway opposite us. Everyone on the arena floor pivoted to face the royalty as they entered. The pomp and circumstance was nothing compared to the pageantry of the Emperor Supreme and his queen as they entered and took their seats in the front row overlooking the action. Dressed in heavy exotic fabrics of golds and purples that draped over their bodies as if it were a second skin, and other jeweled finery beyond necessity, they were a sight to behold. Members of The

Supreme Commission followed and were seated in a similar show of power and prestige.

The royal herald stepped forward and addressed the crowd. He was an unremarkable man who valued himself higher than he ought to by the way he held his nose in the air as he spoke.

“It was written into our laws by the first of us that the Midsummer Festival would be held every ten years and culminate in a test of strength and will,” he declared in a squeaky voice. His hands gestured wildly as he delivered his oration in an attempt to capture the crowd’s rapt attention. “Combatants and competitors from all walks of life shall enter the arena with only one emerging victorious. A fight of the few to the death sets the course for the lives of the many. A person able to display such strength against impossible odds is a person capable of leading our world. All may enter—slave or free, man or woman, boy or girl—none may be turned away, for strength can be found in all of our territories if we are brave enough to find it.”

Those of us on the white sands of the arena gathered in front and looked to the Emperor Supreme as was custom. It would be his hand which would signal the start, and the bloodbath would commence. As I looked on, I also used the opportunity to study those encircling us out the corners of my eyes. I noted most others did as well. Fifty souls stood in front of the Emperor Supreme. Forty-nine were destined to fall.

I have to do this.

“And thus, dear citizens, we are set,” the herald wrapped. “Our majestic Emperor Supreme, by your hand, the games begin. May it usher in another decade of peace and prosperity to all who are felt by your powerful touch.”

The Emperor Supreme rose to his feet, and opened his arms wide to the boisterous cheers of the crowd. As he soaked up the attention, I saw it—the tremble in his chin. To have the power of the world in the palm of your hands for ten years, had to have been a terrible burden. One I would ensure would

no longer fall to only one fallible person.

When I win, I shall end it all.

“Listen to me,” I whispered to my fellow Powerdrop Wagoneers. “When he makes his move, partner up and protect each other.”

“The pompous prick is milking this till the end,” John noted through gritted teeth.

“And you can continue to bear your hatred for Sepawns, or you can take a look at the men and women who encircle you, all with the same murderous intentions, and work with me and live,” I challenged.

His jaw tightened as he removed his gaze from the Emperor Supreme and to the competitors surrounding him. He blew out a soft breath. “What would you have me do?”

“Bhif fights alone mostly, but even he recognizes when a different option should be considered,” Bhif observed.

“We’re with you,” Amira said softly and reached for my hand, clasping it in hers and claiming it as her own.

“I’m in as well,” Ridley whispered. “We can resolve our differences once it’s down to us, and only us. There are too many here to battle without a solid plan. You seem to have one, Torrin, so I’m in. Regardless of our motivations, we’re all striving for the same thing, and that’s to end this madness. There’s honor in that. There’s beauty in that. There’s a chance for victory in that. I’m in.”

I gave a slight nod. “Here’s what we do. When he gives the signal, Ridley, you and Bhif go left. Protect each other. Make your way to that side of the arena, put your backs to the wall, and keep at a distance. Ridley, when you see the opportunity, you cut the bastards down. Bhif, follow his lead.”

Bhif grunted an agreement and Ridley nodded slowly.

“Hunter,” I continued, “You and—”

Hunter whistled. “I never said I’m part of your party. Do not count on my aid. I’ll be there in the end, and I’ll see whichever one of you makes it there,

but rest assured, I am *not* your ally in this. I am a titan.”

Those same words. From my dream. I squeezed Amira’s hand and continued. “Fine, have it your way. John, you, me, and Amira will head to the right. Amira will provide us with cover for anyone who gets in close. With your replication and my fighting, we’ll cover that side. Bhif and Ridley, we’ll meet you in the middle.”

“Pfft,” John spat. “You coupled me with you? That’s an insult.”

“Fucker, you just agreed,” I growled.

“Before I knew your plan,” he countered. “You obviously plan to stab me in the back the minute it’s turned. Fuck you.” He leaned and looked over his shoulder to Hunter. “But the Sepawn’s plan has merit. There is strength in numbers, and I provide the greatest numbers you’ll find. Care to team up?”

Hunter chuckled. “Heh. Your hatred of Sepawns will be your undoing. Sure, I’ll team with you, only so I can be there when you crash and burn at his hands.”

Did these two just team up even after they swore they wouldn’t work with anyone?

“Whatever. Do what you want. Amira,” I called. “We’re in this together.”

“Together,” she echoed.

The Emperor Supreme sped his hands together in a loud clap.

“Begin!” The herald shouted.

Chapter 11

Torrin

Red painted the sands. The clap of the Emperor Supreme signaled the blood to flow and ushered the nightmare world into reality. I'd come up with a plan to find my way back to Anne. Before I could hunt down Gerard and find my sister, I had to survive the unsurvivable, and to do it I needed to change the way the games were played.

"Amira!" I shouted after the clap sounded. "Get down!"

I dropped to a crouched position and pulled her down with me, narrowly missing the intense solar beam projected from the eyes of one of the combatants. The beam connected and incinerated two combatants on my right.

"Stay low and tight to me, Amira," I warned. "I'll get you through this."

"We'll get through this," she corrected, and then a wave of nausea bubbled up inside of me.

I steadied myself and noticed Amira whipped her hands in a circle above her head. The three closest combatants to us each staggered a bit as if they'd lost their balance. Another blast of flames consumed them and sent them screeching in varying directions as the fire ate their flesh.

"I messed with their balance by affecting their inner ears," Amira informed me as if she could read on my face my confusion at what happened. I gave her a nod and grasped her by the hand.

We ducked walk forward until I could reach the weapons the combatants dropped as they sought refuge from the fire. “Someone has to take out those two,” I declared. “The one with the Fire Vision and the other with Solar Blasts. They’ll pick us all apart if someone doesn’t—”

On cue, the Day Walker with Solar Blasts head separated from his shoulders. As his body convulsed and fell forward, it revealed the cause of his demise. A Ground Keeper had shifted his form into a Retenour, a medium, bipedal amphibian with a ridged head, two light pink feline eyes, webbed, fin-like ears, no nose, a pointed snout, a rigid neck, and six short, powerful arms that end in razor-sharp claws. I gave a slight nod at the choice. If I had the Shifter power, I might choose a Retenour as well. It’s flexible torso and whole body covered in tough skin, made it a great choice for offense and defense. The shifted Retenour had torn the head off of the Ground Keeper.

The Shifter might have been a true contender to make it to the end, except after he ripped the head from the Solar Blaster, his body elevated high into the sky. I looked to the left and saw a Telekinetic motioning. The Telekinetic sent the Shifter up and away. When his body fell, it burst and popped like a balloon, spilling forth his innards. His drop also eliminated two others as the Telekinetic timed the Shifter’s drop perfectly to maximize the impact.

“This...this isn’t a game,” quavered Amira. “It’s an extermination.”

With one hand I squeezed hers, and with the other I gripped the spear I’d picked from the fallen combatants. By my count, ten had fallen at the sound of the clap. We had to keep a low profile, to avoid things like eye-level solar blasts or fire vision, but it wouldn’t be enough to survive to the end. We had to get in the game.

“Amira, we’re going to get through this,” I vowed, “but I need you with me. Are you ready?”

Her blank stare and trembling lips gave me the answer.

“Amira! Are you with me?” I demanded.

She slowly opened her mouth and shifted her eyes to mine. She gave a slight nod and that's all I needed.

“Look over there,” I pointed with the spear. “Ridley and Bhif are headed on that side. They're following the plan. Amira, they're working *together*. John and Hunter are as well, in their own way. Now, we have to do our part. I need you to blind anyone who gets close, do you understand?”

She nodded more assuredly this time.

“Stay low and a step behind me. We're going to get through this. Together.”

“And when we make it to the end?” She asked, her eyes wide with anticipation.

I squeezed her hand. “We're going to get through this,” I repeated. “Together.”

She squeezed back, shut her eyes, and exhaled. Another wave of nausea coursed through me and I knew she had centered herself and sent forth a blinding pulse of power. We duckwalked to the nearest combatant and I stabbed upward from my low position, driving the spear through the neck of Night Stalker. He'd had the Negative Form power and been using the opposite of the Blood Manipulator he'd defeated earlier. He manipulated the blood of other combatants and were controlling them like puppets, stopping their hearts and causing instant death without needing to connect with them in some way. I'd determined he had to die quickly as he was a major threat.

As the blood gushed from the open wound in his neck, I pulled the spear out and drove it through the eye of the Blood Manipulator he'd been holding down to end his life. Another wave of nausea forced me to swallow hard, and I turned to Amira in time to see a combatant trip over his feet. He'd been closing fast on my rear, and if she hadn't acted, he'd have taken us both out before I'd had a chance to act. I surged the tip of the spear through his opened mouth and out the back of his skull. But the spear broke in the process.

“I need another weapon,” I shouted to her over the din of the arena. The

crowd noise had reached a fever pitch at the insane action below them.

She nodded her head and we pressed ourselves tightly together as I scanned the arena. Many of these fighters were powered and didn't need use of weaponry. I was a Sepawn. If I didn't find something soon, it would be game over no matter my best intentions.

"Bhif!" Amira yelled and pointed.

I followed her line to where Bhif and Ridley were. Amira saw exactly what was needed. Bhif was making deadly weapons of ice and wielding them for destruction. I looked at her and nodded.

"You're a fucking genius," I declared. Her smile at my words lit up the arena and burned the image onto my heart. No matter what happened next, I'd never forget the beauty I beheld from her in this moment of death and destruction.

Bhif was a ready-made factory of weapons. We only needed to reach him and unite our talents as one.

"Amira, can you cloak us so that they can't see us as we pass by?" I asked. I needed to understand the extent of her power.

"No," she answered. "I can manipulate, enhance, reduce or remove senses temporarily, protect them from being overwhelmed, cause the target to sense things that aren't there or prevent them from sensing things, but what you're talking about is more of generating illusions. That's not what Sense Manipulation is."

"Fuck. Okay, we need to meet up with Bhif and Ridley. How can we get there through all of this?" I asked and waved my hands around to signal the entire arena and the destruction on it's floor.

Amira shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Very carefully?"

I chuckled at the innocence of her response. "*Very carefully* it is then. Stay low and—"

"I know. Stay tight to you," she answered.

We pivoted on the balls of our feet and began a slow duckwalk towards

Bhif. If we could make it to him and Ridley, I could get him to create an ice sword for me and I'd be right back at it. Almost on cue, Bhif and Ridley began to make their way back towards us.

“They're coming back to us!” I whooped. “We won't have far to go.”

“Oh,” Amira gasped.

The tone in her voice made my blood run cold. I spun around and studied her face. The coloring had drained from it and she stared at something intently. I followed her gaze and sucked in a breath.

This went from bad to worse.

Hunter used his Replication power and split himself into a number of additional copies. The field of combatants was supposed to be growing smaller as we fought each other one-by-one, but this changed the rules of engagement to something only he alone knew.

“Kill them all,” he commanded as he glared at me.

Chapter 12

Torrin

The time for subtlety had reached its end. I grabbed Amira by the hand, rose to my feet, and sprinted to the middle of the field, bringing her with me. The Hunter replicas charged with murder in their eyes, and death on their lips. Bhif and Ridley almost collided with us and we all reached the center of the arena, followed shortly by John.

“Back-to-back!” Ridley shouted.

It wasn’t enough. He had a sense of training about him, but this was war. I had to step up or none of us would survive.

“Don’t let them touch you!” I commanded. “Amira! To the center!”

“Give her space!” Ridley agreed.

Amira moved into the center of our circle, while Bhif, Ridley, John, and I surrounded her. If I did nothing else, I purposed to stand between her and death.

Anne, wherever you are...forgive me.

“What do you see?” Ridley asked.

We didn’t have time.

“Amira, use your Sense Manipulation to blind any Hunter that comes close,” I called. “Bhif, we need weapons. Make them and an ice moat in front of us to rob the bastards of their footing. Maintain it as long as you can while feeding us. The rest of us will cut them down as they close in.”

“Yes!” Bhif roared and tossed me a long, sharp ice sword.

It was exactly as I envisioned. He had the power to keep us armed.

The Hunter replicas swarmed like pack animals and scaled the walls of the arena like deadly spiders. We all were caught in his web, combatants and crowd members alike. Hunter attacked with his copies from all sides. In the stands, Warden Troopers tried to fight back, firing their weapons at the multitude of replicas headed for them. These were my brethren and even as I fought on the sands because one had condemned me to die, I felt for the others. We were called upon to risk our lives for those in power, while they sat around and reaped from our sacrifice.

Well, my sacrifice was for Anne...for Amira, and for all those like them. The ones who neither the means nor the skill to fight back. The Hunter replicas who didn't climb the walls, attacked those of us on the sands. Bhif moved to action, and created a wide, thick, ice moat and laid it along the ground encircling us.

A wave of nausea came from behind me, pushed through me, and then past me and slammed into the oncoming horde of Hunters. I swallowed hard and noted how strong the nausea seemed to grow the longer I remained in Amira's presence. It sickened me, but had the desired effect on the replicas.

“Now!” I commanded.

With the ice sword in my hand, I charged forward and impaled the closest Hunter. My head swiveled right and left as I looked on. The others had followed my example and engaged with any replicas in their area. The sickening feeling flowing through me from Amira's power left me woozy, but I pressed on. I delivered a horizontal slash through one of the replicas, spilling his innards and felling him. Another weaved his way through the chaos, but met the same fate as his replicated brethren when I preemptively threw the ice sword like a javelin and sunk it into his body.

“Bhif!” I called.

Bhif responded by forming another ice sword and sent it my way.

Rearmed, I twisted to avoid the bloodlust of another replica and drove the ice through the underside of his chin. Blood sprayed everywhere I turned from the onslaught, and I knew it would only be a matter of time before we were overwhelmed.

“Ridley, find this bastard’s weakness,” Amira called from behind me.

“I got it,” I answered. “They teach us in the Troopers that powers are like muscles. Even someone like Hunter will eventually fatigue. When he does —”

“I’ll kill the cunt!” Bhif bloviated.

“No, you won’t,” John yelled. “He...eats death! I saw it! He absorbs it and gets stronger!”

Dammit. With all this death around him, we won’t be able to stop him.

The Hunters crashed the arena walls like the waves of the ocean against the shore, and I knew. *This* was my dream. Anne had been right. It was a warning. A warning about Hunter and the death he would bring.

“I’ve seen this before,” I muttered to myself.

“Somebody better figure something out quick!” John shouted. “At this rate, we’re going to be overrun.”

“Bhif doesn’t like the sound of that,” Bhif moaned.

He’s a titan, and a nightmare. But for every nightmare, there’s a way to wake up.

“Ridley,” I called over my shoulder. “Give us something, man. Or we’re all dead. Bhif!”

Bhif tossed me another ice sword, in time to block a replica’s attack with it, slicing through his arm. A follow cut through the neck eliminated him as an immediate threat, but there was another. The sword Bhif formed was shorter and thinner than the others, and the ice moat had thinned. Where Hunter’s powers denied my instructions, Bhif’s were proving me correct. He was fatiguing.

I’ve got to end this.

I scanned the chaos before me, and searched for the source. The original Hunter walked through the bodies like they were flowers in a field, until he stopped at one. He touched the body, closed his eyes, and his hand glowed. As John had warned, Hunter absorbed the death of the person, and with it, grew stronger than before.

It was the damndest thing I ever saw. Nothing in the Warden Troopers had prepared me for a powered person like this.

“We’re fucked,” Ridley moaned.

Anne.

“Snap the fuck out of it!” John blustered. “What happened to all of you? Are you a master or a fucking coward?”

I scoffed and shook my head as John’s words rattled around in my head. The main person who’d rejected my plan of action, now served as the voice of reason. I knew what I had to do. Being a lieutenant taught me what leadership was. Leadership was empowering those under you to make the right choice, not lead them down the path of destruction as Gerard had done.

Fuck you, Gerard. You sentenced me to die, but I’m going to live, and I’m going to do it by being a better leader than you ever were.

“Ridley, if anyone is going to get us out of this, it’s you, Ridley,” I affirmed, instilling him with confidence. “I was at those games with your brother, watching from the crowd, and I remember him. I was one of the Troopers assigned for crowd control, just as those men and women up there are now. Your brother didn’t die because his Sepawn opponent was better. He died because the Sepawn fought without honor.”

The clouds in the sky parted and gave way to reveal the sun, and I knew I was on the right path.

“The Sepawn stabbed your brother in the back before he had a chance to do anything about it. Your brother never saw it coming. But you have the chance right now to avenge him, and right those wrongs. We all do. We all have the chance to fix whatever mistakes in our lives led us to this moment.

And we do it, together!”

The light from the sun streamed down from the sky and flooded the field, bathing me in a celestial spotlight and coating the field in shadows. It was the confirmation I needed. The light would wake us from this nightmare.

“Bhif!” I shouted, “form and ice path and take us to the original Hunter. We’re going on a collision course.”

“Whaaat? Bhif doesn’t like the sound of that,” Bhif whined.

“Do you like the sound of your own death instead?” Ridley added.

“Do it, Bhif,” I commanded.

“Everyone else, when Bhif makes the path, climb on board,” Ridley directed.

I was right about him. He had some formal training and would make an excellent subordinate.

“John, make a couple of replicas,” I directed. “Their job is to push us down the path and if they die along the way, that’s a sacrifice you have to be willing to make.”

“Fuck you,” John spat.

“Do it, you racist piece of shit!” I demanded. “Or you can die right here, alone.”

John growled, but began to vibrate to create the additional warriors to our cause. There was only one thing remaining.

“Amira,” I said, “keep the Hunter replicas off balance. You’re the strongest person we have. Your power is unmatched and when we reach the original, focus all your strength on him. He’s strong too, but I *know* you can best him.”

“Got it,” she declared boldly thanks to my confidence. “What will you do?”

“As we slide, I’ll call out any incoming traffic to us, and point out any attackers. Any that get through you and John will deal with me.”

“And what happens when we get there? To the original Hunter?” Ridley

asked.

“I’m going to end it,” I answered.

“Bhif likes the sound of that,” Bhif roared. “Everyone, climb aboard.”

Bhif waved his hands and pushed out. A straight line of ice connected us to the original Hunter. We all jumped onboard and John split into two replicas, one for each side. Bhif raised his other hand and the replicas pushed. We fired down the path as Bhif steered, cutting down any replicas in our way. Amira’s power was strong as she sent wave after wave of Sense Manipulation into the Hunter replicas that came close, but her powers affected me. The feeling of sickness inside me continued to grow.

The original Hunter looked our way and we stared at each other in challenge. The smirk on his face brought concern to mine. Was I leading these men and this woman to their deaths, as Gerard had led our squad? Was it my own arrogance and hubris which prevented me from seeing me make the same mistake as him?

I had no time to dwell on it. I’d made my decision, and set my course. There would be no deviation, and in that moment, I understood Gerard. He was a distorted psychopath, but he had achieved clarity. He had purpose. He had a mission, and I introduced change. I brought him to the brink. He had one goal, which was to fulfill his mission, and I challenged him when he had no chance at deviation. He’d made his decision and set *his* course.

I’m still going to kill you, Gerard. I may understand you, but if I live, I’m going to hunt you down like the dog you are and deliver my own justice. This I promise you. This is my decision. This is my course.

Bhif split his hands wide and the ice path melted into the ground. I used the momentum, and executed a perfect tuck-and-roll just as we’d practiced so many times in the training I’d received from the Troopers.

I came up on my feet and in front of the original Hunter.

“Very dramatic,” he snarked.

“Replicate this,” I fired back and slammed my melting ice sword into his

eye and through the back of his head.

Hunter dropped to his knees, threw his head back and roared to the sky. With one final push, I drove the ice through his brain. Hunter shook and with each convulsion, his replicas screamed. They dissolved, filling the arena with the agonizing cries of death.

Chapter 13

Torrin

The Emperor Supreme approached us with his herald by his side. I gave a quick bow as the herald screeched.

“You saved us all! If it wasn’t for you, we’d all be dead. Thank you! Not only did you save the world, you did so with honor. This day will go down in history as the darkest of days, another Sepawn winner. Another Sepawn Emperor Supreme!”

“No,” I countered. “It’s because of my team. Together, we defeated the evil.”

“You’re right. We *must* forgo the normal rules. Even though you, and you alone, are the reason we’re alive, with the Sepawn Emperor Supreme’s blessing, we’ll have five winners of the The Chaos Games.”

“What?!” John complained.

“We have to bring the Midsummer Festival to an end. You all gave everything you had to save us, it's not fair to ask you to fight to the death. You deserve better. So, the five of you will be given charge of your individual territories! You can establish them as sovereign kingdoms in their own right for the next decade.”

“The four of them,” I corrected.

“What?” The herald asked. “What did you say?”

“I said, ‘the four of them,’ will be given charge of their own kingdoms. I

don't want my own kingdom.”

I need to find my sister, and to do it, I can't be tied down ruling.

The herald nodded in agreement. “As you wish. Since there's not a Sepawn representative in these games, the Emperor Supreme will not be removed from power completely. He will continue to rule. We'll let him rule over Sepawn Island.”

“That's fair,” I agreed.

But, it reminded me of something.

“What of the wish?”

“Wish?” The herald asked.

“The wish,” I said. “Each winner gets one wish to be granted.”

“We can't grant a wish for your entire team,” the herald scoffed. “Not when *you* did all the work.”

“No need,” I replied. “Because we all have the same wish. So in essence, you're only granting one wish, and in doing so, fulfilling the Midsummer Festival traditions.”

“Oh?” The herald asked. “I think we can do that. Sure, why not? What is this one wish the five of you would like to see granted? Riches? Glory? How can we fulfill the traditions of the Midsummer Festival?”

“This is over, this Midsummer *Festival*,” I growled. “I was sentenced to die in these so called *games*. I served as a Trooper. I should have been honored for risking my life, and the lives of my brothers, but I wasn't. And for what? So the very people I fight for can whoop and holler at my death? No. I...we, wish to end it all.”

“What?!” they wailed. The herald and all the members of The Supreme Commission who'd accompanied him and the Emperor Supreme to the field, all cried at the realization.

Their corruption would be stopped by a former Sepawn Trooper. Their power would meet its end by a nonpowered person.

“You heard me. This will be the *last* Midsummer Festival ever. The wish

is to end it all.” I commanded.

Chapter 14

Amira

“**T**his was not the deal!” King Morrow roared.

“I’m pretty sure kidnapping and forcing her to fight wasn’t part of the deal either, but here we are,” Torrin replied straightlaced.

The world outside the battle arena was so much different than what I remembered. Or perhaps it was the fact that my eyes were no longer clouded through my naivety of my past life.

Life before my family’s fall.

Life before the end of Amira the farmer’s daughter. Bitterness slowly seeped into my pores.

I was a warrior, forged from pain and suffering as well as desperation. I never saw myself to be the leader of anything but life had other plans and here I was, side by side with Torrin in the Intel Dynasty’s capital city, ready to start my reign as queen.

“Who the fuck are you?” Morrow objected.

But it seemed we had another obstacle in our way. Standing there, I tried to find the right words but didn’t need to when Torrin took control of the situation.

“Lieutenant Torrin Tattersall of the Warden Troopers,” Torrin answered without hesitation.

He was confident and if I was to be queen, I needed to mirror it.

“He’s the new Chief of the Watch,” I answered. “My watch, as the new queen. And you’re in my seat.”

Morrow leaned back in the throne and rubbed his chin. “I’m in your seat? Impudent wench. This is *my* seat and no woman has ever taken the throne.”

Well, ya old bastard, it was going to happen today.

“Take care how you speak to your new queen,” Torrin growled and placed his hand on the grip of the gun at his waist.

“I’ll speak any way I wish to a common piece of trash like her. She’s not even full Intel. She’s a hybrid.”

I shook my head at the fool. “No.”

“No?”

“No,” I fired. “I am a full Intel citizen. That was *not* my lineage, and that was *not* my husband.” I stepped forward for added emphasis. “And that was *not* my deal.”

“And you are *not* in charge anymore,” Torrin added.

The intensity in the room was so thick, it pervaded the air and hung like the fine draperies on the wall of the throne room. The king’s guards stayed back and watched the volley of words like it was a sport and they were betting spectators, wagering on the outcome.

In many ways, it felt like the arena all over again. But if I could come out alive from that bloodshed, this would be nothing in comparison.

“My family has reigned over the Intel Dynasty for generations,” Morrow seethed. “I will *not* lose my position because you lot somehow survived and decided to wreck the system.”

“We corrected the system,” I remarked calmly.

“And you will remove yourself from her majesty’s throne, or you will lose your life,” Torrin threatened.

“Guards! Get them out of my sight!” Morrow demanded. “If they step on Intel land again, have them shot on sight.”

My body tensed, ready for whatever was to come. It was a good thing

Torrin and I had acquired weapons on our travel here.

“I am Lieutenant Torrin Tattersall, of the Warden Troopers and I countermand that order!” Torrin roared. “If any man makes a move towards her majesty, Queen Amira Jax, then they and their family will be held accountable. The whole of their family.”

I admired Torrin and his consistent stance in protecting me. I was right to name him my Chief of Watch. I didn't know any of these people in the palace, I didn't know if I could trust any of them at my back. Torrin was the only known person I had at my disposal and I planned to keep him until I established good footing here with the people of the Intel Dynasty.

The silence in the room was stifling. No one made a sound, no one made a move.

“I come with the full backing of the Supreme Commission and the authority of the Warden Troopers,” Torrin continued. “And by her majesty, Queen Amira Jax's declaration, I am the Chief of the Watch and command you to remove the former King Morrow from her majesty's throne. Any man who does not act at her majesty's command will be deemed a traitor to the crown and executed without prejudice.”

I looked to Torrin who stood there with authority. He was a man born for the position. My respect for him grew as well as my relief. I made the right decision.

The guards on the wall jumped into motion. The closest two climbed the steps to the throne and laid their hands on Morrow.

“Unhand me!” He cried but I had no sympathetic ear to give him.

Torrin looked to me for direction as the guards roughly handled my predecessor. “What will we do with him, my Queen. What will your first decree be?”

It seemed we shared a mutual respect for each other outside of the arena as well.

I glared at Morrow from the side of my eye as I looked directly into

Torrin's. The only thoughts I had were ones of survival.

I never thought we'd get this far, to be honest.

"My first decree as queen of the Intel Dynasty will be one of mercy." I said boldly. "Though this man never showed me any, I will show the people that we will be one of compassion. There are so many families whose lives are put on the line because of things out of their control."

"Spoken like a woman who's been through it and had survived to tell the tale," Torrin said in a tone of reverence.

My face flushed with timidity. What was there to admire about that? Wasn't that the plight of all the people who live on the outskirts of the city? Survive.

My eyes began to burn with unshed tears. Memories of my father and his cough. If he had more good meals in his belly, would things have turned out the way they did?

The guards removed Morrow from my newly acquired throne, and Torrin extended his hand. My breathing slowed as the memories of a past best left forgotten slowly dissipated from my mind. This was it. The course of my life was forever changed after one event. Letting out a breath, I placed my hand in his and felt the warmth and strength of it as he helped me ascend the stairs and assume my place as queen.

I looked out into the great hall and gripped the throne's armrests tightly. Torrin moved to the side and continued to stand, assuming his position as my righthand and new Chief of the Watch, in charge of the security of me and the kingdom.

Yet my mind troubled over. Everyone in the room looked to me and I wasn't sure what was expected of a queen, but I had to learn quickly. I was confident I would be with Torrin by my side.

"Seems like you're in some serious thoughts over there," Torrin whispered as we watched Morrow escorted out the side door. "He could still incite an insurrection, you know? You may have to deal with him at a later

date.”

I had to deal with a lot of things it seems. The men who put me in this position were still out there. I felt my paranoia rise.

“I’m the new queen of the Intel Dynasty. I got a lot on my mind,” I snapped back, not yet wanting him to be privy to my thoughts of bloodlust and vengeance.

“And the attitude to boot,” he chuckled.

As queen, I had access to everything I ever wanted in life, but my parents weren’t here to see me elevated to such a height as this. I glanced at Torrin and gave him a once-over. He’d been with me in the arena, saved me a number of times, and shown every reason for me not to doubt his loyalty. Yet, I had no idea of his background, or where he came from? Or why he chose to abdicate his opportunity to lead the Sepawns in favor of staying by my side? His words of inciting an insurrection stirred something inside of me that I tried to fight against, but had to work through.

In the arena, John had a strong dislike for Sepawns, and Ridley was likewise as wary of them. But, I’d elevated one to the second highest position in the land and he has no ties to my kingdom or my journey. Why?

Everything seemed to be moving so fast, I had no time to process. Torrin and I would need to have a conversation, and soon. A conversation that could have serious repercussions.

Chapter 15

Amira

THREE MONTHS LATER...

I groaned as we sat there, listening to the community complaints in the throne room. Who knew the duties of a queen would be so monotonous and dreary?

“I would like to ask your majesty for permission to extricate tenants who wish not to follow the contracts that have been initially agreed upon. I have given them three notices and they still refused to leave. Would you grant me the right to remove these bodies by any means necessary? They are impacting my business and my livelihood. They are terrorizing my sheep. They—”

I cut my hand before me, no longer needing to hear the rest of it. What the citizen refused to tell me was what exactly the contract entailed and if extracting the family would put them out in the streets. How often did my family and I find ourselves unable to make enough to eat? At least we had shelter over our heads. This family? This family wouldn't if he chose to go this route and that would possibly lead those people into a life of thieving and much worse.

There were no simple answers, only choosing the lesser of evils. Torrin stood beside me in beautiful regalia. I found myself distracted as I looked upon him, trying to think of a solution for this man and his supposed troubles.

Torrin, noticing my attention, gave me a sultry grin that made me scissor my legs.

His choice to stay with me in the Intel Dynasty made my heart want to burst even as I sometimes doubted why. I was sure he would want to travel back to the Sepawn islands once we gained our freedom, but he had mentioned nothing of it and I was never brave enough to question it in case of his answer.

“My queen—”

I internally groaned but cut a scathing look at the man causing him to shut

his trap and not try for my attention again.

“I need to think over what you have requested, kind sir. Until I come up with a solution that would benefit both parties, I suggest you come back here tomorrow. Right now, I wish to rest as it feels like a headache is coming on.” I stood up and everyone behind him flinched back. “Citizens, I thank you all for taking the time to make your way to the capital city with your grievances. I ask that anyone lined up after this man here to please come back tomorrow.”

Some grumbles of disapproval floated to my ears but I ignored it. They couldn’t expect me to sit here from dusk to dawn in order to sort these things out.

“Evander, can you please tell the guards to escort the people out.”

My royal council nodded his head and carried out my orders. He came with the last ruling regime and I had yet to determine if he was friend or foe under my new rule. There were too many changes to adjust to, too many things I needed to learn that I decided to allow him to stay for the time being. He had yet to give me advice that I was uncomfortable with. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact Torrin stayed close beside me as a personal guard.

I stood up and left the room without a glance back. Torrin followed behind me.

“Please! I need your help! This cannot wait!”

The voice was small, a young boy’s. Something inside of me pulled me back and made me turn.

He showed courage as he struggled against the guards who were forcefully dragging him away.

I shouldn’t be this callous. Was that not me so long ago, wondering if there was any help out there for my father who fell ill? It was the very reason I took things into my own hands—thieving.

“Stop. Bring him to me,” I commanded.

“You heard her! Let me go, ya brutes!” he yelled. The guards took their hands off and he fell to the ground face first. He quickly jumped back to his feet in a fighting position and my heart ached. He’s been through a lot in his life to react in such a way.

“Boy, step forward.” I made my way back to the throne and sat down. One more grievance wouldn’t hurt.

Torrin came and stood beside me with his hands clasped behind his back. He was armed but stood in a relaxed position. A remnant of his position with the Warden Troopers. Disgraced for having such a poor showing at the games in defense of the people they’d sworn to protect, and without an Emperor Supreme to set the direction of the world, the Troopers were disbanded.

Made up mostly of Sepawns, the reputation of nonpowered people took a massive beating. Rumors began to circulate of how many of the Sepawns were being treated throughout the world, and I’d wondered if this were the reason Torrin decided to stay by my side in lieu of ruling his own kingdom. Had he foreseen the treatment of the Sepawn people and decided to seek refuge with me? Did John’s hatred of his people, or Ridley’s uncertain posturing in the arena lead to this? Or was it his position in the Troopers itself which gave him the forethought to align himself with me?

If he sought to join me only as a sheltering and covering for him, I wouldn’t know how to respond. It would speak to the very core of our relationship, and I wouldn’t know if I could trust him any longer.

When the boy made it to the bottom of the dias, he looked at me with desperation, and I put the thoughts of doubt away for later. “I need your help, your majesty. Our orphanage is in trouble. There’s been missing children and I didn’t know what else to do until I heard that Amira the Widow Maker came back to be queen.”

Amira the Widow Maker? Is that what they’re calling me in the streets?

“I knew no one else would understand,” the boy continued, “but you would. Because you—you know. You just know.”

“How can I help you, child?” I asked. I didn’t want to rush the boy, but the ache in my head began to sing louder. There were too many thoughts swirling around inside me. I needed to see the royal healer, and soon, before I’d be able to rest.

“The children, your majesty,” he spluttered. “They’re taking us in the night and selling us. We’re trying our best to keep watch but it’s not enough.” His voice broke at the end but his eyes were stern, one of a determined soul who would lay his life down for his family.

I looked to Torrin who had a fire in his eyes, one that spoke of bloodshed. Maybe we hadn’t truly left the arena behind after all.

“Where is this orphanage you speak of and what is your name?” I looked at him with a soft expression, letting him know I was sympathetic to his plight.

If I was to rule this kingdom justly, I needed to protect the innocent.

“I come from the Prospects Orphanage, your majesty, located in the town of Owhar. It is south of here, not but two days travel on foot. My name is Thiestan.”

On foot? I stared at him and my eyes burned with a need to kill. He looked malnourished and I could only imagine what the other children looked like. To make it this far on foot was a testament to his perseverance.

I stood up and he quickly dropped to his knees and bowed his head to the ground. It made me uncomfortable, but I had to remind myself I was the queen.

And apparently, a widow maker.

“Please, get up. You do not need to do that. Come now,” I pleaded softly.

“Thank you. Thank you for taking the chance to listen. We desperately need your help.” When he picked up his head again, his eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

“Your majesty, I do not think it wise to—” Evander began.

Torrin put a blade to his neck the moment I jerked my gaze in his

direction. “Do not question your queen,” he snarled. “We’ve had enough of that.”

Torrin and I were on the same page.

How dare he?

These were the words from a man who never had to suffer atrocities. A man kept safe and secure behind palace walls, not having to worry about making it to see the next day. It lit a fury within me.

I stood up and came toe to toe with Evander. He visibly shook where he stood as he tried his best to avoid my eyes.

“I need seven men. You and the others will leave in ten minutes with Thiestan of Owhar.” Maybe it was time for him to get a taste of reality.

His eyes widened comically as they snapped to mine. “Y-your—”

Torrin cut off Evander’s blubbling by pressing the sharp end of his blade further into the flesh of his neck. Thin crimson lines trickled down his chest.

“Your queen has given you a command,” he snarled.

I turned my face from them, confident Torrin would communicate what I needed to my advisor.

Stepping down the dias, I bent at the knee and extended an arm. “Come, let’s get you washed up and ready you for our trip. You’ll need a good pair of shoes if we are to get the children back. How good are you with a sword?”

Thiestan roughly nodded his head and hesitantly reached for my hand, staring at it for a few moments. The contrast was striking. From his disheveled appearance to my clean cut fingernails. My heart ached for this boy and the rest of the children of this orphanage. Life was never meant to be fair but life never gave them a fighting chance either.

“I’m very good with a sword, your majesty. My dream was to become a great fighter, like Torrin the Butcher.” He casted his gaze to my personal guard who stood behind me as if we were heroes. We were anything but. Just two simple people who got thrown into the arena to fight for their lives.

Maybe this was the good that came out of it—the chance to use what

happened to us, my position as queen, to make this world a better place for those like Thiestan and the children who were stolen away into the night.

Chapter 16

Amira

“**A**nd you never saw him coming? From what you’re telling me, he’s always had it in him to do such a thing.”

Torrin and I had gotten to know one another over the past few months. It was on a quiet morning when I remembered him mentioning a sister when we were in the wagon together. With all that happened so quickly after, we finally had a chance to sit down.

“Amira, I knew. That’s exactly why I was ready for him. I just wasn’t ready for him to come back to life.”

Seeing the dirty boy brought back old memories for us both. But it seemed this conversation was overdue.

“I’ve crossed Owhar but once in my life,” Torrin started. “It’s a very small rural area. Seeing that boy today—” He ran his hand over the back of his neck and I wondered if he thought of his sister, the one he mentioned in the wagon upon first awakening.

“Have you thought about looking for her?”

He let out a frustrated sigh and stared ahead. “We needed to establish your kingdom. I didn’t want the wolves to eat you alive.” He turned to look at me. “And I was right. The old king still sat on his throne.”

“And now? What will you do now that things have settled, Torrin? Will you go find her?”

My heart was unsettled. I had gotten used to him having my back when I doubted myself. Though I'd learned to find my confidence in certain matters, I wasn't certain in all aspects. What if I needed advice on military matters and how to run our militia? John had established his kingdom, and his poisonous attitude towards Sepawns was beginning to spread.

"I've thought about it. I need to strategize and figure out where exactly I would start looking. Gerard would have placed her somewhere that wouldn't cross my mind."

Could I be selfish, though, and keep him from finding the one person he needed the most? I had no one left. He still had his sister. I couldn't be that obstacle, even if I was queen.

"Maybe start in Owhar," I suggested. "If children are being trafficked there, whose to say your sister wasn't among them? Perhaps this Gerard person works with—"

"I've thought of that. But what about you? Will you be okay here, while I'm gone?"

His concern made my heart swell, but I couldn't let him see how much I needed him. It was another weakness on my part. I needed to take control of that if I was to be a good queen. Decisions couldn't be made emotionally.

"You should go. I'll send some of my guards with you, to help with the search." It was the least I could do, to bring him back to me.

Torrin stared at me with an expression I couldn't decipher. I felt myself waver ever so slightly under his scrutiny. Could he see my doubt in the decision? I took a deep breath and pulled my shoulders back, staring him in the face with a mirrored expression.

"Your parents would be proud," he said with conviction and my heart stuttered. They were lies. He was under false beliefs and I couldn't let him keep thinking highly of me when what he should be doing is looking at me with disgust.

I stood before him, vulnerable and raw. My face flamed as my voice

raised with emotion I was unable to contain, no matter how hard I tried. “I killed them, Torrin. Me! I killed them.”

My head felt tight. The world around me crumbled once more the same way it did everytime someone I loved got sick. I was a cancer, the cause of it all, but I didn’t know how to let go. *I should have let them go...*

“I know.”

“No, you don’t!” I screamed, hot tears burning my cheeks as they fell. “It’s because of my power.” The admission, out in the air, felt bitter on my tongue.

He should shun me. He should walk away and go find his sister and never look back.

“What?”

Of *course* he was confused. I was confused. No one knew this truth. I couldn’t let anyone know. But how long would I be able to hide it before it manifested itself again, but this time in a man I wasn’t sure I could lose.

“The royal healer told me when I went to see him for my headaches,” I said, and turned around, unable to face him. “With a power like mine, prolonged exposure severely sickens anyone...*anyone* who stays around me!” I wiped my eyes and took a deep breath. “This is why you need to go, Torrin. Go find your sister and start a life you deserve away from me. I can’t get you sick, do you get that?!”

“I know.”

“You do?” I sniffed.

“Yes. I felt it in the arena when you used your power, and pieced it together later. You almost knocked *me* out a couple of times. Your power is strong, Amira, but we all have weaknesses.”

Did he not understand that mine weren’t limited to one. I am nothing but a woman full of weaknesses and yet the universe thought to hand a kingdom to me. To me! It was cruel.

He had torn down a wall I thought I successfully erected since coming

here. I guess I was wrong.

It was easy for him to stand there with these beliefs because he was a Sepawn. How could he truly understand what it was like to be both gifted and cursed?

“You don’t understand, Torrin.” I turned to face him then, letting him see my tear tracked face. It was too late to play brave now. “My weakness *killed* my parents. I’m responsible for the murder of my own family. Slowly I watched them wither away knowing full well it was me all along. But I couldn’t let them go. My selfish need to be with them brought their downfall. You have to go, or I’ll do the same thing to you.”

“I’ll risk it.”

My frustration climbed. Did he want to die so badly? Who would take care of his sister?

“You stupid man, listen to what I’m trying to tell you. Think of your sister. If you stay much longer, you’ll die too and then I’ll have no one, your sister will be left alone. I’ll be alone. I can’t—”

I couldn’t bear the thought of it. I couldn’t be responsible for killing another person I cared about. My body shook as I tried to contain my emotions. I exposed enough of my failures in front of this man who continued to stand there like none of this mattered, when it was the only thing that should matter.

“I never met your father,” he said in a low tone, “or your mother, but I have met you. And from the woman they raised, I can tell you this...they loved you so very much, and would risk their lives for you in a heartbeat. I’m sure they were very thankful to have you as a part of their lives and as a part of their family.”

I shook my head frantically in denial. He couldn’t know. He served a higher purpose, found a calling. Me? What did I have? The memories of the lost.

“How can you be so sure?” I whispered, afraid of the answer.

The sound of him taking a step made my body tense up. This was it. This was where he told me he had a duty to find his sister and that this would be our goodbye. His false belief that I would be alright would be his driving motivator because that was who he was. A man who led until there was no more reason to.

“Because, Amira—”

I quickly wiped my face and cut him off before he could say anymore. “I will send you my guards to help you on this mission, to make sure it’s successful. And—”

“Amira.”

“—A-And my swiftest horses so that your journey will be short. Try Owhar, maybe you can start at—”

He grabbed me and my throat constricted from fear. I didn’t want to hear his goodbye, I had enough of them to last a lifetime and some that were lost in the mess I created, the mess called my life.

“I-I wish you luck, Torrin—”

His eyes bored into mine and I swallowed hard. The tension in this room was electrified by our silence.

“Amira, I think it’s you who doesn’t understand,” he whispered.

My eyes widened a fraction, not seeing this turn of events. I thought he would be elated to leave me.

“I understand perfectly, Torrin, and I’m not upset. You need to find your sister, I know and—”

“Amira, would you stop for a second and breathe? Look at me.”

My eyes were darting around his face, over his shoulder. I couldn’t face him. My cowardice only made me internally grimace because this was who I was. I was good at thieving, good at running. I was always running... and staying when I shouldn’t.

“Look at me,” he commanded and I did. Me...a queen...following his command.

My lip trembled at the intensity of his gaze, at the hunger I refused to believe was there. Hasn't it always been this way between us since we decided to take this journey to the Intel Dynasty together?

"Amira, I love you."

I shook my head but he stopped me with a kiss on the lips.

"I would lay down my life in a second and without hesitation for you," he breathed and brushed the side of my face with his lips. "We'll find a cure."

Fresh tears streamed down my face.

"Torrin, it is the course of my life. It's okay. I've come to terms with it. I'm okay with it," I tried.

He kissed me again and I took in his scent, trying to distract myself from my self destructive thoughts.

"It's okay to not be okay, Amira. I got you. I've *always* got you."

He was willing to sacrifice himself to be with me.

The heroic asshole.

I shoved him away from me, needing space, needing air.

He grabbed me before I could turn and pulled me back into his arms, slamming his lips on mine.

I was a weak woman with a mind filled with all manner of chaos from my queenship to the possible need in finding a replacement once he left.

"I'm not leaving you. I'm going to find my sister and bring her back here," he said against my lips.

"But—"

He took command of the kiss and the rest of my words were lost in his dominance. His lips and tongue told me everything I already knew deep within me, that my irrational thoughts were just that, irrational.

The opulent room we were in had a large window giving us the perfect view of the courtyard. Anyone could see us. What if someone was watching?

I broke the kiss and shifted away from him. But Torrin wouldn't be deterred. Embarrassment turned into laughter as he tried to grab for my arm

again but missed as I quickly dodged and put a chair between us.

“Amira, get over here. I’m not done with you.”

Chapter 17

Amira

“**Y**ou dare command a queen?”

Ignoring him, I made my way toward the double doored exit with him right on my heel. I quickened my steps when I noticed the halls were empty. I made it to the next room when Torrin grabbed me, pulled me inside and shut the door.

“Ladies first,” he said playfully, waving his hand aside as if he were truly gentlemanly, which he wasn’t.

I scoffed. “After what we’ve been—” I yelped when Torrin grabbed me by the waist and carried me to a bed I mistakenly forgot was here. I led him right to one of the many guest rooms in this place. He threw me down and landed on top of me with his arms at my back to soften the fall.

My heart was caught in my throat. Torrin’s face was right against mine. I could see all the planes of his features, especially the way his nostrils flared as he took me in.

“I think tonight will be spent serving the queen,” he gruffly whispered right before he slowly pressed his lips against mine once more.

The way they moved against me, a contrast to the last time, coaxing me out of my shell, left me breathless. The moment my lips parted, Torrin slid his dextrous tongue in. I let him guide me in a dance I was unfamiliar with but judging by the groan that escaped, he was enjoying being my teacher.

Irrational fears fell to the wayside piece by piece as we continued to kiss passionately. I found myself caressing his muscular back through his shirt as he flexed and tilted his head and pressed his hard, covered length against my center. It felt hot. I felt like a flame constricted by everything that was a barrier between us.

I needed this. We both apparently did.

The moment my hands began divesting my clothes was the moment our lips detached so he could do the same. In a flurry of movement we reunited skin to skin, a tangle of limbs that couldn't get close enough to one another.

The sound of the sheets rustling beneath us faded away, taken over by the sound of our panting and our skin sliding against one another. His flame matched mine as I wrapped my legs around him, locking him against the heat of my center.

“Fuck, Amira, you're killing me,” he groaned against my neck as I slowly grinded myself against the underside of his hard cock all the way to the tip without letting him in.

“There will be no dying, not unless you're inside of me.” I let my filters down. It was the first thing that came to my mind. I craved him like my next breath but I also overly enjoyed the torture we were putting each other through.

My hand slid down between us and grabbed his shaft, stroking it against my wet folds. I pushed his tip in but never let it go any further, still unsure if I would be able to handle the size in my hands.

His mouth traveled down to the top of my breasts, planting wet kisses, and trailing his tongue down to my nipple. As he covered it with his mouth, I gasped and stroked him harder, feeling our wetness combine. When he pulled his mouth away and blew over it, my nipple hardened to the point of rocks and I bit my lip to stifle my reaction.

His thumb came up and pulled my bottom lip out before he slammed his mouth on mine once more.

He drew back and locked his darkened eyes to mine. “Don’t hide from me, Amira. I want to hear every moan and every scream that comes out of you.” He thrust hard against my hand, pushing his cock another inch into me. “Just let go, Amira. Let me take care of you. Can’t you feel your pussy pulling me in, stretching around me? Let me give you what you need to relax.”

I raked my nails up his abdomen and he took that exact moment to push himself in further. He was too big. It wouldn’t fit. I started to panic.

“Shhh. It’s okay. Let me take care of you. Trust me,” he whispered against my ear as his own hand went between us and played with my wet lips.

His fingers trailed to my inner thigh, opening me up further before he thrust in again, then pulled himself out.

“Fuck, look how wet you are for me. Do you see yourself, Amira? Do you see how beautiful you are with me inside of you?”

I was blushing, wanting to hide my face from his praises.

But he wouldn’t let me.

“Look at me. Don’t ever hide your face, especially when I’m claiming you.”

I took a sharp inhale. “Is that what this is?”

Maybe it was a challenge.

He licked my bottom lip and passionately kissed me before answering. “That’s exactly what this is.”

He plunged the rest of himself inside of me with one swift movement, locking us together.

I squirmed, I pleaded, I whimpered. It wasn’t new to me but he was. I wasn’t used to a giving lover. I wasn’t ready for everything that was Torrin.

He invaded my mouth again, not allowing me time to think about it all and I was grateful for it. I told myself to surrender to his guidance and soon enough my body began to relax around him.

“That’s it. That’s a good girl,” he hummed against me.

His hands explored and began to play with my nub, swirling and pushing it every so often. Pain gave way to pleasure as I began to climb toward something I was uncertain of, afraid of what I would find. It had never felt like this before.

When my fingers dug into his shoulders, he groaned against my cheek and slowly began to thrust again. This time, he slid easily, adding much needed friction to the magic he was creating with his fingers down there.

Just when I thought I couldn’t take anymore of his ministrations, I felt my body tense up right before falling over a metaphorical cliff, screaming in passion.

“Fuck. You’re tight. Hold onto me and don’t let go until I tell you.” He nuzzled my face and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, doing as he commanded.

His hands grabbed the flesh of my ass and pulled it up as he began to pound into me as if punishing me for an unknown transgression. The sounds of flesh hitting flesh was all I could hear as my heart burst out of my chest from everything I began to discover about myself through this deprivation of control.

I loved everything this man did to me and everything he made me crave. I needed more of his dominance, more of everything. It was exactly why I was afraid to lose him.

“Deeper, please,” I begged and he growled as he flipped us over on the bed and forced me on top.

I yelped in surprise at the abrupt change of position and steadied myself with my hands against his panting chest.

“Fuck, if I keep going I’m going to finish and you, my queen, look like you are far from it.” He grimaced a second before it morphed into a sultry smile. He placed his hands behind his head and stared at me with hunger. “Take what you need from me.”

“I—” I didn’t anticipate this.

He chuckled and brought his hands around my hips, guiding me and grinding his still hard cock inside of my wet cunt. It felt good and I wanted more of it, wanted to see what other heights he could bring me to.

As my courage slowly overtook me, I raked my nails down his chest and began to move. Grinds became frantic movements as he brought his knees up and joined in by thrusting into me from below.

His right thumb played with me as I fell forward, grabbed his face and forced my tongue into his mouth, simulating everything I wanted.

He didn’t disappoint as he grab handfuls of my ass and fucked me into oblivion, pushing me toward heaven again. I cried into his mouth and he growled in response, forcing himself to increase his pace until he pushed me down and slammed himself to the hilt and stopped moving.

I watched as he threw his head back and cursed, my pussy still fluttering around him as he spilled inside of me.

Out of breath, I rested my head against his chest and listened to his rapid heartbeats, my mind turning it into a sweet lullaby.

If this is what it felt like to be thoroughly loved, I can see why so many women and men were willing to die for it. Wasn’t that what he just declared to me earlier?

The bitterness that hung around me at the start of our journey dulled as gratitude filled its space.

We were alive. We made it and our lives were forever changed for the better. Hopefully one day, the bitterness would be washed away like the sands on a beach.

Torrin caressed my hair and as I closed my eyes, savoring his gentleness and aftercare, I let his praises sink into my soul.

“You’re such a good girl, taking my cock. Fuck. I love the way you milk me. I guess being the queen’s Chief of the Watch isn’t bad at all,” he chuckled.

A soft smile graced my lips but I didn't respond. His cock was still inside of me and I began to wonder when he would leave to find his sister. He didn't deserve to lose her.

I didn't deserve to lose Father.

Suddenly, the bitterness returned and the smile left my lips. I chastised myself for letting it sour the beautiful moment I just shared with Torrin.

"Don't think about it, Amira. Let's just live in this moment, right now. I can feel your body tense up. Let it go."

"What if I can't?"

He flipped us over again, throwing one leg over his shoulder, never pulling out of me.

"Then I'll just have to keep distracting you, my queen."

Epilogue

“I don’t want to go back. What if the bad men come back and get us?” the little girl named Nikri cried into Thiestan’s shoulder. He holds her close and stares off into the distance as if he could kill them all over again.

I wish I could too.

“It’s our home. We’ll protect it better, I promise Nikri. Don’t be afraid. I’ll always come and find you.”

“Thiestan! I don’t want you to come and find me! I don’t want to be taken. It’s scary! The bad men are so scary!”

Thiestan’s hand balled into a fist and I stood up from my throne, unable to hear anymore.

The children were all brought directly back to the palace after their rescue. They needed a good meal and hot bath to settle their nerves. I wanted to provide them with a safe place where they could rest while they battled their nightmares.

The boys were placed in one room and the girls in another, each with their own pair of guards to protect their doors.

I couldn’t let them back out there. Not when they were this vulnerable.

I stepped down the steps with Torrin right behind me. I hadn’t seen Evander since my announcement that the children would be here for a while and I was beginning to get suspicious. But, there were more important

matters at hand.

“Nikri, is it?” I gently spoke.

She flinched back but peeked over Thiestan’s shoulders with curious bright eyes.

Once she nodded her head, I continued. “Would you like to stay here, with me and your guards? Do they make you feel safe?”

She began to nod but stopped midway, tilting her head back to look at Thiestan for guidance.

The boy sighed but said nothing, his eyes were still focused ahead at the doors. He knew as well as I did that the worst was yet to come. The flesh market needed to be put to an end but it took time.

“Thiestan,” I whispered, not wanting to spook him into making rash decisions out of stubbornness or pride. He did the best he could, taking care of his wards. But he was also only one person who wouldn’t be able to take on the world alone. “Thiestan, would you like to train under Torrin the Butcher?”

It was something I had mentioned to Torrin on the trip back in our tent. Thiestan had powers beyond his imagination but he required the discipline that came with being a warrior. His mastery of his power would come over time. It had to start with the mind. We needed to lead him down the right path so that his future choices would be wise ones.

Thiestan quickly twisted his head around while holding tightly to Nikri. “You mean it? You want to train me? But I am no one. I’m only—”

I placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and squeezed in reassurance. “You’re only the boy who walked all the way to the palace to an unknown queen to demand assistance in rescuing the future of our nation. And became the man who saved them all in the end.”

He shook his head, choked up in his words and I squeezed his shoulder again.

“You’ll start tomorrow morning before the rising sun. Make sure you get

plenty of rest.” I stood up and looked at all the faces of the children, now unbound, cleaned and fed. “You will all start earlier tomorrow, for school. I will bring an instructor here so that you will feel safe again. Your guards will be with you while you attend your classes.”

“W-what does this mean, your majesty? Are we staying?” One of the younger boys asked with eyes full of hope.

I couldn’t save the past, but I could take the right steps for the future of the Intel Dynasty. I understood now, why the universe played out the way it did and why I was here in this position.

“Yes. You’re all staying here.” The children gasped and cheered with joy, some of the older boys with uncertainty in their eyes. How many times in their life had promises been broken? I hope they were ready because things were about to change in their lives.

“I want you all to grow strong and harness your abilities so that no one will ever hurt you again. And in turn, all I ask is that you do the same for those around you, those in need, those weaker than you. Because that’s what leaders are made of. Courage is the strength to face adversity even through your fears and many of you have demonstrated that already. You will all set the example of the new age of the Intel Dynasty—one where breeding and circumstance does not determine their future.”

“What if we don’t live up to your expectations, your majesty?” one of the boys asked with a hint of bitterness.

I walked over to him and gave him a smile. “You already have. You were the one that stood ready to lay your life down for your fellow comrades. That’s the exact kind of person I would want to have to stand beside me.”

His eyes turned from bitterness to hope and my heart swelled with pride. He would make a good soldier and with Torrin’s help, he would make an unstoppable one.

I stood up and walked away, not before briefly stopping and looking over my shoulder one last time at the faces of the future.

“You will all be known as the first of the Royal Legion. Your job will be to protect the weak and bring whatever necessary justice down on those who deserve it.”

The children’s voices rose with excitement and I looked at Torrin with a smile before exiting the throne room and in preparation for change.

UNKNOWN

HUNTER



Courtesy Warning

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to violence, themes that may be disturbing to some readers.

The Dreaded Hunter

The *Dreaded Hunter* is the story about life and the trappings of power. It is retold every ten years at the start of the Midsummer Festival as a reminder of why the festival and the games are held. The games were celebrated throughout the world, but only those who could afford tickets were able to attend in person. It's considered a great honor to be in attendance to see who would no doubt choose to rule our world for the next decade. It'd been a longstanding tradition that whoever won the games would receive from The Supreme Commission one wish, in addition to assuming the title of Emperor Supreme. In accordance with the wishes of the First Ones, the Emperor Supreme would rule our world for a total of ten years until the next Midsummer Festival and guide the world in peace and prosperity.

The Emperor Supremes of the past typically were so caught up in the opulence and luxury of their status, most left the governing of the individual kingdoms to the royal families already in place. Some in the past attempted to guide us all, but it proved to be a tremendous feat controlling six individual cultures and territories, so The Supreme Commission would recommend to the Emperor Supremes to let the kingdoms make their own decisions. The Emperor Supreme would set the overall course of the world, but the day-to-day situations of the kingdom-territories would be left to the kings and queens of the individual kingdoms to manage.

The system worked, as everyone was satisfied. Those on The Supreme Commission retained status and aided in the transition of power from Emperor Supreme to Emperor Supreme, acting as a check to the authority. The new Emperor Supreme could lead the world in a general direction, such as the advancement of technology, or ensuring equality for all peoples and ensure peace, while enjoying the celebrity and spoils of their victory. Each kingdom worked together to fulfill the mandates and decrees for the world set forth by the Emperor Supreme, without threat of war between nations due to jealousy or greed. No one but the Emperor Supremes could be considered the ruler of the world.

A small number of Emperor Supremes rejected the advice of the Commission, and would attempt to manage the day-to-day of the kingdoms, but most would go enjoy themselves. They'd quietly pass the responsibility onto the next winner after ten years, and retire in peace and wealth.

One Emperor Supreme, however, decided instead of quietly passing the authority, he'd attempt to extend his authority and rule for longer than a decade.

Originally a Sepawn, and in an effort to gain an advantage, this Emperor Supreme conducted experiments to see if it were possible to grant powers to himself. Then, he reentered himself into the games, and used those powers. He'd grown so strong, no one could oppose him. The Supreme Commission intervened and ordered the Warden Troopers to take him down, but even that proved to be difficult, as he'd grown too strong. It took a combined effort of powered combatants and Warden Troopers to finally contain him.

Afraid of a public spectacle, the Commission banished and locked him away forever, instead of executing him. The Troopers were reformed to be filled with mostly Sepawns as a way to keep them in a position of authority, and to prevent other Sepawns from becoming jealous of not having powers. If they were in positions to police the world, they'd be less inclined to attempt to revolt. And without a martyr to rally around, the Sepawns accepted their

assignments.

As time passed, legend began to blend with fact, and it was impossible to know if the story of the Sepawn Emperor Supreme who sought to rule forever wasn't more than a bedtime story designed to entertain children. The Sepawn Emperor Supreme had been banished, and forgotten. Now, he roams the planet hunting for naughty boys and girls. When he finds them, he devours them and takes their powers, hoping to grow strong enough to one day reclaim his throne and get his revenge over everyone in the world for casting him out.

Only good little boys and girls who obeyed their parents were safe.

But for the bad ones...when the feeling of dread crawls up their backs, be careful young ones.

The Dreaded Hunter is near.

Chapter

One

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO...

“Put these on,” the guard commanded and tossed in the restraints.

The clatter of the cold steel as it hit the ground in front of me flooded my ears. Like a warm summer rain, I tilted my head back and basked in its warmth.

The guard growled at my lack of compliance. “Hurry up! I don’t know how you swindled the prince of the Night Kingdom to get you out of here, or what tricks he had to pull to do it, but I don’t like waiting.”

“You’ll have to give me a moment, Captain. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve seen the sun?”

“The sun? First of all, it’s night outside, so however long it’s been, you’re going to have to wait even longer. Second, I’m not a captain.”

“Oh, I know. I just wanted to afford you some respect before I kill you.”

The guard put his hand on the hilt of his sword and tightened his grip. “There is a full regiment of guards ready to end your life if need be. We’re under orders to transport you back to the mainland, but in those orders is a provision to use deadly force if necessary. So, don’t fucking test me,” he snarled.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve seen the sun?” I repeated. “Of course, you wouldn’t. How could you? My records pre-date the current system, don’t they? You have no idea *why* I’m in here, do you?”

“All I need to know about you is that you’re some old, feeble, debilitated man who’s been in here for a long time. The only thing listed for you is ‘extreme danger,’ but you’re right. There’s no judgments listed. So no, I don’t know what you’ve done and I don’t care. If your records go back so far as to be before we keep accurate account of our inmates then you’re clearly old and feeble and no longer a threat to me or anyone else for that matter.”

I stepped forward. The echoes of my footsteps bounced off the walls and

hit the guard in his chest. As I entered into the light, he drew his sword, but his eyes bulged. Unable to blink, he was a man full of dread and fear, unable to move.

“If I’m, ‘old and feeble,’ then why the ‘full regiment,’ Captain?”

“Impossible,” he gasped.

“Impossible is a word only those who think too small use. I’m possible is bigger. So much bigger.” I looked at myself in the reflection from his blade, and rubbed the hair flowing from my chin. “Hmm. I *do* need a shave.”

“Put...put...put those on,” the guard urged, trembling as he pointed at the restraints at my feet.

“Whatever you like, Captain. But surely with a full regiment at your back, I don’t need them. ‘Extreme danger,’ you say? ‘Impossible,’ you say? I should be able to walk out of here with a semblance of dignity since you have orders to use ‘deadly force,’ wouldn’t you agree?”

“Put them on. Please...” he mewled.

“Fine,” I sighed. “Although, I wonder,” I began, as I picked the heavy metal up and placed the cuffs around my wrists, “do you really believe these meager restraints are enough to keep you safe?”

“Got you now, fucker,” the guard spat when I locked the cuffs. “Those aren’t Sepawn cuffs. Those there are powered. You step out of line once, make one wrong move, hell if you even *look* at one of us the wrong way, bam! Fifty-thousand volts shoot through your body before you blink an eye. You understand how that works?”

The guard unlocked the cell door. The hinges groaned as he pulled the door back, screaming from years of neglect. I stepped out of my cell and into the full torchlight of the hallway.

He held up a small black controller with a red button on it. “We’re to transport you to the beach where you’ll get on a transport ship back to the mainland. You’ll be under guard the entire time, so don’t try anything. These boys here are ready for some target practice, and I have this.”

Before me, both sides were lines with guards, each with a hand on either the hilt of their sword or with their finger above a trigger ready to squeeze and riddle my body full of holes.

I cracked a smile.

“What are you smiling at?” The nearest guard in front of me asked as the Captain pushed on the cell door with difficulty to close it.

“Let me tell you a story, Captain,” I answered.

He frowned. “I’m no capta—”

“Who can stop the sand?” I asked.

“What?” One of the other guards fired back.

The corners of my lips turned up. “You’re taking me to the beach, but who can stop the sand? The grains of sand are too numerous to count. Too many of them to name. Yet, together they hold back the sea. Sure, the waters crash against them, and even drag some of them down to its depths. But what happens when the sea drags the sand? Is it doomed to a watery grave? No, it settles at the bottom and bides its time, waiting for the moment the sea no longer has the power over it, and resurfaces as the water is forced to flee.”

The first guard moved beside me and grabbed under my right elbow with his hand to push me forward. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The sea, Captain,” I explained. “Its waves are angry and continuous, but against the sand? Time stands still and at the same time goes on forever. The sea struggles against its enemy, but the sand never falters. The grains of sand can swallow you, or slow the movement of an entire army. The sand surrounds you before you even know you’re defeated.”

“This guy talks a lot,” one of them sassed.

I shifted my attention to him. “Has no one ever taught you it’s not nice to tease?”

“Ha!” He chuckled. “Why don’t you teach me?”

“I think I will,” I answered.

“Not with those powered cuffs around your wrists,” he fired back.

“You’re nothing but a prisoner with a big mouth. Now shut it, before I do it for you.”

I blew out a nice, slow stream of air. “You think I am a prisoner? After all of these years, why do people continue to think so small? Do you know why that door has never once been opened since I was put behind it? Because I *am* the sand. I *am* the sea. I am death and life all at once. I am a titan, and I am a nightmare. And you didn’t know those bars they placed me behind before your birth nullified my powers. Now, you are dead.”

The Captain released his grip on my elbow, but it was too late. He stepped back and pressed the red button on the black controller he held in his hand. When my restraints did not power on, his jaw dropped and his eyes widened.

I pivoted to face him. “Oh, Captain. The reason why they put ‘extreme danger’ on my file is because I have Electric Charge. I can control all electronic devices around me. There’ll be no fifty-thousand volts surging through me today.”

“He’s a Day Walker!” One of the guards behind me yelled.

“Take him down!” Another shouted.

The guards behind me squeezed the triggers to their weapons, sending projectile after projectile hurdling in my direction. A miscalculation. The torchlight of the hallway made the shadows long and numerous, and as I melted into them, they realized the full extent of their failure. The Captain’s body shook as the bullets pierced his flesh a hundred times before he fell to the muddy floor.

The guards began to question everything they’d ever known. “Wait. He’s a...he’s a Night Stalker too?”

“That’s impossible.”

“No one has more than one power.”

“He has more than one?”

“No way!”

I emerged from a shadow behind one of the guards further down and wrapped the chain on my still bound wrists around his neck and pulled, dragging him into the depths.

“He’s over there!”

“He grabbed Kenyon!”

“Fire!”

Again, they squeezed off and fired, but Kenyon and I disappeared before their eyes. As the bullets ricocheted off the wall and into more of their own, the fear in their eyes grew.

“Where is he?!”

“Find him!”

“Oh, hell!”

“I have a wife. I didn’t sign up for this!”

A few of them began to scatter and run towards the end of the tunnel and their exit to freedom. I stepped out of the shadow in front of them, and stomped my foot onto the ground. It quaked and groaned with force causing them to scramble. Some fell to their knees, others held onto the wall as I robbed them of their balance.

“He...he has Earthquake?!”

“He’s a Ground Keeper too?!”

“Fuck!”

“How does he have so many?!”

“We’re doomed!”

I nodded, and as I walked toward each man in the hallway, whistling as I went, there was but one question on my mind. “Do you know how long it's been since I’ve seen the sun?”

Their screams didn’t last long. Their agony was brief. I was many things, but I wasn’t cruel. Except for the sassy one. For him, I had a fifty-thousand volt lesson to teach.

Now for the games.

Chapter

Two

John moved from Torrin's side to mine. "But the Sepawn's plan has merit," he directed to me. "There is strength in numbers, and I provide the greatest numbers you'll find. Care to team up?"

The brashness of youth.

"Your hatred of Sepawns will be your undoing," I told him. But I had to admit, his bravado had the chance to provide me some entertainment. It'd been a long time since I'd had a good laugh. "Sure, I'll team with you, only so I can be there when you crash and burn at his hands."

I counted the combatants standing with me on the white sands. Fifty in all, but how many were Sepawns? Torrin was known, but surely he wasn't the only one. Sepawns always threw their lots into this festival in a chance to rise so far above their station, no one would be able to see them. The festival, the tournament, the games...all of it was put in place, not to celebrate the difference between the six races, but as a means to control them. I scanned the crowd and none of them knew it. They'd somehow lost their own history and became wrapped in only the spectacle and instant gratification.

Meat for my army. I won't repeat the mistakes of my past.

Wait.

One future which stood out among the rest fanning in my mind as I locked eyes with her. But to reach it...to make that future come to pass—

“If you think I’d die at the hands of a fucking Sepawn, then you’re useless,” John prattled on, turning me from the options I weighed.

But not before I’d decided.

“Only a fool underestimates those he perceives as weak.” I jutted my chin in Torrin’s direction. “He’s not weak. He knows there’s strength in numbers. I would think you would as well.”

“Better than you,” he countered.

I couldn’t fight the smile on my face. “You may think arrogance is what gets you over the top, but it doesn’t. Arrogance prevents you from reaching your full potential. The Sepawn understands this. *If* you survive to the end, you’ll probably have the fewest kills out of all of us.”

“Let’s find out,” he dared.

My smile widened at the challenge. “Let’s.”

“Begin!” the herald signaled.

At the start, I folded my arms and watched as John’s entire body vibrated and then produced two exact replicas of himself. The two replicas rushed behind us and attacked the first combatant they saw, while John vibrated and made two more. Another vibration produced two additional replicas and the six of them joined the fray and jumped on the combatant. John strolled towards the six-on-one fight and smirked as he walked past me.

I whistled in response. “Not bad.”

“Not bad?” He echoed, his smirk flipping upside down into a frown. The six replicas had grabbed the combatant they tackled by the limbs and the head, with each holding one. “Watch this,” John demanded and made a slicing motion across his neck. The six replicas pulled on the combatant, each in a different direction, until the combatant’s body exploded into six separate pieces and the screams of the combatant rang out. The crowd exploded into a lustful, ravenous din at the liquid-filled red explosion.

“Eh,” I sighed.

“Fuck you,” John hammered back and vibrated again, creating another

two replicas. The other six ran to his side and I'm sure the sight of nine Johns in a horizontal line would have disturbed most.

I found it boring.

The fury in his eyes at my lack of awe was telling. "I've known a few replicators in my time," I explained. "This is nothing new."

"Well, how about we bring *your time* to an end?" One of the Johns snarled.

"Except, the thing I always wondered," I continued unfazed, "about replication is this—how do you keep track of who the original is when there's so many of you?"

"Simple," one of them answered, but then they all chorused. "I'm the original."

Each replica looked at another with various eyebrows raised, tilted heads, and narrowed eyes.

"Exactly," I commented. "If each replica is the spitting image of the original, down to their thoughts and feelings and the power to make more replicas, but still individual beings...how do you tell which is the original?"

"Replicas only last minutes," one of the Johns answered, "and any replica who makes a replica that replica loses quality."

"Yes," I noted, "but minutes can feel like hours, and the replicas who make replicas can make many replicas before there is a significant loss in quality, correct?"

"Stop trying to confuse us," the Johns chorused.

I shrugged. "It's a strong power to be sure, but it seems as if it would drive a person mad trying to ensure they don't lose themselves in a sea of themselves."

"Enough!" They chorused. "Fuck the Sepawn and fuck the plan. We're in this to win it, and we'll start with you."

"After all this time, you haven't changed. It already started with me, before you were born, boy. You're merely repeating the same mistakes as

your predecessors, but the difference is I've had centuries to think about how to fix mine. You'll be dead in minutes."

"Argh!" They screeched and rushed me.

The first arrived and placed both hands on my forearm. It was a mistake.

"Rot," I commanded.

It amazed me how the strongest of powers could be controlled by the simplest of words.

The bloodcurdling scream the replicated John released made the others stop in their tracks. His skin turned a lifeless gray as the necrosis spread, infecting every replicated cell with decay and rot. The replica's screech filled every part of the arena as his body collapsed into a pile of ash, dust and goo.

"Oh," I sighed. "I guess *he* wasn't the original. If he was, the rest of you would have melted instantly, am I right?" I bent down and stuck my hand inside the mix and pulled out a fistful. "The death of the original, and the subsequent destruction of the replicas would have powered me for hours," I remarked as I let the ash fall from the bottom of my fist in a steady stream. I opened my palm and placed it on the pile, shut my eyes, and inhaled the death, absorbing it into my body and letting it fuel me. It was if liquid flames rushed through my veins. I stood to my feet, a little taller, and much stronger.

I opened my eyes and whistled. A forgotten tune for this generation, but one which signaled to the past. The open jaws and wide eyes staring at me provided me with the bit of entertainment I'd hoped for.

"How...how...how did you do that?" One of the Johns stammered.

"With all the power in the world, it's amazing how you people think so small. You've forgotten your own history."

"I've never seen that ability and I've been all over the world," another John stated.

"But have you ever been *in* the world?"

"What?"

"You said Sepawns belong in the ground. Well, I warned you that being

in the ground is not necessarily a punishment. It can give you time to think, to germinate ideas and thoughts—thoughts such as revenge on the world. The world that locked you away and forgot about you. I’ve been in the ground. Let me show you what happens when something left for dead still has life.”

I sucked in a gust of air and vibrated my body, creating replica after replica and infusing them each with Necrosis Inducement, until fifty stood beside me. The collective gasp from the crowd brought everything to a sudden halt as every remaining combatant looked on. Whether it was the sight of my replication, or his own power being exhausted, John’s replicas melted away in stunned silence.

“He’s a replicator,” one of the combatants said.

“No,” John corrected and shook his head. “He just killed one of my replicas by telling it to ‘rot.’ And it did. That’s not a replicator power.”

Ridley and Bhif had moved close enough from the side wall to rejoin the center. “What are you?” Ridley asked.

I surveyed the crowd and settled my gaze on the outgoing Emperor Supreme, and each of my replicas did the same. However, unlike John’s underdeveloped replication power, I was the original and they all knew it, so I and I alone spoke for us.

“You want to know what I am?” I exploded. “What I am, is the forgotten. The cast aside. The discarded. I am the one you fear. I am the one mothers tell their babies about to keep them obedient. I am vengeance. You locked me away because you couldn’t evolve. You put me in the ground because you were too small. Your father’s father’s grandfather thought I would go quietly into the night, but they didn’t realize I *am* the night.

The white sand you stand on allows you to because I will it. I am the sand. I am the sea. I am death and life all at once. I am a titan, and I am a nightmare. You think you know loss? That you know fear? You know nothing, and you’ve experienced nothing. But that changes now. I’m here to revisit past decisions. You, the children of the First Ones, are the ones to feel

the repercussions of their decisions. I am the loss. I am the fear you feel when something bumps you in the night. I am your dread.”

I looked at every citizen in the elevated stands and pulled my lips back. “Kill them all,” I commanded.

“Except her.”

Chapter
Three

How do I keep from going insane? I asked myself.

I don't know if it was a day, a minute, an hour, or a year before I discovered the answer. They locked me away as if I was nothing. Discarded me as if I were refuse to be absorbed back into the dirt from whence I came. They surrounded me in total darkness with nothing to feast on but the occasional crawling animal unlucky enough to wander into my cell.

There were no shadows in total darkness in which to escape into. Even if I could, the material used to make the metal bars sealing me in, came from the First Ones. Jasline, a forgotten element, mined when it was first discovered it had properties found to cancel powers. Useful for controlling and training the youth as they developed, or rehabilitating wrongdoers. The Supreme Commission housed many secrets.

They locked me away to become one of them.

The answer to the question I discovered was not in attempting escape, but in accepting fate. The Commission had many secrets, but so did I. Sentenced to rot, they had no idea of the true power held within Jasline. In large doses, it cancels powers. But in small, refined amounts, it cancels not only powers.

But aging.

Sickness.

Disease.

Jasline could heal as well. Imagine what a person could do who'd found a way to ingest it safely.

The Commission thought too small when they thought to lock me away. I didn't need access to powers when I had the most powerful thing in the universe.

Time.

Time to plan. Time to review and recover from my mistakes. Time to envision the world as it would be once the opportunity arose.

An opportunity given by a wayward prince and a few unlucky guards.

How do I keep from going insane? I wait until I can enact my revenge, and think through all the strengths and weaknesses. Weaknesses such as Replication and insanity. A mind that could be duplicated was a mind that could be strengthened. Enhanced. Formidable. But only when the mind was disciplined. Controlled. Trained.

All things afforded to the person who had time.

Now, as I walked along the white sands stained by the blood of the fallen, as I observed each of my replicated selves dismantling the children of those who granted me the gift of time, I was grateful for the lessons their forefathers gave me. The plague which once caused me to act in rashness may have been cured at some point in their history following my incarceration, but it wasn't the true sickness.

They were.

And I will do what I set out all those many years ago to do. Burn this world to decimate the sickness, and out of the ashes, forge a new one. A better one.

With her.

If the future Precognition showed me is correct, then I was only at the beginning. I needed to be free from my Jaslin barred cell to see it. To see the potential. And now that I had, I could see the cost. Yes, there will always be those who try to stop me. Those who suffer from delusions of heroism.

Like them.

I admired them for what they proposed to do. They alone had the courage and conviction to do what the others won't.

These five sped toward me now, traveling down a path of ice, and for what? They sped toward their destruction. They sped toward their date with the void. They were children of the ones who put me away. They were the sickness.

Even now, as he grabbed hold of my shadow and attempted to lock me in place. As the woman tries to dull my senses, and as the oaf gifted them weapons of ice, they still did not understand.

I'd seen the possible future, and I was not afraid of the dark. For in the dark, I had discovered the answer. She'll think me a monster, but I was the cure. Death was simply a prison, wrapped around a soul like a tight blanket. But I had the key to unlock the door. I figured out long ago how to remove the blanket and face it head on.

One stabbed the ice into my eye. Its frozen brutality was one I could appreciate. But the mistake he made was a weakness I'd long ago learned how to overcome. In allowing me to see it coming, he allowed me to utilize a strength unknown to them. He allowed me to utter one word.

“Revive.”

It amazed me how the strongest of powers could be controlled by the simplest of words.

Epilogue

The arena was littered with blood and gore. Red, black and gray colored everything from the stands to the white sands of the arena floor. An artist's masterpiece of carnage.

A group of people celebrated and then dispersed, leaving a few to begin the efforts of the cleanup. The air, filled moments before with the barrage of sounds of explosions, and the screams of the wounded on the verge of death was now quiet.

The thick silence said more than the cries of agony ever could. People left the arena with lives forever changed. Memories of something no survivor would ever forget, doomed to haunt them for the rest of their days.

But beneath the scent of death and decay, a steady heartbeat arose.

“Together, they got me,” I swore and laughed as I steadily pulled my body through the corpses on top of me and I reached my hand out. Covered under petrifying bodies and bloody entrails, I could still see the sun.

Sliding against cooling flesh, I continued to pull myself free from the weight of the dead.

“History repeats itself, but that’s okay. I’ll bide my time,” I growled as I finally pulled my top half free, coughing against the putrid stench. “Because, unlike before, this time I am free. The darkness doesn’t engulf me.

There’ll come a time when their togetherness will fade, when the glory

they received will fracture, and when it does? I'll be there. I will assemble my own team, my own army. This is far from over.

I kicked the corpse on my foot and finally freed myself to climb over the soft tissue beneath me.

These people thought so small.

KEEPER NATION

— ❖ —
ULANI RENSBURG



Courtesy Warning

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to dub-con, violence, torture, brutal discipline, gore, kidnapping, themes that may be disturbing to some readers.

Chapter 1

Ulani Rensburg

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO...

The games always drew such large crowds because of the promise that anything could happen. Whether the eventual winner would choose to rule or use their wish for something else was too enticing and dramatic to miss. I'd reached the age where I could attend the festival and bask in the spectacle, and I couldn't wait.

I brushed through my long, thick, black hair and wondered if my eyebrows were too bushy as I stared at the reflection in the mirror before me. I needed to look my best. Representatives from all the kingdoms would be there, and I didn't know who I would meet. Mother said I'd never forget this day, and the butterflies crashing against my stomach told me she spoke the truth. If only I could get my hair under control.

"Would you like some assistance with that, my princess?" One of my maids piped in after a lengthy struggle.

I let out a resigned sigh and nodded my head. I'd tried to shy away from the assistance of our servants. At the age of eighteen, a girl shouldn't need one to complete such simple tasks. Luckily, she didn't have much left to do, since I got most of it the first time around. Toward the end, I thanked her and took the comb back to finish off the rest. I settled on a utilitarian ponytail and pulled it tight.

"My face isn't the most important thing about today," I scolded the hazel eyes staring back at me as I put on the crescent spectacles with a black brim. "Even if what Mother says is true, I don't care. What's most important is my countenance in which I carry myself, not my appearance."

My maid, Ina, stood in the background quietly trying her best not to stare at me and my crazy outbursts of speaking to myself. They had all gotten used to it by now.

I rose to my feet, drew back my shoulders, and faced the young woman in

the mirror. “I am a princess,” I reminded her. “Be royal.”

I grabbed my small knapsack full of coins and hustled out my bedroom door. I hoped to stop by the shops on the way home and possibly add more mature attire to my wardrobe to symbolize my coming of age. As I made my way down the stairs, my usual attendants were in place waiting, and I rolled my eyes. It wasn't my fault as to why I didn't feel my age. No one around me would let me grow up.

The attendants were led by my handmaiden Beatrice, who nearly tackled me to prevent me from leaving without them.

“Good morning, Princess Ulani,” Beatrice said with her signature smile. She reminded me of a fluttering raven because of her fine, straight, dark, long hair on a curvy build. The color of her skin was an extreme contrast which only highlighted her dark features further. Her deep-set green eyes missed nothing. And like a raven, the old broad never forgot any of my transgressions in this home under her watch. She needed to understand—I have to grow wings and learn my independence to soar, not be hovered around.

“Good morning, Rave,” I returned. She reminded me of the bird so much, I gave her the nickname. I plastered on a false smile like a good little girl but the lift of her eyebrow told me she saw right through it.

Beatrice reached for the knapsack in my hand as if to be helpful. “Let me grab that for you, Princess.”

After a small struggle, I sighed and handed it over to her with a scowl. She was just overly pushy and nosy. Even though Beatrice spent her time caring for me, when she put her mind to something, I couldn't deny her. She'd proven herself to be an incredible woman and served as a close friend and confidant for me. The mean streak in her meshed well with my stubbornness. I was the princess of the Ground Keepers kingdom, but even I tried to avoid making her angry.

The sound of running water washed through my ears and the clink of

breakfast dishes being set on the kitchen table chorused with it. Without trying to be rude, but failing miserably at it, I moved around Beatrice and made my way through the narrow doorway separating our living room from the kitchen. Mother had the servants prepare a feast of my favorite breakfast foods and the smell of the delectable delights pulled me as if I'd been roped around the waist.

My stomach grumbled and I grimaced quite unladylike. I couldn't help it, taming my mane took more time than I'd anticipated. I made my way to the private dining area for the royal family and took my place to the right of my mother's chair. A single seat separated us..

"Is all this for me?" I begged prettily with my hands clasped under my chin. I was utterly starving.

"Of course! It's a big day, you need all the energy you can get," Mother crooned. She was a younger middle-aged woman with graying hair and mild wrinkles with an extraordinarily sincere smile, who was as happy for me as I was conflicted.

I was nervous about attending this festival. The possibilities were endless. But also excited to see the strongest from each kingdom fight to the death.

"Thank you," I say, and stuffed a forkful of tomato omelet in my mouth, relishing the flavors as they exploded on my tongue. Had it really been that long since I ate? When was dinner? Ugh, it didn't matter. All that mattered was this food in my mouth satisfying the monster in my stomach. After chewing for a while, I turned to mother with a question about the empty seat at the head of the table. "Where's Father?"

"Comfortably resting. He had a long night, but don't you worry. He'll be ready."

"That makes one of us," I mumbled.

As I continued to chew once more, Mother's gaze caused me to feel awkward as if I was under one of those scientist's devices to get a closer look at...sciency things.

“Are you nervous?” She asked.

“About?”

“Don’t play coy with me, Lani,” she remarked. “You know what I’m talking about. Are you nervous?”

“No,” I said and rolled my eyes, laughing almost hysterically like a loon. “Why would I be nervous about the biggest decision the world will see? How the next few hours will forever set the course of my life? Nope, not nervous at all.”

“There’s no need for sarcasm dear,” Mother responded.

“Sorry,” I said and dropped my eyes, before stuffing my mouth with a forkful of baked apples. Food always made everything better—except, of course, for my current nerves.

Mother moved from her place to the empty chair between us. She placed a hand on my leg and gave it a gentle squeeze. I wondered what she thought about my choice of outfit for the day. A bit more revealing than what I usually wore, I wanted to feel attractive and thought this soft fabric would highlight my figure.

“It’s okay to be nervous, Lani,” Mother explained. “No matter what happens today, know this. Your father and I will always be here for you and love you regardless.”

Her words almost moved me to tears. I swallowed the lump in my throat and exhaled. I brought my eyes up to hers and found comfort in the beaming smile she had. I knew it was silly of me to be of such concern with matters I had no control over, but...

“What if the wrong person wins, mom?”

“No matter who wins, there’s only one thing I want you to remember. Trust. My daughter can accomplish anything when she puts her mind to it. Trust yourself. No matter who wins, and no matter what happens, I know this—you will be the best at whatever you do, no matter who’s making the decisions.”

She was right, of course. Mother always had a way with making me see reason when my thoughts became scattered and irrational. She opened her arms and I sunk into her embrace, squeezing tight and never wanting to let go.

“It’s not fair,” I moaned a bit. I knew no one ever said life would be fair, but it still sucked to know the fate of your life could be changed by a single festival.

“We all have to make our way,” her muffled voice came from somewhere above my head. “We get to choose our life, and I know you’ll choose a great one.”

Mother had such trust in me and my decisions, I was afraid to let her down. “I know I’m not the perfect daughter, but I always try my best to be a quick learner from my mistakes.”

“I know,” she answered.

I nodded and withdrew from the safety of my mother’s arms in more ways than one. I blew out a slow breath, looked at the remaining morsels and closed my left eye tight. “I’m going to go,” I said with reluctance.

“We’ll see you there!”

Mother’s smile warmed me as I pushed back from the table. Beatrice handed me my trusty knapsack as I passed her, and headed out the dining room. I was ready to greet the world with renewed confidence. Mother knew what I struggled with, and knew exactly what I needed to hear today.

After a few steps, I heard my name called by Beatrice. “Princess!”

I looked over my shoulder and rolled my eyes as she and the two other handmaidens scurried after me in an attempt to catch up. My mind filled with thoughts of what the future held. I had no time to move at a measured pace.

“Catch up!” I fired back before I turned and slammed into a mountain of flesh. “Hey!”

I composed myself quickly and drew back to scold whoever would be so careless as to impede my way. I looked up and found myself staring into a set

of dazzling wide gray eyes like the calm moment before a thunderstorm. I found myself swept away in its magnificence. Eyes like that couldn't be real. My breath caught in my chest and flames flooded my cheeks as I went speechless.

"Apologies, Princess," the owner of the eyes remarked with a voice that rivaled thunder.

We stared at one another for another second—or perhaps it was only me who was bewitched in the moment.

His voice matches his eyes? Of course, it did.

This composed gentleman had dark hair fashioned in the old ways, clasped together behind him in rope-like strands. His broad-shouldered masculine build couldn't be hidden behind his pristine coverings. There was so much of him to look at, I found myself losing all manners as I continued to stare upon the sharp planes of his face, full lips and deep umber skin tone.

When his strong hand settled on my shoulder, something akin to electricity shot through my body and my eyes widened further. I jolted a little as he attempted to aid my efforts to straighten myself.

"Whoa!" Father boomed. "Where you going little Hummingbird?"

"Father," I said through gritted teeth as I grimaced at my nickname. I coughed and broke away from the gorgeous specimen in front of me, and shifted to the king whose tilted head and sly smirk made fire rise up my neck.

In front of this man of all people? Why? Why did he have to be like this?

"Sorry, Father," I said, and gave a small courtesy, trying to hide my embarrassment in the movement and collecting myself. He wasn't just my father, he was king.

The contingent of women hustling behind me, luckily, stole his attention. Father raised an eyebrow. "In a hurry, I see."

All I could do was shrug my shoulders.

Everyone could see.

Everyone except the gaggle of women behind me.

They need to get it into their skulls.

“Father...the games—,” I remarked as I discreetly glanced out the corner of my eye to the man who accompanied my father.

“—Are today,” he said, continuing my thought and fully aware of my distraction. “Yes, I know.”

“How can you be so calm? This means everything.” Worry laced my words.

His smile filled the room. “Because we have a solid group of combatants to represent us, all sworn to the crown.”

Is it really that simple?

“But...but what if one of them actually *wins* and uses their wish to seize the crown?” I asked.

“My little Hummingbird,” he said with a chuckle. “Don’t worry. In over a thousand years of the games, our family has never once been removed. If you treat the people right and rule fairly, then they have no reason to want for anything else. No, the men and women we chose to represent the Keepers and the crown will use their wish for a life of luxury, not to rule our one kingdom. Of course, one of them has to win first.”

“And if one of them doesn’t win? Humans are fallible, Father. How can you not have a seed of doubt?”

“Then,” the man beside father said. His deep, gravelly voice made all the other voices in the room seem small. “We shall greet our new Emperor Supreme and carry on with Ground Keeper kingdom business.”

“Princess Ulani Rensburg, allow me to introduce Auberon Ellison,” Father said and extended his hand, gesturing it between me and Auberon.

“My Princess,” Auberon crooned and bowed deeply at the waist.

“Your family has cared for our kingdom,” he continued, “and advisors to the crown like me have helped service you since the games first started. Nothing will change. I promise.”

I stared at him, trying my best to keep my jaw from dropping. It would be

terribly unwomanly of me in front of company but my goodness, the way this man dominated the room. His movements were exuberant and a little corny, but I also detected a hint of danger with his grace. It was a rather odd mix, and I was unsure of how to respond, so I said nothing.

Father placed his hand on my shoulder which brought me back to the present moment, and stepped beside me with his toes pointed toward the private dining area. Then, as older men were prone to do, he launched into another long winded speech.

“Our family has ruled for a millennium with no threat of disruption. The people praise our policies as we walk among them, not carrying ourselves as their betters, but as their protectors and providers. We have nothing to fear Hummingbird on this day, or any day.”

And with that, Father walked past me and my handmaidens, gave Beatrice a slight nod as she and the others bowed, and disappeared in the dining area with Auberon beside him.

“My king,” I heard Mother say from the other room, “and my husband.”

“My queen, and my wife,” Father returned endearingly.

The sound of over-inflated affection poured out of the room and drove me away. I couldn't believe they were doing this in front of company. Yes, they were the king and queen of a mighty kingdom-territory, but they were still my parents, and hearing them practically enact the act which brought me into the world was not something I wanted flooding my ears.

As I headed toward the door, images of what Auberon and I would look like embraced in such a way flashed in my mind, and my inner muscles clenched. I looked timidly around to see if anyone noticed the sudden change in my gait, or the redness in my face as my cheeks burned, while we exited my home.

Chapter

Two

The decapitated head fell on the sand like a child's toy. As blood geysered from the body, I gasped at the gruesome sight of the fallen.

"I never truly understood how much bloodlust there was at the Midsummer's Festival," I admitted to the person next to me.

He ignored my comment as the crowd stood in unison and cheered like a fearsome unified organism. The roar thundered and caused my ears to ache. I stood with them and clapped, trying to follow suit, as I peered to the center of the arena.

Since I was of royal birth, I'd been given a seat a few rows back from the front row, and it sent my heart racing. The front row had been reserved for the highest dignitaries of the six kingdoms, but I had a spectacular view of all the activities below, as well as the premium box housing the Emperor Supreme and his consort. When the new combatants entered the arena floor, I leaned in and held my breath.

The last event of the festival.

The big finale.

A massive free-for-all death contest made up of dozens of competitors from all over the world and from all walks of life, with the winner able to rule the world and get their greatest wish fulfilled. It was symbolic. Each of them represented one of the kingdoms, and were filled with hope of becoming the

ruler of the world by killing any other who opposed them.

The herald of the Emperor Supreme started some sort of pompous speech to close out his reign, and I tuned out. Drawn to the bloodstains on the white sands, and the heads of the next possible victims, I cared not for speeches at the moment, and I wasn't the only one.

"I can't wait to see them take down that big guy!" a feminine voice screeched in excitement.

"Why?" someone asked.

"Because it would be an amazing sight. Imagine the fight he would put up and the bloodshed."

"If he's a giant, he's not the biggest I've seen. Maybe he's a runt?"

It was a morbid form of entertainment we had adopted over the centuries to celebrate when the First Ones stepped foot on this planet. The festival served as a way to remind us all to unite or be torn apart by war and destruction. While we were all individuals, as the combatants were, there needed to be one clear voice to guide us through the darkness, as the eventual champion would be. Symbolism at its worst and its best.

I sat down as the sounds of voices around me rose and fell with excitement.

"Be quiet, they're doing something!" the voice beside me yelled.

"You're the one who keeps talking, ya prick."

The royal guards were scattered throughout the crowd around me, but they too were into what was about to happen. Beatrice and the rest of my handmaidens sat in the section behind us so they could attend us during the games, but curiosity got the better of them. I decided to let them enjoy the spectacle and I'd help myself if I wanted anything.

"I got ten gold on the big guy."

"The big one? He looks like a chicken-fucker."

"Yes, he does. But what if he wins? Look at the size of him!"

"Exactly! He's too small a giant to be one."

“He’s bigger than the rest of them!”

“I got 100 gold on anyone *but* the big guy.”

The smell of the sea of bodies around me, as well as the metallic tang of blood in the air, caused my skin to break out into goosebumps. There were so many incredible combatants it would be hard to bet on an eventual winner. I was dumbfounded as people placed their wagers on who would emerge victorious, but decided to try my hand—mentally to myself.

The people seem like they would wager on an insect if it meant getting any type of coin. There has to be a better way to determine the winner.

One particular combatant caught my eye. He stood strong and proud, not at all deterred by the fact that another combatant—had to be a resident of the giant empire—towered over the others. His countenance looked militant, and reminded me of some of the royal commanders from the Warden Troopers I’d observed as they passed through our capital one day.

If he were a Trooper, then that makes him a Sepawn. He has no particular powers. He’s like me!

In the crowd of powered contestants, he had to be considered a long shot. I mulled over the many different ways a Sepawn could die from such a festival, but our current Emperor Supreme was the winner of the last decade’s games after all.

Well, that turned all my logic upside down. Mother said I’d be the best at whatever I do, maybe his mother told him the same thing?

“I’m going to wager on that one there. The smaller guy. He looks like he’s seen battle in his life,” the man beside me piped in.

Someone elbowed me to get my attention. I sat in the section where the wealthy and upper crust of society were, but it still took a lot of nerve for someone to feel they had the liberty to touch a princess.

“Do you want to join in on the wager, miss?” The man’s smile was horrid, his teeth darkened and some were missing.

I gave him a polite smile back before answering. “I truly do not know.

Any of them could win, really. I'm not good with wagers. I may have to sit this one out," I laughed nervously.

He muttered something under his breath and turned his attention back to the arena. I did the same.

Where was I? Oh, yes. The Sepawn.

Thoughts of the Sepawn competing in these games drew my mind to the stories we were taught as children. There'd been another Sepawn who'd overcome all the odds to win, though there'd been countless debates as to whether this was historical fact, or merely a fiction.

I always chose to believe the story. The Sepawn Emperor Supreme who'd sought to rule forever, had to be more than a bedtime story designed to entertain children. I understood him. Kept in a gilded cage of finery, I longed to find *my* place in the world, and had hoped to by attending the games. If I could understand what would drive a person to risk it all, it would expand my knowledge on certain things.

In my opinion, all the Sepawn Emperor Supreme truly wanted was the opportunity to expand his knowledge of the world. He'd been painted as a cruel ruler, power hungry and filled with greed. His ten years wasn't enough time to control the world's secrets, the story goes, and he wanted more. But I'd always wondered if he simply wanted more time to learn, more time to grow, instead of more time to rule.

I always thought it was admirable.

If what I thought were true.

I continued to scan the final combatants to see if any others were worthy of me actually wagering some gold coins on a bet. I was getting caught up in the excitement of it all.

Another contestant did stand out from the rest. He was in a relaxed position, separate from the others.

What made one relax in the face of death? I wondered and tapped my chin with a finger. *The only answer I can think of is he's faced it before.*

I perused his wide shoulders and the way it sloped down around the curves of his musculature. Those were arms made to execute an opponent. I must have been staring too long because I could have sworn he tilted his head back for a second and looked over his shoulder in my direction.

I discreetly looked around me.

No way. He couldn't possibly be looking at me. There's a good mix of both men and women in the crowd. He could be looking at anyone. He's just looking in my area. Get a grip, Lani.

I shifted in my seat as a silly part of me hoped for him to actually be locking eyes with me. With my having turned eighteen, my heart began to pound in my chest. I'd never caught the eyes of an older man before—especially not one of his caliber, if one could call it that in an arena made for death matches.

With his head facing the direction of the combatants once more, I continued my exploration of his appearance from my vantage point. In many ways he reminded me of the Sepawn in age, except his darker features and more mature air, drew me in. The planes and angles of his form made me shy with embarrassment at how hard I had been examining him. The man had barely any body fat on him. His face, from the side, held nothing but mystery and I found myself leaning in even more to get a better look. How many hours in the day must he have trained to his body in such a way? None of the royal guards looked anywhere close. What did that say about our would-be protectors?

Maybe I should mention this to Mother.

The movements of the Emperor Supreme stole my attention as well as everybody else's. He spread his arms wide and slammed them together in a thunderous clap.

“Begin!” His herald shouted.

The crowd's excitement exploded as combatants were dropped quicker than the echo from the Emperor Supreme's clap could die down. Men and

women from all the kingdoms interlocked in a bloody battle for the right to have their greatest wish granted. I locked in on the dark mysterious man to see how he would react. He, somehow, remained loose and slack as if he hadn't a care in the world. He even engaged with another combatant in conversation in the midst of this death storm, yet no one engaged him in battle.

And then the unexpected. The mystery man split himself into what could only be described as millions of copies. The crowd boomed with exhilaration at such raw power. The record for most replicas at one moment was around ten, and he easily shattered it. The original walked along the field as a proud parent would when their children played amongst the flowers. The replicas were merciless and many. They quickly overwhelmed all of the combatants—save a few—and showed no remorse. From where I sat, his confident and calculated bloodlust made me scissor my legs beneath my dress.

The replicas laid waste to the arena floor, littering it with bodies, blood and destruction. The air filled with a hellish symphony of screams as the replicas killed any enemy they saw in a fury of blood and gore. Easily outnumbering the combatants five or more to one, they tore the men and women on the field apart with their bare hands, as the original watched with a quiet smugness. The crowd whooped and hooted in a delirious, macabre song, their fever fed by the ruination.

As quickly as the crowd leapt to their feet to celebrate the loathsome entertainment, the thrill mutated to dread, as everyone started to realize what was happening. Beyond the destruction on the field, the replicas were not stopping. Not only were they washing the combatants in a wave of blood, but they didn't limit themselves to the field of play—they broke through the barriers of the walls and headed for the crowd!

Chapter
Three

“**P**rincess!” One of my father’s guards shouted.

The crowd scattered when they realized the full extent of the danger we were in. The first of the replicas rushed the walls of the arena and began to climb. I snapped my head to the side, trying to find the voice, but with the throng of people stumbling over each other in fear and terror, he was crushed under the stampede of an angry ocean.

Cries of pain and death rose as the crowd screamed in both feminine and masculine voices, some too young to have been here.

“He’s going to kill us all!”

“Get out of my way!”

“We need to escape!”

“Where are the guards!”

I turned back to the front as the first wave catapulted themselves over the top, followed by the second wave. The waves of replicas crushed anyone they found like insects. Their hands emerged over the top like hands clawing from the ground. They were like the sea—its waves, crashing and angry. The battlefield had moved from the arena to the stands. Time stood still and at the same time went on forever as I struggled against the people in the crowd fleeing to safety around me. It was like a wind storm which never seemed to falter.

The carnage was unimaginable. Blood splattered the seats and walkways, creating what looked like a grotesque painting of the slaughter. The replicas moved in a frenzy, tossing people over the walls to the replicas waiting below, who tore them apart as easily as slicing through bread. The people who weren't tossed, were tackled and had their necks cracked, bones crushed, and bodies splintered into fragments and shards jutting out from their flesh.

I frantically joined the fleeing masses, doing my best to ignore the snapping of bone and the sound of blades cutting through the air. The arena no longer existed for entertainment. A being of monstrous strength dictated the terms and transformed it into a stage of pure genocide and demise.

“Help me!” a young voice cried out and my heart raced.

“Noo!” a woman screamed.

Instincts forced my feet in the direction of their voice, but I couldn't decipher who it came from in the throng of shouts. The number of men and women surrounding me—each fighting against me to get free—multiplied every time I successfully took a few steps. Their panic threatened to swallow me whole as each one of my movements slowed until I couldn't move. I was surrounded and paralyzed.

“Ahhh!” came a cry of pain from somewhere ahead of me. The voice of someone I'd heard countless times before, and my heart stopped.

I looked up and in time to see it was too late. Beatrice disappeared under a swarm of replicas who'd intercepted her and cut her path off—a path meant to intersect with me. She had resisted the urge for self-preservation to try and reach me, and her loyalty cost her everything. Her severed head emerged from the bottom of the replicas as one of them held it high before discarding it like it was trash, splashing her crimson life force and mixing it with the rest who'd shed their blood.

The adrenaline coursing through my veins wanted to come out in screams of anguish and frustration but all I could do was stand helpless, in silence, as my friend succumbed to the sea.

This was no festival. It was a massacre.

None of us were prepared for this, none of us were equipped with the emotional fortitude to ward off such an attack. No one had the training or the weapons except for my guards.

My guards!

I needed to find them.

Royal guards from all the kingdoms had mixed and allied themselves to repel the common foe. They fired their weapons or used their swords to cut the replicas down, in an attempt to stop the madness. But as they killed one, three more arrived in its place. The guards were as helpless as the rest of us, but if I were to survive, my hope rested with them.

My heart raced as I grabbed my skirt and tried to follow the direction of the droves of scrambling bodies, saying a silent farewell to my friend who died in an attempt to honor her oath. I slipped on a pool of blood, and caught myself on a dismembered limb with an open hand, crying for help to escape. I whimpered and kept moving forward. Strangers ran into me, knocking me into some of the seats. The moment I got back on my feet, *more* people collided into me. The more I tried to escape the more they tried to trample me and take me down.

I didn't know how I would survive, but I was too scared not to try. Grabbing onto the tail end of someone's clothes, I used their running momentum to right my body's position again before letting go—sending them tumbling onto their own face. I watched in horror as a good handful of people stepped on the person's back, preventing them from being able to roll away. I turned away when the multitude smashed their head open like fruit, and grimaced at the crunch. My heart thrashed in my chest. I couldn't stay, or else I'd end up like him. I swallowed the guilt down and began to move once more toward the exit.

“Princess!” another guard called out, stopping me in my tracks. I looked over my shoulder and screamed as a replica detached the guard's head, and

held it high like a trophy. With part of the guard's spinal cord still intact, the replica's celebratory movements whipped blood against those around him.

Some women passed out at the gruesome sight. The replica laughed in delight, climbed their bodies and launched himself, soaring through the air like a bird and whipping the spine as he threw the severed head. It smashed into the back of a fleeing woman over the seats and knocked her down. Twenty replicas dove in and ripped her to shreds. They pulled her innards out like an overflowing cistern, her cries of agony drowned out by the sadistic laughter of the replicas.

A hand grabbed my arm. I opened my mouth to scream, only to have another hand slap over it. My heartbeat thrashed in my ears, until I realized it was Keon, another of my father's guards. He muscled me over a few seats and threw me on the other side of his body as one of the replicas barreled into him with his shoulder.

"I will kill you all!" the replica snarled.

"Try it!" Keon growled.

They both crashed into the seating area, the sound of the impact reverberating throughout the area. I lost my balance as I tried to take a step backward and fell hard. Pain shot up my lower back and I winced, shutting my eyes to try and grit through the feeling.

"Princess, get out of here!" another guard yelled.

A nearby growl forced my eyes open. The sun had been blotted out by a looming figure—a replica. A man made of the night itself. A titan, and a nightmare. This close, the fury emitting from his skin was palpable. It felt like worms crawled up my skin with each step he took closer to me. Caught like prey, unable to figure out which way I should go with the seats all proving to be obstacles against my escape, I sat paralyzed by fear of the stranger before me.

"A princess, huh? All covered in blood?" He purred menacingly, his voice dark and dangerous. A man this evil shouldn't be allowed to be this

attractive. “More like a bloodied raven. Little birdie flew into the wrong arena.”

He was the spitting image of the mysterious combatant who had made me curious earlier. Gone was the fantasy of him singling me out in the sea of faces, in its place was unmitigated fear for my life. He stepped forward, with his grin never leaving his lips.

The perfect predator luring the unsuspecting.

Luring the gullible.

Like me.

“Come here, little blood raven,” he motioned as he mused. “I have plans for you.”

I screamed and threw my forearm out as protection. It was all I could do. His hand shot out, but was intercepted by a dark blur. The blur tackled him from the side, crashing over some of the corpses and knocking them to the lower levels like ragdolls. I scrambled to my hands and knees and then to my feet, clasp my hands over my mouth to swallow my scream at the scene.

This was death in a barbaric display. I stumbled over another torso and gagged as my insides attempted to rise out my throat. I blew out a ragged breath, and resigned myself to my fate. With the carnage before me, and the destruction around me, it was only a matter of time before everything would be enveloped in its entirety. The noise of the patrons dying around me would serve as my funeral dirge. As the horrible look of terror on Beatrice’s face replayed before my eyes, I could only hope my parents made it out safely.

Without warning, the ground shook and forced me to my knees. I shot out my hands to stop the fall but miscalculated and slammed my chin onto the seat below, stunning me.

A large foot kicked my head, and the force of the blow slammed my skull into the seat. My spectacles cracked and cut into the flesh beside my eyes. My vision blurred as pain overran my every thought. Darkness threatened to consume me. I fought it as hard as I could, blinking feverishly and crying out,

but the world spun as I held out my hand to resist the invisible force. The sound of death and screams of terror began to fade away into the background like a hum. My soul wanted to leave my body as I groaned, and turned myself onto my side. The sun's rays hit my face as if to highlight my failures.

I tried to make myself call out for someone.

Anyone.

But the only sound I could make were words masked as a croak.

“Beatrice, I’m sor—” I started, before the darkness pulled me into the void of nothingness.

Chapter
Four

THREE MONTHS LATER...

I was drowning in pain as a swarm of dark figures morphed into beings from the afterlife, threatening to devour humans whole. I screamed until my throat was raw, but no sound came out.

Beatrice's face distorted into one of pure terror as it ripped in two. I cried and reached out my hand as the lower part of her face hung by the small piece of flesh still attached. Crimson coated everything, as the cries of lost souls echoed in and out though I couldn't see them. I fell to my knees, and rocked myself into a ball, trying to console my own nerves and calm my fears as I whimpered and cried for my mother by name.

Hands.

His hands.

The replica's hands.

All pulled at me.

I screamed and scuttled back on my butt. When I looked up, a replay of Beatrice's head being torn in two until blood and blackness meld together to create a crimson raven, squawked and flew right for me, slamming into my body and bending me in half.

Suppressed voices floated to my ears but I couldn't make out what they said. I heard my name, but every time I whirled around to find the source, all I saw was a replica laughing maniacally as it slaughtered another unknown body beside me. One tried to hand me a knife. I reached for it, but it morphed into a red raven, took flight, and landed on my shoulder.

I opened my mouth and the raven invaded, attempting to force itself down my throat to choke and rob me of life. I ran and the scene shifted to the family dining room. I let out a relieved breath, and walked toward my mother who was about to eat. My heart skipped a beat knowing she lived, but then I scrunched my face as a servant walked backward with a tray. When he

turned in my direction, a replica stared into my eyes with an evil smile. He put the tray down in front of my mother, and stabbed her in the back of the neck with a dagger, pouring her blood onto the cooked bird.

My heart ripped. I screamed for him to leave her alone. The cooked bird rose from the tray and grew red feathers, shifting into a raven covered with the blood of my mother. My body tried to run to her unmoving one, but I slammed into my father. Strong hands steadied me, yet when I looked up, the face morphed into a replica of the mysterious man wearing my father's crown. I screamed but no sound burst forth. The replica bent his head down and opened a mouth full of fangs, threatening to bite my face off.

The feel of the fangs as they scraped my face and the sharp pains radiated through my body as I tossed and turned. My mind told me I needed to wake. I jerked my arms and legs, trying to reach my eyes but I couldn't. The darkness of sleep held me down like a prisoner, and led me to my execution. The executioner wore a mask made of blood and wielded a knife. I reached and removed the mask, only to see my own face staring back at me, as the knife plunged into my chest. I finally screamed as death had its way.

My throat stung as my eyes finally fluttered open, crusted from the long slumber. Every inch of my body ached as if I'd been fighting to come back for centuries. My cheeks were tear stained and my breath labored. I eased myself over onto my side and tried to calm my racing heart.

I rubbed my chest with the palm of my hand, massaging my heart in the place the dream knife stabbed, and coughed from the gnawing in my throat. I groaned as my mind slowly cleared from the fog, blinked a few times to clear my vision, and surveyed my surroundings.

They were unfamiliar.

A large, timeworn room covered in dead insects, roots and cobwebs, greeted me like a lost friend. The thick, earthy air irritated my lungs and made me cough again, sending my throat into painful spasms.

"You get used to it," a masculine voice said from the darkness.

I scrambled backward, falling back onto the makeshift bed I laid on, while my body tightened as I searched in hopes of finding the origin. My eyes moved at an agonizing pace, as if they'd been frozen for the winter and only began to thaw under the spring sun.

“Relax,” the voice commanded. “If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't have made it out of the arena.”

My heart banged against the walls of my chest.

The arena.

“Wh-who are you? Where are we? Where am I?”

I slammed my eyes shut as hard as I could. I needed them to do their job and let me see who held me at such a disadvantage. I reached for my face out of habit only to find that my spectacles were missing, and my fingernails had grown. The skin under my fingers revealed a few raised scars near the bridge of my nose.

Why didn't these scars hurt? They felt closed over, healed.

I cracked my eyes open and blinked rapidly, forcing the dim light in and accepting the shadows dancing in the room. I'd always hated this aspect of myself the most. Without the assistance of my glasses, the world existed as a blur, though I didn't have it as bad as some.

As I searched for the owner of the voice, my eyes scanned the out of focus images carved onto the walls. One after another the shapes twisted into corrupted figures with faces half melted into masks of twisted pain and terror. There was an irregular flagstone tile floor. Numerous lines had been etched into it. They were less than a finger's width wide, filled, and obscured by dirt and wear. It may have once been a map or mural, but now was indistinguishable.

Then there was the owner of the voice.

“Welcome back,” spoke the man shrouded in the darkness. “You were asleep for quite a while.”

My jaw dropped when realization washed over me. His voice was one

lost in the sea of voices right before thousands were slaughtered.

“What are you doing?” I scratched out.

My eyes finally heeded my commands and focused on the direction his voice came from. Though a blur, I could see well enough. He stood in front of a large stone which had been hollowed out to create an area for cooking and also served as a counter space. In his hand, he stirred a white porcelain cup with steam wafting out of it. Everything about this was bizarre and sent chills up my spine.

He moved from his rock counter like a predatory animal and prowled toward me with grace. As he approached, I tried to scramble back further, but my body betrayed me as I moved. The adrenaline initially rushing through my body upon my awakening couldn't hide the shooting wave of agony coursing through me.

Helpless and at his mercy, my fear amped up to exponential levels. I cowered and tried to shift myself into the smallest possible position.

“Drink,” he commanded and thrust the white cup in my face.

I whimpered as he spoke, sure he would end me where I lay.

“I don't want whatever you have,” I whined. The more he spoke, the more I began to recognize the voice. It didn't make any sense.

“Please,” he scoffed and knelt down in front of me. “You don't know half of what you think you do. Now, drink.”

I tightened my lips and turned my face away. A strong, yet familiar hand grabbed my shoulder and forced me to an upright position. Before I could register a complaint, his hand moved from my shoulder to my face, and gripped it, forcing my jaw open.

“*I said*, drink,” he repeated and forced the steaming liquid into my open mouth. Memories of a time before the bloodshed rushed back to me in fragmented pieces.

His ropes of hair were still neatly tied back behind him as he stood in front of me with authority.

My body convulsed as I choked and gagged, but with one hand he held me in place. The steaming liquid poured down my throat. It burned as it went, and brought tears to my eyes. It was thick and putrid, and smelled worse than dung. I wanted to scream, I wanted to kick and fight back, but his strength forced my body to surrendered to his want.

When the contents of the cup emptied, he released his grip on my face and I fell back on my side haphazardly, and banged my shoulder on the hardness underneath. I lay on a cot with minimal cushioning and moaned as the suffering magnified.

He leisurely rose to his feet, turned his back, and returned to the rock counter.

“That was something to accelerate your healing,” he said. “If you want to see the end of this thing, you do as you’re told. Do you understand?”

The tears continued to flow down my cheeks, dampening the mat beneath me. “Fuck you,” I blustered. “I’m Princess Ulani Rensburg of the Ground Keeper kingdom. You can’t do this to me!”

His laughter boomed into the area, bouncing off the walls eerily and sending my bluster into nothingness. “No,” he remarked.

His response was both unnerving and absolute.

He looked over his shoulder and stormy grey eyes, which once captivated me, did so again, but in a completely different way. This force of nature threatened to consume me whole.

“You’re not anything at this moment,” he continued. “You’re a ghost. A shadow. The very mist in the air itself. To be a princess, your family has to be royalty.” His eyes intensely bore into mine as if there were more to what he was saying and I was being too stupid to see it.

“My family *is* royalty,” I blurted.

He knew this. He was there, in my home, right before—

“Your family is dead.”

Chapter Five

His words sent my world crashing. I hadn't considered my mother or father when I awoke. "Wh-what happened to them? This isn't possible!"

I refuse to believe him. This many bad things can't have happened all at once. He's attempting to trick me!

"Ha!" He chuckled and my blood began to boil. "You don't believe your family is dead. Interesting. Yet, you're *here*. If your family were alive, would they allow you to wake in a strange place?"

Whatever it was in the liquid he forced into me, must've begun to work as the pain I'd experienced started to subside. My thoughts began to clear, and my mind started to fly as possible scenarios played out before me.

"If I've been kidnapped, they wouldn't know," I countered.

"Wake up, Ulani," he answered in a seething tone. "They're gone, and who do you think saved you from the bloodshed, hmm?"

I eased myself back to a seated position with a groan. "What are you talking about? I was at the arena, and I didn't see *you*."

He pivoted on his heels and faced me, his eyes narrowed and his lip curled into a snarl. "I know you were there, so was I. That replica was about to rip off your head the same way he did the others. I tackled him just before he could."

A memory fragment flashed before my eyes.

The blur? Was he the one that...

I shook my head. This was too much to take in at one time. If he saved me from the massacre, why was I here? Why was I not taken back to the palace, to my family? I needed answers to help me think.

“It doesn’t make any sense. If you saved me from the arena, why didn’t you take me back to the palace? Why am I here?”

He shot from his spot and brought his face right up against mine. I gasped in startlement, and almost lost my balance, throwing my arm out behind me to stop the fall.

We stared at one another and I was reminded of how tantalizing his features were. We were both starting to breath heavily, a strange tension in the air between us. It made me want to find an escape to rid myself of it.

“Because,” he snarled. “They would have executed *you* along *with* them, Princess.”

“What? They? Who are they? The replicas of the madman from the arena? He was at the palace? You’re not making any sense!”

My mind raced, as something boiled out of me. Anger? Hatred? Irrational fear of this all being some sick joke. My insides twisted into knots as I considered his words.

How could the events of one festival lead to a path of utter devastation, especially in my life?

“You don’t believe me,” he stated flatly without taking his eyes off me, examining me and my responses like a specimen.

I broke our eye contact in cowardice, scooting closer to the wall. I needed time to process his words. How could he expect me to take all this with grace?

He chuckled and started to walk away.

“How can I believe you when I do not even know where I am, how long I’ve been gone or if people are out looking for me?” I called after him. “For

all I know, they are and you're using me as a bargaining chip for whatever nefarious reason you may have!"

For some reason, the fire within my gut flamed to the highest levels and I snapped. "Don't you walk away from me!"

He stopped but didn't turn.

The silence sent my rage simmering higher and made me want to choke into tears. I pressed my lips tightly together. I needed to escape. I needed to find a way to get home and make sure my parents were alright.

"I can hear the anger in your voice, Ulani. I want you to live in it, cultivate it, nurture it until you have what it takes to bring them down in your vengeance."

"Them? You keep saying that! Them, who? Who are they? Tell me!"

He looked over his shoulder at me once more, his face devoid of any emotion. "Your parents escaped the arena, Ulani. However, the ensuing chaos left the kingdom shattered as people searched for answers. The moment that festival concluded in blood, was the moment your parent's death certificates were signed. Their closest advisors used the opportunity and betrayed them with blades and savagery."

"Why?!" I cried, his words hitting me harder than anything I'd ever experienced before, and left a hole in my chest.

"Because we had no winner from the Ground Keeper kingdom."

"So? We've not had winners before in the past. Father just told me that... our family would still rule even if our kingdom wasn't the last one standing. You were *with* him when he told me!"

"I was."

"So, who won? Who's the new Emperor Supreme? Was it them? Did the new Emperor Supreme order my parents execution?"

He inhaled sharply and blew out slowly before he spoke. "It was unlike anything in the history of the festival. There were *multiple* winners. A group of combatants banded together and somehow overcame the odds. They

stemmed the tide and killed the madman, defeating him and all his replicas. Together, they stopped the bloodshed, and were declared joint winners, rewarded like no one before them.”

“Answer my question!” I sobbed, my heart heavy. “Who killed my parents?!”

“Of the winners, none were Ground Keepers. The winners determined that each of them would return to their separate kingdoms and rule independently. There *is* no Emperor Supreme any longer. The winners used the wish to end the Midsummer Festival for good. However, since there was no Ground Keeper winner, our people fell into disarray. The advisors saw an opportunity and seized it. They forcefully removed your family from power.”

“Forcefully?”

“It was a coup, Ulani. I’m sorry, but there’s no other way to say it. Your parents were slaughtered like farm animals in cold blood, and the leader assumed the throne.”

My eyes widened at what he was saying. Wasn’t there a combatant that represented us? Suddenly, all my initial fears of our future came crashing into me like a tidal wave, drowning me in the feeling of doom. Father was wrong. This was the end of the Ground Keeper kingdom as I’d known it, wasn’t it?

No, it was so much more.

This was the end of all hope.

“So you hid me,” I wailed. It was the only conclusion I could grasp. “You should have left me in the arena!”

“I hid you so you could rise again and take back what is yours.”

I shook my head. My hands clasped at my temples as my body curved into a fetal position. What he asked of me was impossible. I was the princess in a gilded cage. I knew nothing of fighting or vengeance. I had never even held a sword in my life. This was it. There was no point in living out my days without my family.

And Beatrice... Her death replayed in my mind over and over in a loop as

if in accusation of my continued failures.

I glared at him through my tears. The anger and tumultuous emotions coursing through me clarified my vision and allowed me to mentally send him exactly what I thought of him.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” I asked through clenched teeth, the fire rising inside of me. “Why didn’t you die in an attempt to stop them. You’re a coward.”

I could sense his grin in response and it only fueled everything rolling around inside me.

“No, Ulani. I’m not a coward. I’m your savior. And with me, you’ll see everything...in time. For now, just know this. Use it, Ulani. The hate...the pain. Use it all, and I can guide you in the direction you need to go.”

Did he realize using my name only showed me I was no longer who I thought I was—the only identity I had ever known.

Without my family, I was the princess of nothing.

Chapter

Six

“Can you stand?” He asked.

I rolled my eyes and forced down another swallow of the disgusting, putrid, mysterious liquid he continued to feed me. The room where he kept me had no windows, so I had no concept of time. Had it been hours? Days? Months? Years, maybe? As I plotted my escape, I began to observe my captor closely. I started to use my own body as a time piece. Whenever I felt hunger, I considered it breakfast, lunch, or dinner. The pain in my body made sleep more of a chore than a respite, so I only did it as necessary. If my hunger pangs were any indication, it'd been about a week since I first woke from my coma as I'd come to call it.

Though I had no idea of what ingredients went into this liquid I imbibed three times a day, I had to admit its effects were incredible. My memories of the destruction of the arena fed the idea of how damaged my body actually was, and whatever was in this crap did the job. It satiated my hunger, and my body's healing accelerated. I grew stronger each time I ingested it. The aches and pains were still there, but lessened by a significant degree after each treatment.

“You know I can,” I seethed.

He'd treated me like an animal, barking orders and making me do tricks. To feed me a poor quality drink as a meal to give healing to keep me alive,

was one thing. But I also had to relieve myself daily as any normal, functioning person would.

“There’s a shallow hole over there in the corner covered with sand,” he’d informed me when I asked. “Use it whenever you have the urge, and cover it with the sand. I’ll handle it from there.”

Did he want me to bark for praise too when I was done?

I included the sand in my thoughts of escape, of how I could use it to kill him. But living the high life as a princess, I had no experience in killing outside of my seeing the experience firsthand in the arena. But I gained plenty of experience in *hate*. It burned hotter in me each time I had to squat over that damn hole, and use the small rags he provided.

“Can. You. Stand?” he scowled.

“Fuck you,” I shot back and scrunched my forehead in disdain.

He moved from his standard place in front of the rock counter and entered my space as I downed the last of the disgusting healing drink. He opened his hand with expectation and I placed the white cup in it as I glared at him. I mulled over the many ways I could bite his fingers off. He turned the cup over and examined it, before he stuck his fingers through the loop on the side and rocketed the cool porcelain across my face.

The blow shocked and staggered me, as an agonizing, stabbing pain fired through my cheek toward my eye. The strike forced my face over my right shoulder and tears burned right before they tracked down. I nearly collapsed as my hand flew to my face.

“I *said*, can you stand?” He growled.

I nodded as I whimpered. My head felt light despite its throbbing. Everything around me seemed to spin, and a feeling of nauseousness crept up. Pushing myself up to a standing position, and ignoring the open gash on my face, I lowered my eyes to the ground and hunched my shoulders.

A closed fist met my right cheek and cold shivers shot through my body as I stumbled from the punch and dropped to my knees.

“I said...can you stand?” He echoed.

Stars filled my vision, but I screamed out what he wanted to hear. “Yes! What the fuck?! I just stood up!”

His hard leather boot bulleted into my stomach, and snatched all of the wind in my body with it as it withdrew. I collapsed to my hands and knees and opened my mouth wide as I attempted to swallow all the air in the room, ignoring the pain in my face and body.

“I said, can you stand?”

The crack to the back of my head was the last sound I heard before darkness swallowed me whole.

I LAID ON MY SIDE, SOBBING SOFTLY TO MYSELF.

“Do you hate me, Ulani?”

I kept my back to him, and continued to mewl quietly. I didn’t know what he wanted. Yes, I hated him. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to make him suffer with every ounce of my being before I killed him. I wanted to vibrate and split myself into a million replicas like the man in the arena, so I could have them tear him apart as I watched. But mostly, I wanted—

“Can you stand?”

My eyes widened and I rolled over as quickly as I could. He stalked me as he closed the distance between us, and I scrambled, moving to my full height as he arrived.

He stood right up against me, facing my front, staring down at my form. “Do you hate me, Ulani?”

I nodded my head.

“Not enough, apparently,” he observed before he sent a hard-charging back hand up my chin and out the left side of my face.

I shrieked as I fell, banging the back of my head against the wall my cot

rested beside with a dull thud. I didn't even feel the pain as the darkness swooped in.

I USED THE SMALL RAG TO FINISH CLEANING MYSELF AS HE ENTERED. HE never looked at me as he moved to the rock counter. I lifted my pants, kicked at the sand to cover up my waste, and crept to the cot.

“Can you stand?”

“Always,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Do you hate me, Ulani?”

The tears began to flow out of my control. “With every cell in my body.”

“Good,” he said with a nod.

He held out his hand and presented the white porcelain cup with the steaming liquid. I narrowed my eyes, but approached him, edging close until I was within arms distance. His steely countenance never changed as I removed the cup from his hand and downed the foul fluid in the fewest swallows possible, not stopping until nothing remained in the cup.

I held it out for him to take back. He traipsed towards me, and I flinched in preparation, but he merely continued past me and to the door which he always kept locked. I pivoted around to watch him as he placed his hand on the knob.

“You may hate me, Ulani,” he said with his back to me, “but you'll live. Unlike your parents.”

Heat flushed through my body as I screamed and threw the porcelain cup at his head. My poor accuracy sent the cup smashing into the wall. It splintered into a million pieces beside him with a loud crash.

He immediately spun on his heels and marched toward me. My eyes widened, but my feet planted themselves solidly into the ground in fear. He blasted the middle of my face, smashing the bridge of my nose with his

closed fist, and sending an unbearable wave of agony through me. I collapsed to my knees and wept bitterly.

“Can you stand?” he repeated.

“No!” I cried, my hands covering what I could only imagine as a displaced, broken nose. “No, I can’t stand, you fuck! What do you want from me?!”

My mind was caught in a loop. No longer was it Beatrice’s face that haunted me, but his.

“Right now, I want you to stand.”

The darkness once again surrounded me as he delivered another blow, but this time, I embraced it. For there was no pain in the dark. Me and the darkness had spent a lot of time together, and it told me its secrets.

There were no monsters in the darkness.

No monsters at all.

Except me.

I’M GOING TO KILL HIM, I RESOLVED AS THE KNOB TURNED.

As he entered, I launched, shrieking as I jumped from the cot with murderous intent. But I mistimed my jump. He easily sidestepped my attack and pushed me to the ground. He followed with a swift kick, but I’d prepared, and rolled out of the way and to the hole. I scooped up a handful of sand and fired it into his face, blinding him and making him gag. I ran to the rock counter and scooped up the damned white porcelain cup as he staggered and blasted it across his face. He stumbled to his side and I pressed my advantage. I lowered my shoulder and steamrolled into his gut, knocking him into the cot and piledriving him into the hardness underneath.

“Can you stand, bitch!” I shrieked as I began to scratch at his face and neck with everything I had.

“Argh!” He exploded as I drew blood, raking and digging my nails across every section of skin I could.

He rocked his hips upward, and threw me off balance enough to free his right hand, which he balled and threw, eviscerating me as he connected with the side of my head.

I fell to the ground on my back with the room spinning, but I was not going to stay down. The darkness had taught me how to embrace the pain.

Only one of us was walking away from this fight.

I gathered myself to get to my feet, but he tackled me, slamming me hard onto my back once more. His entire body weight lay on me, and he pinned my hands to the ground above my head with both of his hands.

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” I raged.

I hammered my knee between his legs and watched as his eyes rolled back into his head before he closed them tight. Somehow, even as he grimaced from the pain, he didn’t release his hold. He shifted as he lay on me, closing his legs so I couldn’t get off a second shot between them.

“Get off me!” I stormed. “Get off me so I can fuck your dead skull with your own cock!”

As the wide streaks of red criss crossed his face, I noticed the smile between the gashes.

“Good,” he panted as his blood flowed onto me. “Very, good. Now, you’re ready. Now...you can truly stand.”

Chapter
Seven

“**D**oes the death of your parents mean noth—”

A scream tore from my throat as I swung my blade right into his face for mentioning them once again.

He parried with a loud clang and I continued to slice through the air while he dodged and counter attacked.

My training began the day after he praised me, and I never looked back. I needed an outlet for all that coursed through my veins, the need for justice, the need for vengeance.

Auberon Ellison, the object of my ire. A nobleman, and from his own explanation, no one of noble descent should be trusted. Yet, here we were in the middle of a random forest, fighting as if to the death.

I leaped into the air and brought down my blade only to have him twist, slam the hilt onto my back and pin me to the ground. His fingers weaved into my hair, gripped it and pulled my head back as he brought his blade dangerously close to the flesh of my neck.

As much as I hated to admit it, his position of power and dominance over me after our sparring sessions always made butterflies flutter inside my gut when all I really wanted to do was best him.

I shouldn't feel this way. Not after the hell and humiliation he put me through. I should want to rip out his guts and eat it while I watched the life

leave his eyes, but my body had other plans. My mind had suddenly adopted a craving and need for his praises.

He slowly removed his blade and leaned in, his breath hot against my ear. “You’re getting better, Ulani. You impressed me today.”

I hated the way his statement made me feel. I hated it!

“Get off me,” I gritted out, wanting to spar again.

He chuckled and the vibration of his voice went through my body like a living thing. He remained on top for a few more moments before—

Did he just grind himself against me before getting up?

I inwardly groaned at my body’s reaction before placing my hands beneath me, reaching for my spectacles, and pushing myself up to standing. As I settled my glasses on my face, bending the temple tips to secure them better to my face, he kicked the sword once in my hand with his foot, and caught the hilt. He circled me gracefully, double wielding his weapons.

Is this a joke?

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion as I began to circle as well. I could feel some of the dead leaves in my ponytail, but I refused to make any sudden movements with my hands that might put me at a disadvantage to the game he played.

He crouched and grinned.

“You need to access that hate, Ulani. It’s the only way.”

I crouched as well, with my arms at the ready beside me on either side. I needed to disarm at least one of his weapons and take it from him. My mind shuffled through the different strategies as he kept talking.

“If you want it bad enough, you’re going to have to fight for it.”

Annoyance laced my tone. “Isn’t that what I’m doing? I’m tired of you speaking in circles when it would be easier to simply tell me exactly what you want me to do.”

I lunged in but he jumped back, swiping his blade to cut off my neck. I countered by rolling onto the ground and away, narrowly missing the edge of

his blade.

“Get to the fucking point, Auberon,” I growled under my breath. What was with older people and their need to keep flapping their mouths without getting to the damn point!

He laced his chuckle with something else. The familiar tension between us sizzled and I didn't like how it distracted me.

Part of his plan to make me lose, no doubt.

He leaped and I rolled again, jumping and kicking him from behind. He stumbled, but twisted his body to swing his blade back. My small stature granted me quicker agility as I leaped again halfway onto his back and twisted his wrist, disarming him and taking his blade. He righted himself to parry my attack. The force of him bringing his metal against mine vibrated down my arm and up to my shoulders. He brought his face between them and gave me a smile full of teeth as if he threatened to eat me alive when we were done.

Pushing him off, I jumped back far enough to be out of his reach.

I thought to find an opening, but the ground shook, unbalancing me. Auberon swept my feet from under me, and as I landed on my back, he straddle me. I tried to buck him off, bringing my blade to his face, but he muscled the weapon out of my hand and brought his forearm down on my neck to keep me pinned.

We both breathed heavily. His eyes scanned my face and I tried to turn my face away to hide the scars. He removed his arm, grabbed my chin and forced me back to center.

“Don't ever turn your face from me, Ulani.”

“It's my fucking face and I will do whatever the hell I please with it.”

Living under Auberon had brought out the worst in me and he knew it. Reveled in it. Drove it. Fed it. And every time ire came out of my mouth, he grinned as if he'd won a prize. It confused me.

Years living life as a gilded butterfly left me with little to no experience

with men. Besides being around my father and some of the servants, I had nothing to draw from. My mother was gone. Beatrice, gone. My body betrayed me at the most inopportune times, and these past few months under Auberon left me with nothing but loathing and resentment.

Auberon forced me to face a lot of new things all at the same time. It overwhelmed me, but when Auberon slammed his lips onto mine, all rational thought flew away like dark feathers flapping against the blue sky.

I tried to push him off, but his weight prohibited me from getting anywhere. His tongue dove into my mouth, and I screeched, but all he did was swallow it down, demanding something I wasn't sure I could give. My heart raced, and my face flamed. I didn't know what my hands should be doing. This wasn't part of the training, not at all.

He forced me into submission, and I let him win the battle. He groaned into my mouth and I panted in response, following his lead and engaging in this strange dance of tongues.

I should bite it off instead.

His hand tilted my head up and his aggression increased. When I tried to pull away from shyness, he growled and bit my lip sending a sharp pain right before he pulled back to watch it bleed.

I was overwhelmed with his forwardness, and now confused and pissed. I could taste the tang of blood in my mouth from the wound he created. He leaped off me and fire rushed through me. I felt like a fool as I quickly got on hands and knees and plowed right into his stomach, taking him to the ground.

We scuffled and fought for dominance. Rage like I'd never known, rushed through my body. All I saw was red and tasted blood as I climbed him from behind while he tried to turn, and wrapped my arm around his neck to choke him out.

With his strength, he brought us both upright and proceeded to flip me over his head.

I landed on my hands and feet, growled and attacked again, sweeping my

feet under him without results. He roared at the impact, but didn't topple. Instead, his fist came at my face and as much as I tried to dodge backward with both arms across my face for protection, his strength outmatched mine as his fist slammed into my arms, knocking them into my face. I stumbled and he grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and threw me against a tree. The rough bark cut at my face and ear, sending jolts of pain through my face.

Roaring like a feral creature, the once scared girl inside of me molded into a ball of grounded flesh—like the dead corpses who littered the ground of the arena. I couldn't be one of them. I wouldn't allow it. I needed to avenge my family at all costs!

I refused to let it defeat me. The day of the arena the darkness introduced itself to me, and since, whispered to me its secrets. I had a mission to complete, people to kill, and a throne to take back.

I *am* the monster in the fucking dark.

With a second wind, I wheeled around and launched myself, tackling Auberon in the chest and slamming him against another tree. We grappled on the ground in a flurry of limbs until I straddled him, driving my fists against his face repetitively.

Craving the bloodlust, craving his pain, I grinned at the newfound monster within me.

He growled like an animal and brought his knee between us, kicking me off him. I scrambled to my hands and knees, and prepared to scratch his face off. He landed on top of my back and slammed my head against the ground.

When I lifted my head, the hilt of a blade lay an arms length away, yet my arms were pinned beneath me.

“Fuck, Ulani,” he breathed heavily against me.

“Fuck you!” I screamed right back.

I squirmed and twisted, dislodging him far enough for me to slip out from his weight and bring my elbow up to his jaw. As he staggered, I grabbed the sword halfway hidden in the dead leaves and twigs.

Not wanting to lose his advantage, he brushed off the remnants of my elbow strike and fought to muscle me back into a position of submission. I brought the blade directly against the flesh of his neck, nicking it. We both laboriously breathed, staring at each other in consternation and incredulity.

I watched with utter satisfaction as droplets of blood ran down the curve of his neck, dripping as if it wanted to claim me as its rightful owner.

Tossing my blade aside, I leaned up and licked it, stunning him before shoving him off me. As I moved to my feet, I dusted myself off and walked away, unwilling to face what happened between us today as well as mulling over the fact I was able to beat a man twice my weight and size.

There was a lot to contemplate. The sexual tension between me and Auberon was not one of them.

Chapter
Eight

The days were monotonous. We trained before sunrise and much after sunset. My agility had increased, as did my movements and anticipation. The amount of times my mind pulled me back into the arena to revisit the day of the massacre also increased. Coupled with the pathetic span of time I allowed Auberon to degrade me.

“Eat, so you can rebuild your strength,” came the voice of the man I daydreamed about fileting into small pieces.

I curled my lip into a small snarl. Didn’t he think I knew that? I had other matters I needed to sort out.

Refusing to let him see his effect on me and my mood, I jerked the plate from him and shoveled the food into my mouth. I couldn’t really taste it, my mind solely focused on how to hone my skills. I wasn’t yet in control the way I wanted to be, which angered me. I’d bested him before, but I needed to know I could best him whenever I wanted. I needed to feel empowered enough to go back to the palace and kill everyone who murdered my parents.

“Training is over, Ulani. Eat.”

I shot to my feet and threw the plate in his direction. He dodged it, as if he had anticipated my reaction. His stoic face stared at me in return and added even more fuel to the fire within me.

“I’m sick and tired of this bullshit!”

“You’re sick because you need to eat. All the energy you use in training is draining you.”

I leaned in and pointed my finger in his face. His eyes smoldered, pissing me right the fuck off. “You know nothing about me and what I’m feeling. I need...I need—”

He drew himself to his full towering height and looked down at me with eyes full of hunger. Those first few moments of consciousness on the cot returned to me, as did the whispers from the dark.

My fury spewed forth from my mouth. “Just leave me the fuck alone!”

Breathing in a few calming breaths, I closed my eyes.

“I need some space,” I grumbled. I opened my eyes, spun on my heels and left the clearing we used to train, leaving him alone with lunch.

Headed through the surrounding woods, I lost track of how long I’d been out here, or where exactly *here* was. I assumed we were still in Ground Keeper territory, but every time I tried to pry the information out of Auberon, all he did was talk in circles. As if he purposely wanted to keep the information from me.

“Asshole shouldn’t be trusted,” I grumbled, reminding myself of what he’d said to me early on. The only problem was, I had no one else *but him*. No one knew I was out here, no one knew I lived, and I had no idea where I was to try to find the closest village. No one knew but Auberon.

The sound of insects and night creatures faded in and out with each step I took further into the woods. The leaves crunched softly beneath my feet as I tilted my head upward and tried to find the sky through the thick cusps of leaves and branches overhead.

How did my life lead me down this path? I could never go back. Things could never be the same.

I was not the same.

The naive girl who came into her adulthood with bright eyes and a zest for starting her life, died in the arena stands with Beatrice. Another woman

forced to her knees. To accept her fate and be scorned by the people she thought were loyal to the crown. Another woman had taken her place, the naive girl's place. Degraded and broken, but built back into something I no longer recognized.

A monster.

"They'll all die by my hand," I swore. "One by one their heads will fall."

"You're thinking too small," came a chilling, masculine voice.

I jolted back, quickly hiding behind a tree and peering into the darkness to see if I could locate the stranger.

"I love a woman who knows exactly what she wants," he continued.

A shiver ran down my spine.

How many nights had my mind been plagued with this exact voice. The voice of the man who at one time stood over me. The voice of the man who slaughtered everyone. The man in my nightmares. The man *of* my nightmares.

The true monster in the dark.

I quickly tried to maneuver from the tree but was stopped by his strong hand gripping around my neck from behind, pulling me against his chest as he pinned me against the bark.

"I wouldn't if I were you," he purred.

I elbowed him and he grunted but never let go as I anticipated.

"I've watched you. Pleasurably, I must admit. Your abilities have grown beautifully, Ulani Rensburg."

I trembled at his use of my name. He knew me as much as I knew him.

"How are you still alive?" I huffed. "I thought they killed you!"

He answered coolly. "They also think too small."

"You're a monster," I gritted out, thinking of ways I could tear his limbs apart from this position.

He chuckled darkly as if reading my mind and goosebumps broke out on my skin.

“You think me the monster, but I’ve watched you come to be the same. The princess of a once proud kingdom, turned into the exact monster she feared.”

He was out of his bloody mind! We were nothing alike.

“You’re a murderer,” I snarled. Beatrice’s face of terror flashed into the forefront of my mind like a long lost echo.

He ran his cold nose against the crook of my neck and my breath stuttered. I chastised myself for showing weakness in front of a predator. I should know better.

“That’s all in your perception,” his voice was guttural and reminded me so much of Auberon when things would become awkward during our training.

What was wrong with me? Why was I thinking of that right now?

“One of your replicas killed Beatrice,” I gritted out, no longer afraid of the death that awaited me. If I were to die here, I would go down fighting until my last breath. I will get my revenge or die in her name.

“Did they?” he chuckled without an ounce of care.

I twisted in his grip, the flesh of his palm painfully pulling at the one on my neck as I glared at him in the face. “I will kill you,” I seethed.

He groaned as if pleased right before he grinned again. “You flatter me, Ulani. Desire is so underrated. It should be stoked, fanned. Given the proper fuel to grow and enflame.”

His eyes scanned my face and focused on my scars. “I did something right by marking you. Your beauty was distracting, but I found you now. I’m here to offer you a proposition.”

Fuck his propositions.

I slammed my head against his, dislodging his grip on my neck. With the space opened between us, I threw a fist and crashed it against his face, stumbling him to the side. I ran through the forest, tracing my steps and weaving, hoping I’d eventually run into ones I knew like the back of my

hand.

I cursed the fact that I was never taught any tracking.

I didn't know how many of this guy's replicas were out here watching my every move, but his laughter echoed from all around. His unparalleled power sent my pulse racing. My heartbeat thrashed in my ears as he taunted me from the dark. First to the left, then to the back, then suddenly to my right. How do you handle someone who's everywhere and nowhere at once?

A true monster in the shadows.

I had no idea how to process the terror weakening my legs. My breaths became rapid and fractured as I feared for my life. My eyes darted everywhere in an attempt to search for any of his replicas around me. I tried to get him off my trail while praying I didn't get myself further lost in these woods. I didn't want to lead him back to our location, I didn't want to put Auberon in danger. He was the only key I had to my vengeance.

When I broke through the treeline and into a small open field, Beatrice's face flashed before me, and a plan formulated in my head. I headed for a large rock jutting out from a small hill mound before the continuation of the woods behind it. I needed cover, and I needed it quickly. Crossing this field would uncover my location for more than a few moments but I had to take the risk.

I would not expose Auberon. If anyone was going to kill him, it was going to be me. I needed to deal with this myself, I decided. The naive girl would run. The princess in a gilded cage would hide. She no longer existed. I would honor my family and restore my sense of self.

Time to face the monster of my nightmares.

Just then, the sound of twigs snapping and birds abruptly scattering into the sky made my heart ramp up and pump the blood through my veins faster. My body braced itself for whatever was to come.

And then silence.

An eerie silence.

An undead silence.

There was nothing.

No bird calls. No animal songs. No broken twigs.

Nothing.

As if all sound had been removed from the world and suddenly sucked into a black void.

Nothing but a voice which seemed to speak from inside of me, and surround me at the same time.

“Come here, little blood raven,” he dared. “I have plans for you.”

I had never felt such power, never faced anything like it. But I wasn't going to be taken down that easily.

“You want me?!” I shouted and jumped to my feet. “Come get me. I'm right here!”

My hands were balled tight, my muscles tensed, and my breaths heavy.

His laughter boomed throughout the clearing, and rocked me to my core. My ears ached as his voice thundered as if from different directions, all at the same time. His presence was oppressing and couldn't be ignored. My fists flew to the sides of my head and covered my ears as I dropped to a curled ball in an effort to silence the waking nightmare.

Chapter Nine

It took more than a day of travel to find my way back to Auberon. By the time I found my way to his hideout, I was exhausted and landed on my mat unceremoniously. Auberon was nowhere to be found but the plate I threw at him was still on the ground. He could take care of himself. I needed rest. Once I regained my energy, I was going to kill the monster.

The time for hiding was over.

I explained this to Auberon when he returned. I demanded he bring me back to the Ground Keeper capital city borders or I would murder him in his sleep. Auberon raised his eyebrow, looked deep in my eyes, and for the first time since we'd been together, acquiesced to my request.

The Limitless Forest was vast, and many parts of it uncharted. There were wonders still undiscovered and mysteries to be explored.

I didn't care.

Auberon's hideout in the forest had been on the edge of Keeper territory and it took a few hours to return to the borders of my birthright. Everything looked different. The man from the other night had been right about one thing — perception was a person's reality and mine had changed completely from that unforgettable event.

Being a noble, Auberon had his own motorcar which he steered into the back alleys of Enthinn, the capital city, and away from prying eyes. We had

to stick to the backways as the civil unrest in the city had increased through the months, and Auberon feared what would happen to me if I was spotted before we were ready.

“Okay, now what Ulani? I brought you here. Why? This is a huge risk. If anyone spots you before—”

“If the leader of the coup wants to solidify his hold on the kingdom, then he’s going to need the Winter Storm pendant.”

“Winter Storm?”

“Yes,” I answered and glanced around, taking in the area. “Father never told you about it?”

Auberon raised an eyebrow. “No. He never told me.”

“I guess I’m not surprised. It’s past down from ruler to ruler in our family to signify the power transfer. If this guy ever wants to truly have the people, he needs the pendant. So, we get it first.”

“And use it to prove you’re still alive.”

“Exactly,” I said and waved a finger.

“Where is it?”

“It’s kept separate from the family in case something like this ever happens. Go to the Emerald Eye, it’s south from here. Look for a timber framed single storey building, with an orange shingled roof and tile flooring. You’ll see a large open floor with pillars and piles of books scattered about. Ask for Morthos. He’ll give it to you when you tell him I’m alive.”

Auberon narrowed his eyes and leaned into my space. “Stay. Here.”

I nodded my head. Auberon opened his door, and headed south. After a few moments, I opened my door and headed north.

I prowled through the streets, hiding amongst the shadows. The light of the moon overhead was partially covered by the clouds. Darkness had encapsulated the city and most of its people were safely tucked away within their homes for the night.

If what Auberon told me was right, it was all my parents’ advisors who

overtook the throne. Part of me hated lying to him, but I could no longer wait. If the mystery man could find me, then my families enemies could too. I had to eliminate them before they got the chance, and before Auberon could try to stop me. They'd die one at a time in the quiet of their beds until I figured out who exactly their leader was.

If I couldn't get to them, I would eliminate their family members until their deaths flushed them out into the open. My family died at their hands, I'd have no sympathy for another. It was guilt by association, so it'd be judgement by association.

My judgement.

It was a simple plan. One I could easily do on my own. I was confident in my fighting abilities.

I leapt onto an old bin behind an alley and scaled the wall, grabbing onto the outer lip of the window sills until I reached the roof of the building. The Ground Keeper kingdom was known for our advancements in construction. Our roofs were more solidly built than the other nations who still continued to use thatched roofing.

When I came to the first location, I quietly and carefully climbed down the wall until I came upon the window I needed. Auberon had brought me mens clothing during my stay with him. It would prove to be beneficial as a disguise if anyone spotted me.

"Why must you always go so quickly?" a woman's voice rang out from within the room. I slowed my breathing and listened keenly.

"You knew the terms the moment you decided to be my mistress, Cecilia." His voice grated on my nerves.

Anthony Drover. He used to be one of my father's most revered advisors. A favorite. And now he had become one of the worst. A betrayer. I had mistakenly thought this was his home from catching him in this area a time or two during my outings with Mother. Little did I know it was only one of the secrets he harbored.

“She could lend you to me for the night. You guys don’t even sleep in the same room,” she whined.

“Enough!” came right before the sound of a loud slap. She whimpered on the ground and my hatred for the man exploded. “you will know your place. Do not expect me back tomorrow.”

He slammed the door and I climbed down the building until I reached the bottom, hiding around the corner, waiting for him to exit the building. My heart sped up slowly as my anticipation for the kill grew.

When the sound of the lock's disengagement floated to my ears, I peered around the corner to find him escorted by one of his protection detail.

I'll take them both.

When another man came out of the parked vehicle in the front to open his door, I locked my jaw. Three. Three weren’t impossible odds.

My chance came when his mistress threw the door open and stepped out, stopping him and stealing his attention.

He growled out something but I tuned it out as I inhaled a deep breath, exhaled to steady myself, and threw one of my short daggers.

It missed.

The dagger skidded off the side of his vehicle a fraction away from his shoulder. It was a bad miscalculation. I should have concentrated longer.

His security pulled out a gun and aimed it in my direction, letting off a shot that rang through the streets. I dashed down the alley, not looking back to see if they followed me. Across two more streets and I could no longer hear their shouts or footsteps.

I didn’t stop, however. I ran until I turned a corner and darted down the street a few more blocks before I dared to look over my shoulder to see if they were still following me.

It was my next mistake.

A flock of dark winged birds flew overhead right as I ran into a hard body. A gloved hand slammed over my mouth and dragged me into another

dark alleyway. The clouds obscured the light of the moon, limiting my eyesight further as I kicked and struggled against my captor.

“Settle yourself, you stupid girl!” Auberon gritted out and I stilled myself. “The stupidity of your overconfidence almost got you killed if I hadn’t diverted the other two and the woman.”

I twisted in his arms and shoved at him, separating us. “He needed to die!” I seethed.

Auberon grabbed the scruff of my shirt and pulled me up to his face. “They all need to, but not like this. Not if it means you get caught before you can even reach the palace. Think with your head, girl, not with your stubbornness. That bad habit of yours will get you executed in front of the whole kingdom as an example of what *not* to do.”

I hated the way he talked down to me. I wasn’t as stupid as he thought me to be. I had a plan!

“And what a stupid plan,” he scolded. “Did you really think I’d fall for a Winter Storm pendant? I walked closely with your father. Do not take me as a fool.”

He let me go and I jerkily fixed my top, refusing to look at him. Instead, I stared out into the deserted street and wondered how long it would take for me to leave his ass right here and go out on my own without his help.

“Don’t you dare. I will hunt you down and drag you back screaming until you come to your senses.”

I whipped my head over my shoulder and glowered. How did he know what I was thinking, anyhow? I narrowed my eyes and wondered if he had other powers he hid from me. The only one I had been able to figure out thus far was his ability to shake the ground. It was the reason why I slipped and fell at the arena. The massacre wasn’t his to blame but my inability to escape this fate was.

I was bitter.

“We need to return back—”

“To what Auberon?” I cut in, frustrated at his refusal to let me exact my revenge. “We’ve waited long enough! How much more training do I need? I was able to best you, wasn’t I? That’s enough for me to go against politicians that haven’t seen a battle in their life,” I gritted out through frustrated tears that burned behind my eyes.

Auberon grabbed my shoulders and shook me. My fist flew and he grabbed it before it could make contact. His grip increased, sending pain through my wrist and arm as he crushed my knuckles in his grip. He muscled me into submission, twisting my arm behind my back and pulling me against him with his other around my waist to hold me in place.

“You need to be able to survive their guards, you idiot. You won’t only be going up against them alone, remember that. The palace is now riddled with guards who patrol constantly. Your life as a princess never taught you tactics and strategies of battle. This is why we need to return, so you can train further. Do you understand?” he seethed.

I hated the way he belittled me when I felt my highest. I also hated the way his hard bulge pressed against my asscheeks letting me know exactly what he thought when I went against him.

He inhaled deeply behind my ear, dragging some of my wayward strands of hair with him and my body shivered. I needed to get away from him, I needed to clear my head. My logical mind knew what he was saying was true. I could have died back there if there were more than two guards. But he was wrong. I could have taken them *because* there were only two. He should have left me and never interfered!

Struggling against his hold and pulling my face away from him, he loosened his grip until I detached myself and put distance between us. I refused to look at him as we both began walking toward the motorcar in tense silence. When we finally reached our secluded location, I was brimming with everything left unsaid. Before crossing the entrance I stopped, turned and shoved him in the chest with all my might.

“I could have killed them all!”

He grabbed both of my wrists and snarled in my face. “I would have lost you and then where would that vengeance be, hmm? It would be lost in the wind like the lives in that damn massacre. You owe it to yourself to be the best before you exact your retribution.”

I didn’t understand why he pushed for this, for me to retake the crown when all I wanted to do was get blood on my hands. The crown was pointless because I had nothing left. Nothing! My family was dead! He had a life he could reclaim easily whenever he wanted to. He didn’t need to be here with me at all.

Was that my problem with him? Was that the reason why I couldn’t accept his advances? I had nothing to offer. I had no siblings, nothing to my name. I was just the woman he trained under his thumb for this mission. What happens after I eliminate them? How could I go back to a life I had rejected?

I felt like a tool.

He leaned in and pulled me closer. He pressed his face against mine and we stood there awkwardly cheek to cheek as I tried to control the rollercoaster of my emotions.

This man was the bane of my existence.

“Ulani...” he whispered.

I shut my eyes.

He shouldn’t be allowed to wreak this much havoc on my mind and soul! All he did was confuse me and I tired of it. What did he want from me? When I thought I was doing what I was meant to, he pulled this shit on me making me doubt myself.

Growling in annoyance, I turned my face away once more. “No! Let me go, Auberon!”

He did and I ran into the woods with tears streaming down my face and my failures clogging my throat.

Chapter Ten

Auberon held no mercy for me for the next few days. He trained me relentlessly until I was tired to the bone.

“Again!” he commanded and snapped a stockwhip in my direction. I leaped back but not far enough. The tail end of the whip sliced my arm and I cried out in fury, throwing my short blade right toward his chest. He twisted and dodged it, letting the blade lodge into the trunk of a tree.

I sprinted and ran up a small mound to my right to give me momentum in my next jump. I anticipated his tuck and grabbed onto the ropes of his hair, jerking his head back as I shoved one of my feet against his back and pulled him down to the ground.

“You fight like a fucking girl!” he growled, elbowing me in the chest, knocking the wind out of me. I rolled onto my hands and knees and he pulled his sword from his sheath, the blade shrilly cutting through the air as he gripped the hilt with both hands and brought it down right on top of me.

I jumped to the side and rolled, grabbing onto the stockwhip he dropped, shooting to my feet and cracking it toward his blade.

The sharp metal sliced through it as he stepped back and swung it upward. I was about to throw it at his head when the ground shook, throwing me off. The whip skidded off his shoulder as he tossed his sword aside, confusing me and stomping forward.

This punishment came in response to my rejection upon our return. He threw all of his strength and full body weight into every move he landed on me. Prepared for the same to happen again, my body tensed, ready to kick him in the balls if I had to to stop his abusive exercise on my body.

His hand shot out and I ducked, countering with an uppercut to his jaw. He growled and elbowed me in the temple, temporarily stunning me. I cried out as my body went into survival mode and jumped back away from his grasp. I ran toward the mound and leaped, wrapping my legs around his neck and brought him down to the ground. His fingers painfully dug into my flesh as he twisted me off him. I loosened my hold and scrambled backward, getting to my feet as he came barreling toward me.

I sidestepped away from his stampede and kned him in the gut, but he knocked my leg away with his hard forearm and gripped my throat, walking me backward until I hit the mound. He bent me over and snarled in my face, his pupils dilated from our fight. I had never seen him this worked up before. My hand gripped his wrist as I tried to haggardly swallow a breath. I threw an elbow but his free hand blocked it, then pinned it to the side.

The hand around my throat slipped into the back of my hair, his fingers threading enough to pull my head back for his mouth to devour me.

This sparring session differed from any before. It was as if we both needed to extinguish whatever was happening between us. His mouth moved aggressively against mine, and I matched his pace, gripping the front of his shirt.

He wasn't looking for submission. He wanted someone to fight him, to match him in his ferocity. He craved it every time I shoved him away, and everytime I talked back to him.

His kisses were drugging and I decided I didn't like it. I didn't like the control he had over me, the control he was always trying to exact. I bit his tongue and shoved him off, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, staring boldly into his eyes.

“Ulani, you’ve buried yourself under my skin.”

What the hell? This wasn’t time for a damn confessional. What was wrong with this guy?

“Whose fault is that, Auberon? I didn’t ask to be here.” It was the truth and he knew it. Was this his plan all along? To shut me off from the world and make me crave him?

He took a step forward, his face clouded over with lust and need. My own body cried for something I wasn't sure I wanted *him* to give. He was for all intents and purposes, the man who had broken me, trained me. My instructor, my guide. We couldn’t blur the lines of our relationship, not now, not when I was so close.

Like a predator, he followed my every move. Afraid to turn my back to him, I continuously side stepped and then walked backward, trying my best not to trip over anything. I wanted to be ready in case he attacked. I need to—

My back hit a tree trunk and I gasped in surprise. He immediately closed the distance between us and swallowed my next one with his mouth, caging me in. My hands gripped the bark to keep me grounded as he trailed kisses down my neck, making my skin flush and my body temperature rise.

I expected his hands to be as brutal as they had been during our initial meeting upon my waking but now they were tender, exploratory as they skimmed up my waist and then down to my hips.

What was he doing to me?

When he cupped my breast I squeaked in surprise. He chuckled against my skin and pressed his body against mine, sandwiching me between the tree behind me. A flash of a very familiar moment hit me like a ton of bricks, pulling me out from the trance Auberon had successfully put me under. I broke our body to body contact and panted quietly until I could calm my heart down.

He didn’t give up, closing the distance once more as his mouth and tongue teased my skin. His hand pulled down my top, dangerously close to

exposing my breast to the open air. I shook my head in disbelief, warring within myself.

“Stop. No. We can’t do this. We shouldn’t” I breathed out desperately. Though my mind was being rational, my body refused to move from his ministrations, enjoying the way he forced my pleasure.

Flashes of bloodshed and Beatrice’s face pulled me from my reverie and I slipped away. I ran as fast as my legs would take me, never looking back as I righted my clothes and choked on suppressed sobs. I didn’t understand what my body wanted and was too scared to face it, especially with Auberon.

I needed to hate him not want him.

After what felt like over an hour, I slowed my run to a jog and finally stopped at the edge of a small lake. I’d used it for bathing a few times when Auberon would unexpectedly go missing only to reappear whenever he felt like it.

Calming my heart, I stared out at the scene before me, taking the peace it provided to the convoluted state of mind Auberon left me in. I moved to a nearby boulder and rested my head on my raised knees, listening to the sound of my surroundings.

“You best be careful. There are terrors roaming these woods.”

I sharply inhaled as I snapped my face to the right to find the man of my nightmares standing against a tree, cutting a piece of wood expertly with the blade in his hand. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow on his skin. I inwardly groaned, still frustrated from the abrupt end of what happened earlier to watching the way his muscles flexed under his unbuttoned shirt. The man was nothing but lethal grace even when he was doing practically nothing. The shadows on his face darkened near the stubble along his sharp jawline and I found myself curious as to how it would feel against my skin.

I pressed my legs together despite the fact that I knew he was a murderer. *What was wrong with my body? Why am I suddenly so hypersensitive to all the masculine energy around me?* I let out a frustrated breath and

momentarily shut my eyes to regain control of my wayward thoughts.

When I opened them back up, he'd moved and sat right beside me on the boulder. *How did he move so fast?* The silence of his moves was disturbing but also admirable. I needed to move like that. I needed this skill.

I knew I should run. I knew I should cry out for Auberon's help and hope the two of us could avenge my friend. Every instinct within me said to either fight or take flight. And as if he knew it, he looked at me out of the corner of his eye and smirked as he continued to whittle the piece of wood in his hand.

"He would never be able to get you where you need to be, you know this, right?"

"What?" I leaned back, spooked, but somehow intrigued.

He made no attempt to fight me. His movements were subtle and not aggressive. He spoke casually as if we were old friends. We both knew I couldn't beat him in a fight, and at our last encounter, he showed me I couldn't outrun him. The most pleasant option would be to sit still and wait him out. If he wanted to talk, the least I could do would be to listen.

"He can only train you in all the ways he's able to understand. But how does one train you with power they do not understand?"

How long has this man been watching me?

He stopped whittling and stared out at the lake in front of us. "He thinks too small. You've already outgrown him. But you have a ways to go before you're even close to reaching your goals. So much untapped potential. I could help you."

"Why would I want a murderer helping me with anything at all?" I hadn't made any attempt to remove myself from this conversation. If he had watched me long enough like he insinuated, he would know I didn't stay where I didn't want to.

"Because you are about to embark on a mission to do the very same, Ulani," he said with a calm smile, finally turning his dark eyes back on me. A man capable of so much destruction shouldn't look this beguiling.

But like a moth to the flame, I couldn't resist his allure. Could he really teach me to harness my potential? It was something I knew I needed. I needed to reach my full potential to enact my vengeance. What exactly was my body capable of—besides being attracted to the wrong kind of men?

“You don't know anything,” I countered.

“I know murder is not something to take lightly. And what you plan on doing? You're not prepared for. He hasn't prepared you physically, or mentally for the road you're about to travel.”

I couldn't believe this was real. This couldn't be happening. “And you're saying you do?”

“Yes.”

“I don't need you to complete what's necessary.” I casted my gaze down into the water. I was fishing, for what, I didn't know.

“Your stubbornness works against you, Ulani. You know this more than anyone else. You have a weapon you freely carry around with you everywhere you go. You are already at an advantage, you just need to learn how to wield it.”

I whipped my head to stare at him intently. What was he talking about, a weapon I carry freely? Was he telling me the truth? When his hand slowly moved toward my face, I didn't flinch away. He could have easily killed me at any time, I had witnessed him do it in a million different ways with his replicas, yet he hadn't killed me. Not at the arena, not during our last meeting. No, this man had other plans and I determined within myself to find out what they were.

He gently put his forefinger under my chin while his thumb swept across my bottom lip. Warmth crept up my neck to my face.

“To think of one's own life force as their ultimate weapon of decimation is a fascinating evolution of the body.”

He spoke as if he was reciting mental notes to himself over scientific evaluations but his fingers caressed me as if he were whispering endearments

to a lover. My face continued to flame in response but the air around us wasn't as awkward as the one Auberon always produced. Auberon's energy presented more forcefully while this man's presented as something more like subtle, controlled power. Both of these men surprised me today.

He removed his hand and began whittling his wood again. "Meet me here tomorrow when the constellation Vesperia is at the top of the sky. I'll give you an hour's leeway for your arrival. When you make it, we will begin our training," he said confidently.

I watched the muscles of his forearm work until his veins popped up with the intricate manipulation of his blade. It shouldn't be as sexy as it was but my body obviously had other plans with how it was responding to the way his forearms flexed in front of me.

"And If I don't?" I challenged.

He stood up, hopped off the boulder and walked away. I scowled. *This overconfident asshole...*

"I'll see you tomorrow, Ulani," he spoke dispassionately as he disappeared into the line of trees behind us.

"Hey!" I called after him. "What's your name?"

"I've gone by many names through the years. Most feel dread when they whisper my name. But you may call me, Hunter."

Chapter
Eleven

“I’m tired of this awkward tension between us, Auberon. We need to concentrate on what needs to be done!”

He growled to the ceiling and ran his hand down his face. “I, more than anyone, want to see you get your due, Ulani. You fucking know this. I’ve trained you hard, pushing you to your limits. I just want you to be ready before you do anything rash that will lead to your death.”

I knew everything he refused to say into the air. He acted like I owed him something because he felt he ‘made me’, recreated me.

Nothing but control and mind games. Since the very beginning.

And this stupid speech again. All he did was repeat himself and it got us both nowhere. He said he wanted me to reclaim my throne, yet we’re still in these damn woods fighting like it was foreplay for him. I was tired of these games!

I turned and walked away. I was done with him. Done with it all. Fuck his ‘training’.

“Ulani!” he roared.

“Fuck you, Auberon. I am not going to be your tool for whatever stupid plan you have. You wanted to recreate me into a beast, well you have it! This creature needs to return to the wild where it belongs.” I turned, walked backward and threw my arms up. “Everytime I’m here, you act like I’m out

of fucking control and that it's your responsibility to leash the beast *you* created. Well, guess what? The beast was created long before I woke up on that cot. Fuck you, Auberon. Take that mentality and shove it up your pompous fucking ass."

His nostrils flared and I knew his cock was as hard as stone behind his britches.

Too fucking bad.

I wasn't his project. I wasn't his play thing either that he could continuously push and pull and toy with to his satisfaction. He held me back and he knew it. I needed to put this plan into motion. I needed to reach my full potential.

Who better to train me to be the monster in the dark, than *the* monster? I was growing to be more of a monster than the one who plagued my mind with fear in a constant loop. I could still see the faces of the dead calling out to me, warning me of the decision I was about to make.

In order to rule a nation that left me for forgotten, I needed to face those fears, I needed to *become* what I feared.

Before I could break the line of trees toward the lake, a chuckle came from somewhere beside me.

"You're early. I guess you had enough of Auberon's training for today?"

I refused to look at him, choosing instead to fume quietly while staring out toward the boulder we only sat upon the day before.

"Teach me everything," I demanded.

"There she is. I thought she was lost but I guess not. She's just hiding inside of you."

I whipped my head around and stared at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You are going to do exactly as I say from this point forward, do you understand me?"

What was with these men and their desperate need to control me? I was

fucking tired of it!

I gritted my teeth about to bite his head off when his grin grew wider, throwing me off.

“The fire in you will serve you well, Ulani. Hold onto it tightly.”

“Get to the point, Hunter,” I gritted out, at my wits end with these *men*.

His eyebrows shot up and I wondered what I missed.

“Seems you and I have many things in common,” he said, overly pleased with the fact. He leaned in and brought his face close to mine. Hunter was slightly taller than Auberon, and towered over me. “Come, we’ll need a better location for everything I’m about to put you through, Little Bird.”

His nickname hit much too close to home and it made my rage boil over. His grin turned into something menacing right before he vibrated and split into three.

I was surrounded and suddenly felt very foolish in believing he could help me with anything at all.

The original circled me as the other two stood there with crossed arms, a grin on their faces.

“I can practically smell your doubt and fear, Ulani. That’s the first thing we’re going to have to correct,” he purred.

Chapter
Twelve

“**I** am not in the habit of repeating myself, let alone justifying my actions. Do you understand?”

Hunter led us farther away from Auberon’s location, deeper within the Limitless Forest. I had never been this far to the south but I made sure to memorize the markers along the way as I walked a step behind him. We were in a small clearing surrounded by thick trees.

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. “Fuck you,” I blustered. “What is with you men and your need to control me? Am I some play thing to you? Some manner in which to satisfy your deviant behavior? No, I’m Ulani Rensburg of the Ground Keeper kingdom, and I’m no longer answering to men like you!”

“No,” he remarked.

His response was unnerving. “No?”

“No, you’re not answering men like me, because there *are* no men like me.”

“Ridiculous,” I scoffed. “Auberon—”

“Is a child. He’s nothing, and neither are *you* at the moment. In order to reclaim the throne—To be a princess, your family has to be royalty.”

My heartbeat began to race. “My family *is* royalty.”

It didn’t matter what he said. I knew what I knew. He was just trying to

trick me, confuse me just like Auberon.

The asshole turned his back to me and stared off into some far off space. “Your family is dead.”

Another man to rub salt on a wound that refused to heal, no matter how much I tried, no matter how much I told myself to move on. Here it was again just with a different voice. The blood coursing through my veins burned with the fire of a thousand stars.

“I know that!” I screeched, upset at myself for losing control over my emotions. I should be beyond this. They’ve been gone for some time now. “You’re a waste of my time. I should have never came.”

Without turning to face me, the jerk gave me another command. “Then do something about it.”

My face tightened. “What?”

“This will be the last time I repeat myself. Do. Something. About. It. You’ve been training with Auberon. Training to take your revenge. Well, here I am.”

He opened his arms wide, never once showing me his face as he goaded me. “I am the source of all your pain, am I not? If it wasn’t for my replicas, the games wouldn’t have collapsed, would they? You would have been with your family, and perhaps you could have saved them then? No? What about your precious Beatrice? At the very least, strike me down in her honor.”

I gritted my teeth so hard my jaw ached. “I told you,” I seethed. “I’m done being controlled by men like you.”

I pivoted to walk away when he fired back with the lowest of blows. He knew *exactly* what he was doing to me.

“I enjoyed tearing her apart, you know? Watching her blood spill was the highlight of my day. Holding her head high like a trophy, mmmhmmm. It made my cock hard,” he purred.

I exploded. Everything within me snapped as the rage which had been building ignited into an inferno.

“Argh!” I roared.

I had two daggers attached to my belt. In this stupid location of his, all I needed were these short range weapons at my disposal. At his words, I grabbed both and flung them with such speed and deadly purpose, his last words would be of Beatrice.

Except they weren't.

With his arms wide and his back to me, my daggers flew true and struck him in the back and in the neck. And bounced off of him like a pebble skipped on the water.

How was this possible? My eyes widened when he spun on his heels and marched toward me. I shook my head and took a step back, placing both palms up in front of my chest in a feeble attempt at protection. I was momentarily stunned in disbelief. But he was too quick. He balled the fingers on his right hand and blasted into my face.

The impact made my world spin. I'd never known such pain. Auberón's blows were like cotton brushing against my skin compared to this. Stars of yellow and red filled my vision as my head ricocheted back and I fell to the ground in a heap.

My mind swam through the pain as my skin throbbed like a million more hits to the face, refusing to give me an inch of reprieve despite the fact that the hit was done. His voice seemed to come from nowhere and all around me at once—both pulling me from my current hellscape and taunting me all at once.

“Skin manipulation. An abundant trait of your Ground Keeper people, I believe.”

I couldn't see. My eyes were full of tears, blurred not only from my disadvantaged eyesight given by birth but the body fluid that worked against me. My glasses had fallen from my face from the impact of his strike somewhere, but I wasn't about to search and show any more weakness. It would be just my luck he would stomp and break my arm in my search. The

memories of the arena floated in and out like a pulsating, waking dream—a warning of things to come.

I needed this man as much as I hated to admit it. He was so much stronger than me, so much stronger than Auberon.

My mind moved in a million different directions as part of it focused on the pain, the speed, the accuracy, and skill he held, while another part listened keenly to what he had said a moment ago. In the arena, he replicated, which was a power unique to those from the Day Walker kingdom. But here, he should be dead. I threw my daggers and both struck him with lethal precision, and both bounced off his body as if they were a child's toy. How could he have a Day Walker power *and* the Ground Keeper power of Skin Manipulation?

“You think too small,” he said, as if answering my own thoughts.

Strong hands wrapped around my shoulders and lifted me from the ground back to my feet in a smooth, compelling motion. A hardened thumb wiped at the tears flowing down my face and massaged my cheeks as they moved. The contradiction of his touches left me discombobulated. He placed my glasses back onto my face delicately and guided me to a nearby log, where he eased me down to sit.

“We,” he started, “all of us...we all are children of the radiation. You know this, right?”

Chapter
Thirteen

I whimpered and nodded. Of course, I did. We all did. Being a child born into royalty meant the drilling of studies and history as I grew to adulthood. He knew this, despite his question. Hunter seemed like a man who knew many things but never revealed anything at all.

I forced myself to understand what he was truly trying to say through the riddles of his words. The agony in my face prevented me from speaking, the throbbing making it difficult to concentrate.

“The First Ones came to this planet and settled. They assumed it to be one with a docile environment, ripe for habitation. It wasn’t until years later when the first of them gave birth to a child who exhibited powers that they understood the truth. This place hollows you out from the inside, and impregnates you with its own bastard. They knew nothing of the radiation in this place, until it had consumed them all.”

My breath stuttered. There he went again, speaking as if instructing under the guise of logic and scientific facts while he stared at me more intensely. His dark eyes bored into mine as if trying to pluck my very soul into his grasp.

I couldn’t let him put me under his spell. Despite their differences, there were too many similarities that made me uncomfortable. Auberon’s subjugation was enough. I did the only thing I could in the name of self

preservation.

I projected my anger onto him.

“You killed Beatrice,” I gritted out. The pain had begun to subside and my wits returned.

“Ha!” He chuckled and my blood began to boil. It seemed to be a constant state of being these days. “I did. And it was quite enjoyable too.”

He was absolutely heartless.

“You’re a monster.”

“Aren’t you?” He shot back, a wide grin on his face. It infuriated me how attractive he was. The face of everyone’s worst nightmare in that arena. “I thought you were the ‘monster in the dark?’ Or was that just another lie you’ve told yourself,” he crooned.

I jerked my face back away from his, staring at him incredulously. My mouth fell open. How did he know? Exactly how long has he been following me in the shadows?

“Who do you think planted the idea in your head to begin with? Push...a wonderful, if seldom used power of the Giant Empire. I want you to stop thinking so small like a little bird. We are all a part of this place, all connected by the radiation and the power it grants. ”

Flashes of my father’s endearment hit me in the chest like a million arrows. He couldn’t *possibly* have implanted that in my mind. It was just a painful coincidence. And yet, despite the torment it caused, it lured me even more if only for the yearning of a time that will never be mine ever again.

Keeping up my false bravado, I forced myself to control my voice in answering him. “We may all be connected by the radiation, but not by the powers it grants. Some of us have to do more than others. Not everyone is born with powers. You should know that.”

“I do.”

“I don’t have powers.”

“Don’t you?” The tone of his voice told me he already knew the answer

and that he was just waiting for me to catch up.

Hunter had a dark charm, and in these low moments I found myself trapped like an insect caught in a spider's web. The low throb of my cheek served to remind me exactly what he was capable of. "I'll never forgive you for the arena...for Beatrice, for as long as I live."

The way my voice came out, I wasn't sure who I was trying to convince. I still needed this fucker, whether I liked it or not.

"Continue with this tone and your life won't last much longer."

I pressed my lips tightly together. I needed to escape. I needed to find a way to make him pay for everything he'd done. But in order to do that, I needed my strength.

"What you said earlier about me being a monster is true," he continued, finally taking his gaze off me. "Mothers quake when they tell their babies about the Dreaded Hunter who snatches mischievous boys and girls in the middle of the night, while secretly pining for me to be between their legs. Men act with boldness at the mere mention of the Dreaded Hunter while cowering at the thought of facing me. I have been accused of being many things in my time, but what I am *not* is a liar. When I tell you I enjoyed killing your precious Beatrice, I meant it. And when I tell you Auberon is a child and you've already outgrown him, I meant that too."

Was he...was he saying *he was* the person from the story? *He was* the Dreaded Hunter? It couldn't be. That was the crazy Sepawn Emperor Supreme from the legends, and he was here standing before me, a man of flesh and blood. There was no way he was the Dreaded Hunter. He was suffering from delusions of grandeur. Still, it was interesting to see how his mind worked. I needed more.

"What do you want from me?"

He turned back and stared at me for a moment as if contemplating the formula for gravity before he answered. "You do not cower from me. You do not run away to hide, while yearning for me to make you cum. You are true

to who you say you are. You're a princess, and you're a Sepawn."

My face flamed at his mention of what I yearned. Was that what it was? I thought it was hate but it was nothing like when Auberon tried his advances. I thought it was my need to exact vengeance on the monster beside me... yet I craved his closeness and his instruction more than I should.

I was getting sidetracked. He threw me off my train of thought. It was probably another ploy from this bastard but I wasn't going to let him win. "Yes, and there are plenty of Sepawns. The world is full of them. What do you want from *me*?"

He continued as if he knew nothing of my thoughts. Yet why does it feel like he was lulling me into a false sense of security? "You're a Sepawn born of powered parents."

Was he trying to remind me how absolutely worthless I was? I clenched my jaw and turned away. I wasn't afraid to face the truth. "Yes. My parents didn't pass powers to me. I already said that, mister 'I don't like repeating myself'. The radiation of the world doesn't affect me. I have nothing."

"You're wrong. You have everything."

My gaze snapped to his as he stared at me intently. What was he saying?

He stood up and placed his hand on my forehead. I frowned in momentary confusion. I saw it glow only for a moment before pain like I'd never imagined or experienced flared through my body like a parasite bent on eating my flesh from the inside out. Every muscle tensed as I strained to remain still and failed. I jumped to my feet to try to withstand the suffering, but wobbled as I stood, falling to my knees. My body convulsed. My arms instinctively wrapped themselves around me as I curled into myself. My entire being screamed at me to get him to stop whatever he was doing, stop and find relief from this hellish feeling. But nothing came out as I opened my mouth.

Nothing but pleas and sobs.

With the passing of each moment the pain only seemed to get worse and

worse. It felt like my stomach was going to hurl its contents but caught at my throat each and every time. I feared it would never stop.

As I was about to collapse from the agony, he removed his hand from me and the pain immediately fled to the recesses of my mind. My body was weary from the experience, unable to hold itself up any longer. Before I could fall to my side, strong arms caught me and gently lowered me to the grass. I breathed heavily, trying to bring myself back to the reality of no longer being put through the fires of hell. My limbs tingled as if all my blood had been siphoned out and only now slowly be put back into place.

I shut my eyes, trying to catch my breath, trying to slow down my racing heart. My arms were wrapped around me protectively, and my body shuddered from the sudden cold. *Why was it so cold?*

I involuntarily let out a sigh of relief through my tears when another set of warm arms wrapped around me from behind. My skin broke out into goosebumps as I turned and rubbed my face against his warm chest, trying to absorb as much of it as I could.

The hands caressed my back soothingly, releasing the tension in my muscles as my blood began to warm myself from within.

“Well done, little one. You took that very well.”

Was it wrong of me to relish in his little praise? I sniffed and kept my face hidden. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what his expectations were of me.

And then my body filled with a surge of strength I'd never known in my entire life. The sound of my blood rushing in my ears was like a great waterfall and I was at the base of it.

“How...how did you do that?” I panted as I lifted my face up to his. “What did you do to me?”

His hands slowly trailed down my lower back. Acutely aware of our current position, I took a sharp inhale, embarrassed at my reaction to his touches.

His pupils dilated, threatening to drown me in darkness. “I unlocked your true potential. I granted you a power.”

At his proclamation, all other thoughts immediately left me. “What? How? That’s impossible!”

He shook his head. “You’re still thinking too small. I thought you, of all people, would understand.”

He relinquished our embrace and got to his feet, lowering his hand for me to take. I did, with questions swimming around my head. “Why?”

Gone was the strange moment between us, back in its place was the unflappable man I initially met in the woods, the monster.

“In the arena. You thought of the Sepawn Emperor Supreme who wanted to extend his reign so he could have access to learn more of the world’s secrets.”

“Yes,” I admitted, still wondering if he had the ability to read minds as well.

“I just gave you a secret.”

Chapter
Fourteen

I might have been wrong. Was Hunter even a man at all? My mind warred with itself over all the possibilities of what this could mean.

He presented himself like no other man I'd seen, yet he was thrown into the arena like all the others. Nothing made any sense. How did he get there?

With a smirk, he turned his back to me and walked away without another word. That was it? He gave me a power and expected me to just know how to use it? I didn't have any knowledge of where to start.

"Don't you turn your back on me, Hunter. Turn around and train me like you promised!"

I was annoyed, and now that I was no longer in pain, my anger rushed in.

He stopped and chuckled, at least I thought he was by the shaking of his broad shoulders. *He was making fun of me.*

"You asshole!" Growling in frustration, I spit out the first thought that came to my mind. "If you just gave me a power, then I'm going to fucking use it to kill you!"

I launched myself from my position and fired a punch to the side of his fucking face, hitting nothing but air. Before I could realize what he'd done, Hunter had sidestepped and split into four equal beings by the time I landed on my feet, boxing me in.

"She's a feisty one," one of them taunted.

“But not very bright,” another said.

“Why would you attack when you have no idea how to use the power you were just given?” Another asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Still, the little bird has a lot of heart.”

“And naughty at that.”

“She has a lot of bad habits too,” the final one observed.

“Let’s break her of them,” they all chorused. “I know *exactly* how to handle a naughty girl.”

I screamed at the one in front of me and charged him. I only took a few steps before the one on my left, and the one on my right grabbed me by the arms, halting my moment, while the one behind me kicked me hard in the back of my legs. His strikes were brutal and numbing. I collapsed under my own body weight. The two Hunters on my sides pinned my arms against me and held me up, as the one in front covered the remaining distance between us.

What was the point of these new abilities if I couldn’t even access them? No matter how hard I mentally told myself to use them, nothing happened.

He opened his hand and slapped me across the face. The sound of his palm striking my cheek echoed throughout the surrounding area. This was becoming too familiar, pissing me off over how stupid I could be to put myself in this situation once more. But did I really put myself in the situation with Auberon? No. No, I didn’t. I was forced into it. I chose to be here, training with the nightmare from the arena.

Hunter rotated his head around his shoulders, and leaned in.

“Now,” he said in a low tone. “Would you like to try that again?”

Flashes of the massacre taunted me, warning me of what was to come if I didn’t get this right.

The three other Hunter replicas dissolved as soon as he asked the question. I fell to my knees in relief, as sharp pains shot up my thighs, and then to my hands. I moaned from the sudden impact, but looked up, afraid to

take my eyes off the predator. He stood over me and looked down with a sly grin, as my mouth was dangerously close to his cock.

“Asshole,” I belted out and pushed his legs away from me, scrambling to my feet.

“You have quite the mouth on you, Little Bird. It’s going to get you in trouble,” he said as he sucked in through his teeth.

I shrieked and rushed him again, determined to learn from my mistake. It seemed as if the middle one was the original whenever he replicated. This time, as he created copies, I wouldn’t stop from hesitation. I’d strike quickly, and take down the middle one first. If I got to the original, surely the copies could do no harm. I brought my fist from my side and rocketed it forward, determined to hit him before he could corral me.

And then I went blind.

My fist went through the air for the second time. I swung myself to the ground, landing on my ass in a whirl. I reached for my face, burying my eyes in the palms of my hand, and wondering why I’d been surrounded by a blanket of darkness of which no light penetrated.

Without warning, a strong blow hit my right cheek and flung me to the ground, skidding my body across the grass. I landed on my left side and a sharp object pierced my arm. I cried out from the agony and the disorientation.

What was happening? How did I go blind?

“Aw, my Little Bird,” Hunter’s voice taunted somewhere nearby. “What’s wrong? Can you not feel me?”

I sharply inhaled when a strong hand grabbed a fistful of my hair and savagely pulled back, lifting my chin as another powerful smack crossed my lips and sent the sound bouncing through the trees.

I whimpered, hating myself for it. I needed to be stronger than this. Going through the first training session with Auberon was enough!

“Oh, you *can* feel me. You’re just so little,” he taunted again.

He threw my head forward and I bulleted into the ground with a loud thud as my head bounced off the grass. I groaned in misery, screaming at myself internally to get back up and fight!

“You’re bleeding, Little Bird,” he crooned. “Let’s see if we can use that.”

What the hell was he talking about? *Just get up, Ulani. Get up and fight! Maybe I’ll find a way to punch him in the balls.* It was a cheater's way, but I had enough of this torture!

All of a sudden, the lights turned on and my vision restored. My brain flooded with the images of the trees, grass, rocks, and even the small crawling insects nearing my mouth to investigate. Tears streamed down my face as I eased myself to a seated position trying to wrap my head around what was happening. But these tears were hot and steamed as they made their way down my cheeks. I was enraged at how easily he handled me. On Auberon’s best day, he never dominated me this way. During all of our tussles, there were moments when I knew I could take him if I only had the opportunity. Even at the beginning.

With Hunter? All I could do was sit and bleed.

Bleed. He said I was bleeding. Where?

I touched my face once more as he stepped away and turned his back. The asshole knew he was my better and clearly outclassed me. I was no threat to him, so he gave me the time to examine myself. I felt humiliated but I added it to my rage. I pulled my fingers away from my lips, the warmth following over my tips. As expected, the hits I absorbed had opened them and a rivulet of blood presented itself.

“Have you discovered the secret yet, Little Bird? I don’t have all day.”

His tone attempted to show boredom, but I detected a hopefulness. What secret? What power? Damn him, all I did was hurt and bleed. Where’s the strength in that? What was I missing?

I eased my right hand over to my left arm, and gingerly felt for the location of the stabbing pains which shot through my limb. I squirmed as I

delicately reached inside the wound and dug out the rock which had penetrated through my skin and embedded itself, rendering my arm useless.

“I don’t have all day!” Hunter snarled and spun on his heels, and marched toward me with dark intent.

My heart raced, and my mind ran through a million scenarios of what he might have in store for me. I panicked and survival instincts kicked in.

With no other choice, I threw the bloodied rock at his head. He caught it in one hand, and volleyed it back with an inhuman quickness. The rock careened into my chest and almost doubled me in half, taking all the air inside me with it. I gasped and wheezed as my lungs begged to be filled.

This couldn’t be how I ended. I still needed to exact vengeance. Hunter was going to go on that list right beside Auberon.

“Tsk,” I heard him as he sucked through his teeth. “What’s wrong, Little Bird?”

That nickname grated on my skin like sandpaper, pulling away at the flesh and leaving my vulnerabilities raw and out in this open wooded area he chose to isolate us in.

I collapsed to the ground, a beaten and bruised mess, gritting my teeth through the torment. I was in denial. I wanted to think I could best him but the truth was blatantly in my face. “You’re too strong. It’s too much.”

Hunter walked over to where I lay defeated and knelt beside me. His proximity left me in confusion. My body wasn’t sure if he was going to hold me and praise me or grab me and hit me once more.

“Of course, I am. I’m too strong for a little bird. But not for a raven,” he purred right before he stuck his finger into the hole on my left arm and dug it in deeper than the wound itself.

I shrieked in pain as my eyes began to blur. What was he doing to me? What was the point of all this madness? Did my tears and cries of agony excite him? Was that what it was?

“Why, a raven would figure out this simple puzzle,” he stated with

nonchalance.

“What puzzle, you bastard!” I shrieked as I grimaced from his continued torture.

Why did I suddenly feel like I let him down. Hunter didn’t need to train me, but he chose to. He gave me power but I just couldn’t, no matter how hard I tried, access it. What was I doing wrong?

Someone please, help me! Help me understand!

“Hmph,” he grunted and stood. “I’ve given you the secret. I’ve given you the power, and I’ve given you the context. What I will *not* give you, is the answer. To do so would encourage your small thinking, and I will *not* do that. Not when I know you are capable of so much more. All you have to do is look within yourself.”

I felt berated. I felt knocked down by his words more than his or Auberon’s fists ever could. Was that who I really was? No longer Princess Ulani—now just the princess of disappointment and uselessness.

The princess of nothing.

He slowly pulled his finger out of my wound, taking my breath with it. It throbbed relentlessly as if it were bathed in fire.

Hunter turned his back again and walked a few steps away. “But I suggest you hurry. I don’t have all day, so either you figure this out, or die. Either you stay a soft little bird, or soar like a raven.”

His tone indicated this would be my last opportunity. It was menacing and terrifying, yet somehow yearning. He wanted me to figure it out, but refused to tell me how. It would be so much easier if he would just tell me!

Then he wouldn’t really be training you, Ulani. You are thinking too small.

The inner rational voice was against me too. I knew it made logical sense even though I hated every minute of it.

My mind flashed back through all we’d done today since he laid his hands on me. Every attempt I made to hit him, he countered. I never even

came close to touching him, not with his blinding speed. Suddenly, something clicked. Was that it? Frontal assaults didn't work against him, so I needed something different.

Okay, what else? If I had to fight from a distance, what could I use? My daggers didn't work. The rock didn't work, but what...what did he do? Hunter was a man of calculation, that was easy to see. What was he trying to show me? He penetrated his finger inside the bloodied hole on my arm.

Matter-of-fact, *everything* he did was designed to make me bleed. What had he said earlier? His words echoed in my ears as I flashed back.

Still, the little bird has a lot of heart. You're wrong. You have everything.

What was it he said the day prior?

To think of one's own life force as their ultimate weapon of decimation is a fascinating evolution of the body.

It almost seemed too easy to be true. Was I really that stupid this whole time? He had already given me the answer and I was too blind to see it.

"No way," I gasped.

"Has the little bird figured out the secret?" His tone of voice had a different inflection this time.

I stared at him earnestly then at the bloodied rock on the ground beside me. I felt the ache from the cut on my lips, and the agony of the hole in my arm. But I also felt so much more. Each throb felt like the growing drums of war within me.

"Or is the little bird still thinking too small?" He continued.

I ran my hand over my chest to my emptied lungs, and inhaled sharply. This was it. This had to be. There was no other way, no other answer.

"Time's up, Little Bird. I'd hoped for more from you, but I guess I was wrong. I'm sorry, I just don't have all day."

Hunter spun on his heels in his disappointment and time slowed. I forced myself to control my emotions. It wasn't about how he made me feel anymore but everything about how I felt on the inside. I could see the

individual blood cells on the rock. I felt the current from the small stream of blood as it flowed from my lips. My heart. My life force. I heard the roar of the blood in my arm screaming at me to—

Kick. His. Ass.

The air charged between us. He felt my change as he turned back to face me. I inhaled a sharp breath as he stepped toward me. With his second step, I commanded the blood on the rock to do my bidding. I was a princess. I was the heir to the throne.

I was a ruler!

I demanded the blood heed my call and aimed at his head. The blood responded and lifted the rock into the air as if it were a boat sailing on the currents.

Something within me broke free, and suddenly, everything made sense.

The rock catapulted through the air at such a high velocity, it was a cannonball. From the speed at which it flew, Hunter didn't have time to catch it. All he could do was dodge. He leaned away, narrowly missing the collision, and eyeing the projectile as it whizzed by his head. But the rock wasn't my true intention, it was merely a distraction.

I grinned. When he straightened up and turned his attention back to me, he stared right at two razor-sharp daggers, both points right in front of his eyes and suspended in mid-air. Both daggers made entirely of blood. The same blood from the hole in my arm he so wickedly penetrated.

A ready supply of weaponry.

My own blood.

My ultimate weapon of decimation.

“Good girl,” Hunter smirked. “Now, my *Blood Raven*...we begin.”

Chapter
Fifteen

Begin?

What the hell have we been doing this entire time? If this was only a taste of things to come, I wasn't sure I would survive it. But I couldn't let him know that. The sun had already begun to set and I wondered if Auberon was looking for me.

Not that it mattered. I didn't need him anymore.

"I have given you the gift of Blood Manipulation," he explained proudly.

I couldn't join him in his bask of self praise. Not now. Not when out of the blue, the darkness had begun to encroach upon the outskirts of my mind as he spoke.

"Young lady, are you listening?"

I heard him, I heard everything he said but he was floating away. I was floating away. My vision was blurring again and I couldn't understand why. All I could feel was the warmth of the sun's rays as it crept closer to the horizon.

Was my body failing? This wasn't happening. Not when I had only just tapped into it. The blood daggers abruptly dropped and painted the ground in splotches of blood, and the world began to spin.

"Don't you dare," he growled.

The asshole didn't understand. I wasn't doing this on purpose! Couldn't

he see? I was screaming for him to open his bloody eyes but nothing came out.

He said something else. It could have been my name. I heard him, I did, but his voice seemed too distant. I was oh, so, so tired. As if I floated outside my body, I felt myself wobble. *Maybe the world wasn't spinning, maybe it was me?*

“You’ve lost a lot of blood. You need to heal,” he commanded.

Somewhere out there, a voice spoke to me about healing... but I didn’t know how. I just wanted to sleep. All I needed was to rest and everything would be well. The body rejuvenated in rest, didn’t it? Memories of Auberon’s drink made me want to gag. A horrible combination to how I was currently feeling.

“If you sleep, you die. Heal yourself, and return to me!”

The voice sounded agitated. Surely, there was someone else here besides Hunter, the asshole. He wouldn’t care if I died at all.

But I did.

“How?” I heard myself say to the voice.

“Your injuries are relatively minor, but you drew a lot of blood from your body. It’s weakened you, and you haven’t stemmed it. You continue to let it flow unimpeded, and the hole in your arm is an open gateway.”

He really did talk too much. Why were older men always inclined to be long winded? The wind rushed by my ears as I fell to my knees, the grass barely cushioning the impact.

“Command it to clot and close the wound on your arm. Accelerate it so it delivers the nutrients and oxygen through your body. Speed up the healing. If you don’t, you’ll die from your own blood loss.” His voice was so guttural, bordering feral, as if he was upset that I was losing consciousness. Didn’t he understand that I couldn’t control it? It was controlling me.

All I wanted to do was sleep...

“Open your eyes, girl. Do as I say!”

Girl? Who was he calling a girl? I just bested him at his own stupid game! Why were my eyelids so heavy?

“Your voice grates my fucking nerves,” I croaked out right before my body fell forward against a hard chest. I groaned as I pressed my forehead into him, trying to will myself to stay awake. But everything around me refused to stay still. The only solid thing that grounded me was his body against mine.

“If you do not heal yourself, I will kill you,” he stated blatantly.

But he just said I'd die from blood loss if I didn't heal. Which one was it? Would he kill me or let me die? If he did kill me, it'd be by lecturing me to death.

I didn't know where the spurt of energy came from, but I croaked out a laugh at my own internal joke. A hand slapped my face and I growled. *What was wrong with this man? Did I not complete his stupid task?* I fluttered my eyes open, trying my best to shove him away but it was a weak attempt. All it did was make me slide further into him.

I felt his face lean in until his deep voice was right beside my ear. “I should have just killed you when I had the chance. Auberon should have kept you.”

“No!” I managed to screech. I wasn't sure if I was saying no to death or to Auberon. I refused to belong to that man! He should have never taken me!

“Seemed he was better at rebuilding you,” Hunter taunted.

Lies, they were all lies! Auberon did nothing but crumble me. It was me who had to build myself up, me who had to break free!

“Look at how easily you let yourself fall after one simple training, Little Bird. Is this the woman who wants revenge on the people who killed her family, or is she just a scared little girl who bends her knee at a challenge?”

“Shut up! Shut up!” I refused to listen to him belittle me, refused to let him slither his verbal poison into my mind. My fists weakly battered at his chest, but even I knew it was a pathetic attempt. I forced myself to reach

inside, reach for something I couldn't see or touch.

“Maybe you like being on your knees, isn't that right, Little Bird?”

Heal, damn you! I was physically panting. Flashes of Auberon forcing his advances on me ignited a new flame within. I also needed to punch this fucker in the face for everything he had done to me as well. For everything he was painting me out to be. I was no longer Princess Ulani! No longer the person who stood by helplessly watching Beatrice fall at the hands of a monster.

The monster that led me on this path of self destruction and rediscovery.

Mental images of Auberon crashing a porcelain cup to my face spurred me on as my body contorted painfully. My skin itched like a diseased rash. It felt like a million sea creatures crawling along my skin, making me want to claw my flesh off just to relieve myself of repulsive the sensation.

Was it always going to feel this way every time I healed?

I shuddered and whined as the pain ebbed and flowed in waves, teasing me, taunting me with an end that never seemed to come. I didn't know when my arms wrapped around his shoulders, but I could smell his masculine musk against my nose as I buried my face into the crook of his neck searching for some type of deliverance.

His warm hand rubbed my back as he crooned in my ear. “That's it, little raven. Just like that.”

Tears streamed down my face, wetting the skin beneath me, but I didn't care. I crawled further into his lap, straddling him as my body slowly but surely began to stitch the wounds and heal me enough to let me release a relieved exhale against the man who caused my initial misery—the one who caused this entire chain reaction of events that led me to this point.

“You did good, Little Bird,” he cooed as he cradled my face and forced me to look at him. I hated that his words sunk beneath my skin even more so than his brutal training. He stared at me, he always did, but this time—this time my heart raced for a different reason. “You'll learn to control your body

over time.”

My breath stuttered as his thumb caressed my once busted lip, now healed and sensitive to the touch. How did he easily go from such cruel touches... *to this?*

“And what if I don’t have time?” I genuinely asked, albeit breathlessly. What was he doing to me? What kind of sorcery was this?

Despite everything Auberon had put me through, I didn’t expect what happened next. Hunter leaned in, stopping right before our lips could touch and licked my healing wound seductively. My breath stuttered and my eyes fluttered in response.

I held back a moan, not wanting him to see the effect he had on me, not wanting him to see how easily I folded under his ministrations.

But deep inside, I knew he saw everything as clearly as I did. The man was no fool. Was this his true power? One of seduction? If so, I was in worse trouble than I realized.

He came closer, grazing our cheeks together intimately, scraping my skin deliciously with his scruff. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t do anything but hold onto him tighter in case this new wave of dizziness made me fall.

His next words sent mouthwatering shivers down my spine.

“My little Blood Raven will paint this nation red before emerging from the ashes with her kingdom bent at the knee.”

“Long live the queen.”

Chapter
Sixteen

“**W**hat happened in the arena, Hunter?” I asked.

Hunter glanced at me out the side of his eye as we sat on the park bench, observing the passerby’s. “I failed,” he answered nonchalantly, as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “As did you.”

“What are you talking about?” I countered. “I wasn’t a combatant in the arena.”

“The world is your arena, Raven,” he said, never once turning his head in my direction, or answering my question.

“Bullshit,” I responded as I licked the ice cream from my cone.

“You’re thinking small again,” he stated. “There.”

He directed my gaze with a jut of his chin. We’d traveled back to the Enthinn and chosen a nondescript bench. The street vendor had ice cream for sale, and the cones would be perfect to help obscure my face. As far as the rest of the world knew, Princess Ulani Rensburg had died in the arena at the hands of the madman combatant. And the madman had been killed at the hands of the remaining combatants. No one would be looking for either of us, however, we had to be sure. I had to change up my entire look.

My long, thick, black hair had left, cut short, and replaced and dyed into crimson curls. The spectacles I’d been so dependent on for clarity no longer adorned my face. The first thing I had to learn under Hunter was how to

regulate my Blood Manipulation. It was a powerful ability with powerful drawbacks. I could heal myself if the injuries weren't too severe, but to use it, I had to injure myself. If I hurt myself too much to access the blood needed to complete the task at hand, I could actually kill myself by bleeding out.

I had to have balance and control and it started with my eyes. By regulating the speed at which the blood flowed to them, I could correct my vision and see with perfect clarity. It was a meticulous process and required concentration, but after a while, I got the hang of it.

With new hair, a new look, and a new power, my father's little hummingbird was no more. Hunter named me the Blood Raven, and I accepted it proudly. Beatrice had been my raven, and I was his. And it was time for the Raven's first kill.

So as not to take any chances, I licked the ice cream in such a way as to obscure my face. Looking over the bridge of my nose, I spied the area Hunter pointed out. Varis Lathalas sauntered down the pavement with his security detail surrounding him as if to spit in my face for my failed assassination attempt.

"I see him," I acknowledged over my shoulder. I sat on one side of the bench, and Hunter sat on the other side. To the untrained eye, we appeared as if we were simply two people who happened to be enjoying an ice cream cone, sold by the local vendor on a hot summer's day. We even purchased our cones at separate times, arriving independently at the stand.

When Hunter presented me with the plan, I resisted. The civil unrest in the city would be a perfect cover, he'd said, but we needed to choose the perfect day when there'd be protesters. I didn't want to wait for the *perfect day*. I wanted to act immediately and swiftly. I wanted to remove Varis from this world as my family had been. After another brutal training session that served as punishment, I conceded to his plan.

He was very good at convincing. Though it always led to the spilling of blood, something else was brewing between us—a different kind of tension.

Shaking my head, I refocused on today's mission. I needed to succeed where I'd failed before.

"I've been around a long time, Raven," he'd said to me, "and in all that time, one thing I've learned to be true, is patience. If you're patient, opportunity will present itself. I failed in the arena. You failed on your first attempt. So, we will be patient and the opportunities will present themselves again. *You* must be patient. Your vengeance will come only when you've learned to respect time."

"Jeebus, you sound like an old guy. How old are you anyway?" I always suspected something was off about his age despite his physical appearance. He carried an air of maturity and wisdom about him.

"How old do I look?"

"You look thirty, but you talk like you're thirty-thousand," I teased.

His eyes darkened and he leaned in, invading my space. "If I ever decide to fuck you, you can guess my age then."

I wasn't sure if Hunter was issuing me a challenge of sorts for *me* to convince *him* to get into bed with me, or not. Was he actually trying to manipulate me into *wanting* to get him to fuck me? What kind of mind fuck was he doing to me? I had a hard time figuring him out, but one thing I did know was how tight my inner muscles clenched when he said it.

"How many?" He asked.

"Three guards," I answered and licked, "surrounding him."

"Is that all?"

"It's all I counted. It's hard to see through the crowd of protesters gathering."

"You're thinking too small again, Raven," he sighed in disappointment. "Look at the rooftops."

I leaned back as if to enjoy the sun's rays, but used the motion to glance at the top of the buildings. A man with a machine gun walked along the roof of the structure parallel to the path Varis traveled.

“Dammit!” I cursed under my breath.

Hunter leaned back, facing away from me as if to gaze at the scenery. “You have to see the world, Raven. Never trust your eyes.”

“How the hell am I supposed to not trust my eyes? My eyes are all I have.” I gazed at the birds that landed in front of us. They were common ones found in the city when people left crumbs behind, especially children.

“No. You have more. You *always* have more.” Hunter leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, gazing at the birds with me. “The very skin on your body allows you to feel the pull of gravity and the kiss of the wind.”

My mind flashed to the way his thumb would graze my lip.

“Two invisible forces you cannot see. Your ears allow you to hear sounds which cannot be *seen*. Your breasts allow you to feel the deep bass of my voice. None of which can be *seen*.”

At that very moment, my breasts were rubbing against my top with every deep breath I took. They felt tender with each word he enunciated as if they were led by a puppet master.

Hunter leaned back with his arm relaxed, across the back of the bench. “Never trust your eyes, always ask what more is there? The person who only relies on what they see, will always be blind.”

I leaned back as well and crossed my legs. “Good grief, man. You and these old man sayings. I can’t *see* them either, but damn they work my nerves.”

I was trying to hide the fact that I was pulsating at the apex of my legs. I didn’t need him to give me another lecture about distractions and the importance of paying attention to details. I didn’t understand why he elicited such a reaction from me. Auberon never did, not like this—with just words and an inflection in his voice.

“Funny. Very funny. Behave Raven, or I might show you just how funny I think it is.”

I inwardly groaned, slowly closed my eyes, exhaled and reopened them.

“Tsk,” I sucked through my teeth, but didn’t say anything else.

Damn. Am I actually behaving because he said so? I chastised myself for submitting so easily.

“Now,” he sighed and licked from his cone. “What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? That crowd is gathering so they can organize and protest against the new regime, so I could use them for cover. But, with that sentry on the roof, I’d be spotted before I made it halfway to Varis. Unless you want to make some replicas and help me out by getting him for me?”

“No. This is not my fight.”

I scowled. *How convenient, old man. How very convenient of you to abandon me.*

“I have my own battles to wage and you have to learn how to handle yours. You have everything you need to solve this problem already.”

I discreetly peeked at him over my shoulder. “Yeah. You.”

“No.”

“Ugh!” I groaned. Why was he being so difficult? He could easily handle the sentry on the roof for me. I’d handle the others.

“Stop thinking so small.”

“Stay out of my head!” I seethed.

“You know there’s no mind reading ability, Raven. We’ve already gone over this.”

I still thought he was a liar.

“Yeah, well, I never know with you. You can give yourself powers and give other people powers, how do I know you’re not holding back?”

He smirked and I couldn’t help pressing my legs together further. It wasn’t fair, really. I hated how desirable he was even while I contemplated murder.

“Because I said so, and you know I’m not a liar,” he answered. His voice a deep, even tone.

My eyes snapped to his and I had to correct myself before someone

caught me. How did he do that?

“I can gift Sepawns with powers, as I did you, because they have none. I can also gift myself any power in the world, and I’ve already told you—there’s no mind reading power.”

“Says the man who claims to have pushed a thought into mine.”

“Push is different and you know it. I’ve cycled through all the powers to learn their strengths and weaknesses. The closest this world has is Precognition, Mind Exchange, and Push. But, *no* mind reading.”

His brilliant mind only added to this cursed attraction I developed.

“Old man lecture again,” I sighed.

“And you’re stalling.”

“No. I’m being *patient*. Isn’t that what you said?”

“You’re stalling. I know the difference, Raven.”

Dammit, he was right. I *was* stalling. I had to take out that sentry, and to do it, I had to see without seeing.

Now I was truly starting to sound like a lunatic. I bet if he was reading my mind, he would love every minute of it.

“You do know Ravens can fly, right?”

“Stay out of my head,” I groaned and swallowed the last of my ice cream cone. I inhaled deep, steadied myself, and bit down hard on the four fingers on my left hand. I balled them into a fist and rose from where I sat. I willed the blood to pool inside my fist as I stood up and cut across the grassy area on an intercept course with Varis.

Placing my left hand behind my back, I opened it and told the blood to harden into a razor-sharp throwing dagger. As it obeyed, I flexed my hand into a position to grip the wider ends.

You do know Ravens can fly, right?

Hunter’s words echoed in my mind. The old coot had helped me after all. Where I failed before, I would not do so again. I forced the blood within my body to accelerate, feeding me adrenaline, and boosting my skills.

The protesters continued to gather, and I maneuvered through the people as they walked across the grass, as if I was one of them. I did hate the new regime. I hated whoever the new leader was. Whoever had staked their claim to my father's throne. My family's throne. *My throne*. Whoever they were, I would deal with them shortly, and not through protesting. But I thanked the people for the cover.

By the time I'd weaved my way through and moved within striking distance, the sentry had noticed my approach, as expected. He paused to observe my movements, and as he did, I struck. Hunter hinted at the solution. I needed to let my blood fly like the raven. I let loose and threw my blood dagger as far, and as fast as I could. I purposed the blood to fly with deadly precision, and just as the rock in my first training session with Hunter did, the blood obeyed and landed true. It drove into, and through the neck of the Sentry, dropping him where he stood.

His collapse went unnoticed by the four on the ground, due to the cover the crowd provided. They're chants of unfairness and corruption masked the sound his body made as he fell, but I sped up my pace. I pooled three more blood daggers and let them fly, each dagger obeying my command and striking through the ear of one, the neck of another, and the eyes of the third security guard as they escorted Varis. The men dropped to the ground in heaps and the protesters paused their movements to observe the scene.

I sprinted the remaining distance between myself and Varis. Pooling more blood in my hand, I smeared it over my eyes and face and formed a blood mask. As Varis saw me approaching, his eyes widened and he turned to run. I flung a razor sharp dagger into the Achilles tendon of his right leg, causing him to stumble.

The protesters screamed and fled as they saw the blood masked assassin running at speeds faster than they'd known possible, and the blood gushing from the back of my target's leg. As Varis wheeled around to sit on his ass and grasp his leg, writhing in pain, I approached.

“What the hell?!” He exclaimed. “Who are you?”

“I’m Blood Raven,” I answered coolly before crouching down. “And here’s what I want.”

I opened my left hand, and forced the blood out and into the air. As it squirted, a short sword the length of my forearm rose from it. Anything bigger and I risked passing out from the blood loss. Varis followed the sword as it grew from a few droplets of blood to the perfect instrument of his demise.

“Wait—”

I sliced through his neck as easily as I would a loaf of bread.

“Sorry, Varis,” I taunted with a smile. “But I don’t have all day.”

Chapter
Seventeen

We made it back to the woods while the adrenaline of my successful mission still coursed through my veins.

“Did you see me? Did you see how quickly and easily I slipped in and out?” I was overly elated with my arms held up to the sky, twirling.

“There is nothing to celebrate,” Hunter lectured. “There are still a good handful left to execute. You took a first step, but that’s *exactly* what it was. A *first* step.”

Why did this old man have to rain on my little celebration? It was beyond what I could imagine, much better than my first failed attempt. I stopped in my tracks, turned, and scowled at him.

“What is your problem? I still remember the faces of your replicas as they slaughtered thousands.” Was I projecting? I didn’t know and I really didn’t care at the moment.

“My problem, is the burden of time.”

“You said to be patient!”

“I did, and I have been. You will learn to be too, but it doesn’t mean it doesn’t come without cost. Everything costs in this world, even long life.”

“What the hell could living for a long time cost me?”

“The burden of memory. Of replaying thoughts and moments in your mind endlessly,” he sighed with a hint of sadness as he spoke. “Questioning

every action which led you to the point you're existing in. That is the cost of experience. You learn, you grow, but you still feel the pain and weight of mistakes. It's the burden of time, and time points to the fact that your job isn't done. Not yet. First steps are never final."

I stepped up to him and pointed my finger right at his stupidly hard chest. There was no hint of sadness within me. "I don't regret anything I did today and you know it."

He looked down on me with disdain and my heart skipped a beat. Hunter swiftly grabbed my hand and crushed it within his grip. I grimaced and stared at him.

What the hell was his problem? We could easily go back and finish the job. He was the one who sanctioned the kill today. Wasn't I supposed to wait until he gave me permission to complete the rest?

He jerked my arm until I collided into his chest. "Did you really think you controlled anything, Little Bird?"

I was a bird again. No longer a raven. What just happened? I thought I was doing everything right for once.

Out of the blue, he shoved me hard until I fell back on the ground. I was about to curse him when the sound of a blade cutting through the air came right through the position we were just standing in, lodging itself at the base of a tree.

"The burden of time teaches you not to make the same mistakes as you've made in the past. Wouldn't you agree, Auberon?" Hunter grinned menacingly as he turned to face the man he named out loud emerging from the nearby treeline.

I gasped, having forgotten all about him since my time with Hunter.

The danger rolled off him in waves as he approached Hunter with another bladed weapon in hand.

"You took something from me," he snarled with accusation.

"Did I? It seemed the little bird flew to me from what I remember. Do not

blame me if the mistakes of your past have led you to the burden of your present.”

Slipping a few times on leaves, I scrambled back onto my feet and got into a defensive stance. I didn't know what Auberon had been doing since I left him, or what he had in mind now that he found me. In fact, he looked a little out of his mind right now.

“I'm not done with her. Ulani will serve me, and then the Ground Keeper kingdom will be able to set the past behind them and embrace the glorious future I have planned.” He disclosed as he and Hunter began to circle each other.

“What are you talking about?! You tried to break me!” I raged. “I'll never serve you, you serve me and my family. I am the princess and the rightful ruler!”

“Your family is dead, Ulani,” Auberon retorted.

His words attempted to inflame me, but I'd gotten so much better since I last trained with him. I wanted to show him my new abilities but Hunter's voice radiated in the back of my head, preaching about patience. I couldn't show him my hand, not yet. Not until I got to the bottom of what he was saying. I slinked further away from them as the air around us became thick in tension.

“And by whose hand did her family die?” Hunter asked, his lip curled.

I stopped in my tracks right beside a tree. What did he just say? It couldn't be true...

“I did what I had to do!” Auberon bellowed.

My heart raced at the realization of what I just heard. “What?”

“Oh, did you not tell her?” Hunter intoned. “All the time you trained her, getting her ready, you conveniently omitted the fact that the leader who ordered her parents' death...that the usurper to her throne was you?”

Fire exploded throughout my body.

Hunter tilted his head with a smirk. “Interesting piece of information to

leave out, don't you think?

"I did what I had to do! There was no way around it." Auberon bellowed again.

"What you had to do? You murderer!" I screamed.

They were all out of their damn minds!

"We'd advanced as your family could ever take us. Your father was too shortsighted. It was time for new leadership! You were never going to be the one to do it. It had to be me."

"If you killed my family, why the fuck did you train me?"

"The protesters," Hunter answered. "The people loved your family too much to accept a change. The only way they would be willing to bow under a new reign is if they suspected foul play from the old."

"You were going to set me up?" I asked incredulously. I shouldn't have been surprised.

"If the daughter of the king and queen murdered them in cold blood, the people wouldn't stand for her as their leader. They would demand change. He played you all," Hunter explained. "He trained you, so he could frame you for your parents' death and assume the throne without contest. Isn't that right, Auberon?"

Each new revelation slapped me the same way his porcelain cup did.

"You needed a strong hand to guide you in the right direction. You should be thanking me for the confidence you have now." Auberon lunged and swiped his sword up toward Hunter's face but he leaned back and dodge it before manifesting his own sword from ice.

"Bastard!" I screamed. "You killed my mother! My father! He loved you."

"I did tell you not to trust anyone of noble descent," Auberon snarled.

My mind fractured as the past crawled up behind me, threatening to consume me with the darkness once again. Mother. Father. Beatrice. The girl I once knew who carried my face. They were all taken from me. With

nefarious purpose.

But the asshole Auberon didn't know when to stop, didn't know when to shut up.

Hunter continued to circle Auberon at a leisurely pace while the asshole looked ready to devour his flesh.

“He loved only himself and his ideals of leading the people with fairness and kindness. After what he did in the arena,” Auberon pointed the tip of his sword at Hunter, “he showed me what kindness gets you—Dead. When you're kind, people see it as weakness. When you're kind, you're unprepared for the coldness of the world. No. Under my leadership, the Ground Keeper kingdom will *lead* the world, not react *to* the world.”

From one madman to another. Auberon would never be fit to be leader of anything. I had to make sure of it.

“Your belief is based under false pretenses, Auberon. Your assertion of what people view as weakness has led *you* down a road she cannot follow.”

“And what of you?” Auberon countered. “You killed her best friend.”

And yet, in this very moment, as two evils faced each other, I already found myself favoring one over the other. Then again, there was never a moment in time I ever favored Auberon, much to his false dismay.

“I kill a lot of people,” Hunter smirked. “I killed thousands in the arena and countless others outside of it. The difference between me and you? I kill face-to-face, not like a cowardly dog attacking from the shadows. Her friend Beatrice had every opportunity to flee. She chose to stay and face her fate. You gave her parents no such opportunity.”

“I do *not* kill like a dog. I'm here now, facing you, aren't I?”

I stood there, seeing the man in a much different light from what he conditioned me to see. How easily his pride was prodded with simple words.

Hunter chuckled. “Woof.”

Chapter
Eighteen

The ground trembled beneath our feet in response to Hunter's taunts, a reflection of Auberon's volatile mood.

"My belief is the only one that matters!" he roared as he came at Hunter in full force, swinging his blade expertly.

Both men engaged in a battle of hand-to-hand combat and brute force. They moved so swiftly, it was hard for me to keep sight of each of their moves as both ice and boulders began to shoot out.

I gasped when Auberon jumped against one of the larger boulders thrown his way, using it as a leaping point to bring down his blade. I immediately slammed and scraped my arm against the bark of the tree causing myself to bleed and manifested a spike.

The time for patience was at an end.

It was time for vengeance.

I fingered the blood spike and threw it in his direction, demanding the blood to decimate him.

The spike hit him in the shoulder. He grimaced and glared over his shoulder at me, but shrugged it off as the spike didn't stop his forward momentum. He roared, and continued his assault on Hunter, swinging the blade over his head.

The atmosphere dramatically dropped in temperature and a full body ice

shield wrapped itself around Hunter originating from the arm he held up to block the blow.

In an explosion of white, ice fragments shattered and flew everywhere over the field, but prevented Auberon from delivering his death blow to Hunter. His sword lodged and the frost slowly threatened to encapsulate the blade, as Hunter reformed it, but Auberon jerked back hard enough to pull it free before he leaped back a good distance.

“How is it possible?” Auberon asked with a look of disbelief.

“How could you kill them?” I retorted, cutting in.

The rage within me at his audacity grew with every step I made forward. For the first time against this bastard, I was the predator, and stalked him as *my* prey.

My hands shook and I could feel the legs of a thousand creatures crawling across the wound on my arm, vibrating through me. This whole time—this entire time, *he knew*.

Flashbacks of him humiliating me in that room slammed into me like a crumbling building of bricks with me on the ground floor. My blood rapidly coursed through me, the throbbing behind my ears drowned out whatever poured from his mouth as he and Hunter continued their combat.

I had to piss and shit in front of this man. Suffer through his stupid healing drinks. The feel of the teacup shattering against my face again and again...

I screamed, my body boiling to the point where I felt like my skin wanted to melt off as I raked my own nails down my arms and collected the blood, solidifying it until it formed all of my frustrations—all of the pieces he left behind on that floor by the sand.

My vision blurred, or was it the tears? No, Hunter vibrated until ten more replicas appeared surrounding Auberon as he continued to slash each one down, shaking the ground to get an advantage.

I fell to my knees, my hands clasped my temples as I tried to use all the

hate I had to fuel what I needed to do. Because it couldn't be Hunter. Hadn't he taught me that. Wasn't that what he was trying to tell me about calculating my moves and the use of time? He'd killed Beatrice, but he never lied to me about it. He knew who and what he was. He accepted it. He'd given her the chance to survive, she chose her duty. I could no longer hate him for it.

But Auberon? He was the snake lying in wait, biding his time.

Mother, Father...

Another scream tore from my chest sending the birds scattered across the sky like black specs of bloodstains. I threw my arm forth as my head throbbed to the back of my skull and the small pools of blood on the ground reformed and fired off as hundreds of tiny needles, riddled through Auberon's body and some of Hunter's replicas.

Bodies dissipated, and the screams of agony echoed through the woods, sending the creatures fleeing.

Auberon fell to his knees and landed on his outstretched arms, blood pouring from his multiple wounds. I weakly stepped forth, the pain in my chest manifesting into a physical weight wanting to pull me down with him over my guilt, over the part I played under his puppeteering.

Everything around me wanted to become a blur, but I didn't let it. I accepted only the darkness that had weaved its way into my soul.

I was the monster in that blackness, and I would consume the bastard before me.

I stopped a foot from his bent over form and sneered. "Can you stand?"

He coughed up blood in response, and the ropes of his hair shuddered with his breath.

I asked again, "Can you stand?"

He lifted his face to me, eyes full of possession as he gave me a crimson coated smile. "You've always been mine, Ulani."

I kicked him in the face and sent him careening onto his back with a groan. The birds returned, covering the skies in their inky feathers, blocking

out the sun behind me.

I crawled over and straddled him, grabbing the front of his shirt and bringing his face against mine.

He groaned again, slowly blinking and staring at me, willing me to come back to him.

“Do you hate me, Ulani?” he croaked out.

“You know I do,” I snarled.

“I didn’t need your love. I needed the monster you were made to be. You were going to rule by my side. We would have been equal.”

“Can. You. Stand.” I gritted out, replaying every moment he screamed those very words at me, hammering it into my skull until it burned in the back of my brain like a raised scar.

He reached his hand up and I slapped it away, disgusted by his touches. “Don’t you dare, Auberon! Do not fucking dare after everything you did to me!”

“You’ve grown to be the most beautiful monster of all,” he whispered.

Something inside of me snapped and I dropped his head. My hands flew as my body rejuvenated itself, lending another surge of energy through my fists against his face. I screamed in frustration as my knuckles quickly began sliding off his face from the blood. I couldn’t stop, I wouldn’t.

“Do you hate me, Ulani?”

“Not enough, apparently.”

She lied. She didn’t know what she was talking about then.

“I FUCKING HATE YOU!” I cried out shrilly.

I dug my fingers into his eyes until it pierced through the organs, and slammed his head into the ground again and again. I screamed and cried out for all the lives lost, for the loss of the princess that never will be.

When strong arms pulled me away from him, I screeched like a she demon, pulling away to land a few more hits on his fractured skull.

“I’ll find you in the afterlife and kill you again, you asshole!”

As if my mind confirmed my suspicions of growing insanity by hanging around these men, Auberon's voice invaded my head.

"Do you hate me, Ulani?"

"I hate you to the depths of my very soul and back. You will never have rest, Auberon, never again!" I roared at the corpse.

The soft butterfly from her gilded cage whispered, "Not enough, apparently."

Chapter
Nineteen

“**E**nough, Raven. He’s dead.”

“He’s not fucking dead until I’m done!”

I struggled against his hold, the tangy smell of metallic copper clogging my nose, my lust for blood increasing with every moment as I stared at his unmoving body on the ground.

“Control yourself.”

I twisted in his arms and began clawing at his face out of sheer frustration. “You assholes all lied to me! Led me to believe you were teaching me control when all you did was forge a weapon for yourselves!”

I flailed my arms and kicked my legs until I slipped out of his grasp, but with inhuman speed he quickly grabbed my face with both hands and shook me twice to get my attention.

I couldn’t tell whether the wetness on my face was from Auberon’s blood or my tears. It was warm, or perhaps it was my entire body that boiled with my fury.

“I never lied to you,” he snarled in my face.

Hunter slammed his mouth on mine and began to dominate me. I shoved and pushed but couldn’t overpower him. When his tongue invaded my mouth, I groaned at the taste of blood mixed in with his own unique essence.

I was lost, a raven covered in blood who didn’t know her way—a little

bird that no longer had a home.

But his kisses lured me, promised me he would give me a new one, promised me he would ground me in his darkness and madness if only I allowed it to consume me entirely.

And I did...

I was tired of fighting to exist, tired of everything. Maybe that was my problem all along.

“Hunter,” I breathed, unsure of what I was asking or if I asked anything at all. His name delivered me as he swallowed my gasps and ran his hand down my lower back to bring us closer.

I threw everything I taught myself about caution out the metaphorical window and jumped, wrapping my legs around him. His hands quickly cradled my ass, holding up my weight easily as he continued to demand submission through his mouth.

My breasts were tender and my pussy pulsed with a desperate need.

I dropped my legs and jerkily began divesting my coverings. Hunter followed suit quietly, intently observing my every movement, mirroring his own.

Before I could finish, he grabbed me once more and lowered me to the grass, licking the bloodstains off the crook of my neck, grazing me with his teeth. I sharply inhaled when he forced my legs around him, grinding his erect cock against my center. It made me shiver with delight. I didn't know it could feel this way.

“You were always mine, Raven.”

He overstimulated my mind with everything his hands were doing to me, from trailing down my sides to cupping my naked breasts. My nipples hardened, begging him to tease me right there.

“I just had to make you see it,” he groaned as I grabbed his hand and forced it where I wanted it to go. But he surprised me when he moved his mouth there instead, running his hand up over my chin and slipping between

my lips with his thumb.

I was out of my depth, surrendering myself completely to follow his lead—his instruction on whatever was happening between us. When he bit into my nipple I gasped, my body opening up like the untouched flower I was.

His hand slipped out of my mouth and down between our bodies until he grazed his fingers along my wet folds.

I moaned in response to this new sensation and he chuckled against my skin.

“Hunter, what are you doing to me?” I moaned.

He trailed his kisses up my jawline and seductively licked across my bottom lip making my breath stutter.

He gazed deep into my eyes, searching my soul for something. I squirmed beneath his scrutiny, my face flaming from what he might find... what he might not like.

His thumb caressed my jaw and a smirk broke across his face. “Come here, little Blood Raven. I have plans for you.”

He sat back and pulled me with him. My mouth dropped open at the size of his cock pointed right at my face. He chuckled and leaned back with his arms behind his head, staring at the sky. No words. No commands. He was letting me choose.

What was another step further into madness?

I tentatively wrapped my hand around the shaft.

“You killed my replicas, little Raven. It made me upset. Maybe you should kiss it and make me feel better.”

My face never flamed so quickly. I was almost lightheaded at what he insinuated. Is this what men and women did together? I leaned in, unsure of myself. That was, until another set of strong hands ran down my shoulder and a warm mouth kissed up the back of my neck, the heat of his replica’s body against me.

“You’re not afraid, are you, my little Blood Raven?”

I wasn't afraid of anything.

I closed the distance between us and wrapped my lips around him as best as I could. The replica dissipated, leaving a cool breeze behind me as the original groaned, threading his fingers through the back of my hair. I moaned at his taste as I lowered my head, pushing his cock deeper into my throat.

I gagged when his hand shoved me a little further than I could tolerate and tears welled up in my eyes.

“Just look at how well you take me. That's a good girl.”

His praise made me bold as I continued to explore his cock with my mouth under his guttural encouragements.

Finally getting comfortable with his size, he abruptly pulled me off without warning. I scowled and pouted.

He chuckled as he pulled me onto his lap, making me straddle him. His thumb rubbed across the bottom of my lip harshly. “The perfect pout,” he breathed, grabbing my ass, lifting me and aligning his cock against my entrance. “But there's more training to be done, little Raven.”

I steadied myself with my hands on his shoulders as he lowered me, impaling my wanting center inch by inch. His size pulled at my lips, despite how wet I was.

I bit my bottom lip and shook my head. “It's too much, you're too big. We can't fit. It's not going to fit.”

“Shhhh.” He said against my cheek, forcing me closer to his chest as he pulled back and thrust again.

I whined at the stretch until finally the head of his cock penetrated my folds. I whimpered when he pulled out only to do it again. It was agonizing and torturous.

“You feel incredible,” He groaned.

I felt like he was going to tear me in two. How did people do this? Suddenly, I began to panic.

“You won't—”

He growled against my ear, nipping at the lobe. “Complaining isn’t becoming of a queen. You’re going to take everything I have to give you, little Raven. And you are going to enjoy every minute of it.”

He gave one hard thrust and buried himself to the hilt, making me sharply inhale and whimper, forcing my body to adjust to his size.

And damned if he wasn’t right.

The moment he began to move, the friction inside between my legs began to introduce me to pleasure I never imagined. Both our breathing became heavy as we grinded against one another, rutting like beasts in the wild.

When his hand slid down between us again, I shivered with anticipation. Hunter was a man of many talents and many secrets. I wouldn’t be surprised if—

His fingers were cold as they touched the hood of my pussy, rubbing them in circles while he continued to pound into me.

I was lost in everything he was doing, lost in his scent, lost in everything that had accumulated between us like a tightly strung bow that needed to be released.

Only, his ministrations were making my body feel tighter, as if pulling me to the precipice only to leave me hanging there, then pulling me back down from a high I didn’t realize I was chasing.

“My dark little Raven, you feel so good wrapped around me.”

“Hunter, please!”

“A queen that begs prettily...”

His fingers quickened and so did his pace. Without warning it was as if my soul crashed into the tides of an ocean, pulling me over and under, threatening to drown me in so much pleasure it bordered pain. My eyes teared up at how hard I began to spasm and I dug my fingers into his back, holding onto him, silently begging him to ground me.

He growled and removed his hand from between us, digging his fingers into my hips to keep me still while he pistoned into me relentlessly.

I whimpered, I cried, I screamed his name. My body shattered into a million pieces once more and was held together by his large hands. When curses spewed forth, he swallowed them into his mouth as he finally buried himself deeply within my womb, and pulsated inside of me.

I gasped at the fullness I felt. Did I think he was big before?

“Look at how good you took me, little bird. Look at how beautiful you are.”

I truly cried then, as if he broke a wall I had erected since the beginning of all this insanity—insanity he orchestrated.

But no matter what my logical mind told me, I was caught under this man’s spell and he knew it. He played me like an instrument, expertly, without a shadow of a doubt.

I was broken and yet that was where I found myself, in his darkness.

I sobbed into his shoulder. “Hunter, you’ve broken every part of me.”

His calloused hands rubbed my naked back soothingly.

“No, Ulani. You had to find yourself and come back to me, back to where you’ve always belonged.”

Epilogue

It took a few more months before Hunter told me I was ready for my vengeance. Much to my dismay, nightmares began to plague my mind. But not in the way he thought.

It wasn't the politician's face that haunted me, but Auberon's. Despite taking him to the afterlife, the asshole couldn't leave me alone. Echoes of his stupid question followed me into my waking hours, throwing my mood off and sending me into bouts of rage over the fact I couldn't bring him back to life to kill him all over again.

And Hunter refused to help.

I suspected he had the ability but he always sidestepped the conversation, distracting me with his body, his touches, and his praises when I would finally settle down in my bloodlust.

When it came time to exact my vengeance, I painted the city in red—killing every advisor and wouldbe usurper to my father's throne. The Blood Raven made her impact and struck fear in the hearts of any who would oppose me.

Even the neighboring kingdoms.

When I reclaimed my throne, the people bowed to the new reign without resistance, cheering for the forgotten princess, lost in the massacre of the arena. She'd been reborn from those ashes and arose back to life, to place

herself where she always belonged. A ruler.

I didn't anticipate the lackluster satisfaction I got from completing my mission. Ruling a kingdom had always been bred into me, but I had become more than that during my time away from it.

Hunter stood by my side during the initial weeks as I solidified my reign, but slowly began to disappear.

It hurt. He wasn't around to see me crumble in the privacy of my royal chambers when I would wake up screaming. Screaming his name, screaming for Auberon to die, searching for Hunter's soothing presence to bring me back to the calm reality I needed to take on my day.

But he left me a remembrance of his presence in my womb. Nine months of sweet misery and an heir to the throne was born. A beautiful baby girl with the same hauntingly dark eyes as her father. I named her Alanna, a sweet name who would never know what I went through.

I watched her grow strong, her countenance much too mature for her age, her mind too far learned. She had an old soul at heart and chattered without stopping.

She reminded me so much of Hunter, my heart began to yearn for something I didn't know if I could ever get back.

The detachment he forced upon me was necessary. I had my kingdom, he said he had to gain his own. I understood. I needed another lesson—to stand on my own as a ruler.

He didn't realize addicts crave the one thing consuming them to the point where they would self-sabotage to have another taste.

"Mother, are you listening to me?" Alanna asked, her words snapping me to the present. "We need to make sure to fortify our nation's military forces as well as our naval forces. The Sepawn hate is real and spreading throughout the world like a contagion. We need to prepare in case there is movement from the other nations."

I stared at Alanna. At the age of sixteen, she had become a strong

presence in all the council meetings and a strong voice of reason against those who were her senior.

They all respected, as well as, feared her. The daughter of Queen Ulani Rensburg, the Forgotten Princess, the First Blood Raven and Freer of Keeper Nation.

“Alanna, I listen to more than you realize,” I sighed as I stood up from my seat and placed both hands on her shoulder.

She stared at me, as if she knew this day would come and had been preparing for it.

“You’re going to him,” she stated blatantly without accusation, without disappointment, with no emotion at all.

“I have to.”

“Father took a piece of you with him, but gave you so much more.” She recited the words I had told her again and again, growing up when questions about her father would arise.

My face softened. “He took all of me with him and gave me a new purpose.” I leaned in and kissed Alanna on the top of her forehead. “You are my flesh and blood, and my greatest joy. I am proud of the woman you have grown to be and I am confident you will lead the Keepers in the direction they need to go.”

Her breath stuttered and I squeezed her shoulders in reassurance.

“Mother, what if I’m not enough?”

I pulled her in for a tight hug and buried my face in her dark hair. The words my mother spoke to me so long ago echoed in my ears, and I heard her voice pour forth from my lips as I addressed my own daughter.

“No matter what happens, know this. Your father and I will always love you regardless. Our daughter can accomplish anything when she puts her mind to it. You were born enough, Alanna, never forget that. You are always enough. You are exactly what this nation needs. Follow your instincts and they will not lead you astray. Do not let your heart cloud your judgment.”

She softly chuckled before she sniffed. “Like you?”

I softly laughed back. “I buried my heart until it was time to resurrect it.”

“I’m going to miss you.”

I rubbed my face against the top of her head. In life, as she will soon come to find, there were never any easy choices. Sometimes we just had to pick the lesser of two evils. This nation would slowly crumble under my bitterness if I didn’t do this.

“I love you, Alanna. Always.”

“I love you too, mother. Tell father I will never forgive him if he does anything to hurt you, and as queen, I will hunt him down to the ends of the world if I ever found out.”

A raw laugh escaped me and soon enough she joined in as we both separated.

With another kiss on the forehead, I left the palace. I had to go back.

Back to the Limitless Forest.

Back to him.

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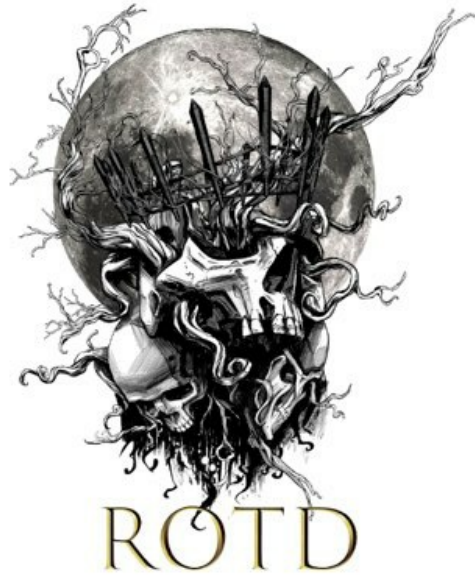
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Grounded For Love

Mahogany SilverRain

Prologue

The bubbling brook was a welcome sight to my hot, dry thirsty mouth. My fourteen-year-old body couldn't take it anymore, and I fell to my knees. I filled my canteen before splashing some of the cold water on my face. This had to be one of the hottest days of the summer.

Suddenly, I heard a man's terrified scream fill the steamy air. "Daddy!" I yelled in full panic mode. Dropping my canteen, I sprinted in the direction of the sound. My legs felt heavy with each step as if I were trying to run through water. Though I was only a few yards away, it felt like miles. What awaited me was a gruesome scene. My father in the clutches of a large creature, a velocitiger. It bit clean through my father's left shoulder, exposing the muscle and tendons as he shook my dad's body violently. Dad's shirt was blood-soaked with blood running down his arms like a river. He hadn't lost consciousness, but he would soon if I didn't do something fast.

Hang on daddy, please. I grabbed my dagger from its sheath at my side. I aimed and threw it at the head of the creature, but it moved and my dagger slammed into the tree behind it. The creature raised its head, spotting me quickly. It let go of my dad who fell to the ground with a loud thud, landing on his right side.

"Ryla, run!" My dad ordered.

The creature plowed toward me on four thick, scaly legs with claws the

size of an adult male's hand. For some reason, I froze, my mind and body benumbed, my heart beating frantically. My brain kept saying, *move!* But my body resisted. On impact, an electrifying shudder reverberated through me. It caused the animal to stagger backward and fall on its hind legs. Then it shook its head as if trying to get its bearings. It stood clumsily like a newborn colt, sniffing the air. Catching another scent, I guessed, it roared before it ran past me into the forest.

I checked my body, which was dumb in a way. I wasn't hurt.

I snapped out of whatever I was in when my dad called my name.

My mind and body finally moved together.

"Daddy!" I screamed as I ran to his side. My dad was the strongest person I knew. A fierce fighter, hunter, and telepath. How could that velocitiger get the drop on him? I cursed myself as I nervously yanked off my outer shirt and pressed it into the wound on his shoulder to stop the bleeding. I used my bright green bandana to support his left arm and shoulder securing my shirt to the wound. Daddy grimaced but allowed me to do it. He raised himself on his right elbow and I leaned in close to him.

"It's alright, baby doll." He whispered with a faint smile.

Enormous tears slid down my sweaty face. "I shouldn't have..."

"Hush now, my sweet baby. You were so brave, and you know I've always been proud of you." His breathing was shallow and sweat beaded on his forehead. I used my backup olive green bandana to dab his brow.

I slid his elbow down and cradled his head in my arms. I looked around blankly, not knowing what else to do. Then briefly shutting my eyes, I squeezed out any excess tears. Looking down again, I noticed that the blood was not stopping, and it was coming from his neck.

"No! Don't leave me, Daddy! There is so much I still must learn from you."

“I love you, baby doll.” He gurgled weakly.

“I love you...” I said as his head suddenly felt heavy in my arms. He took his last breath with his eyes still wide open. I watched tearfully as the light left his eyes. “No, no! Daddy!” I screamed into the hot air. I closed his eyelids and bringing his face to mine, I kissed his lips softly. Cradling him like a baby in my arms, I cried in earnest. My body shook with rage and pain.

Daddy, Daddy...

Chapter One

RYLA SIXTEEN YEARS LATER...

I sat in silence on an enormous pillow on the floor, eyes closed, legs crossed. I breathed deeply, filling the air in my lungs to capacity. Then I opened my mouth to exhale in short bursts of breath at a time, almost like panting. A cool breeze blew softly from my open window. The scent of the outdoors, the flora and fauna that surrounded my small home, filled me with serenity.

I keep a shrine of my father in my room. I pictured my father in my mind as my body relaxed with each exhale. My father's handsome face, bronzed by the wind and sun. Dark chocolate eyes framed his marvelous, square-jawed face. His smile, at least to me, was always one of kindness, approval, and love. When he looked at my mother, his smile was wide, dimples showing, and with much affection.

My father taught me to hunt and fish, build a fire, and gave me his dagger when I was five. It was old and had been in our family for several generations. Created for close contact, it was a lightweight fourteen-inch blade that could slice through anything. It had a decorative engraving of the family's name. Being a blacksmith, my daddy fashioned a one-of-a-kind spear for me. At the time, it was taller than I was, but he taught me how to use it well despite my stature. A blade on one end and a double blade on the other end. It was not heavy but was and still is deadly. I keep the dagger with me, always. I only use my spear when hunting, in case what I am hunting hunts me.

Suddenly, my meditation is interrupted by Chebbi. She jumped on my shoulder, curling around my neck, her heart beating fast.

“What is it, girl?” I asked, looking around the room.

“Chi, chi,” Chebbi answers, looking at the window.

No, she can't talk, but now and then, I think she actually understands me. I got up slowly, my pistol on my hip, my dagger in hand. I smelled the air.

Whomever or whatever is close to the open window. Stealthily, I moved toward the window, alert and ready. Chebbi now almost choking me with her grip on my neck. A hand appears on the window, and I stabbed at it, but it moves quickly, leaving the blade between the thumb and index finger of the intruder.

“Ry! You almost stabbed me!” Loren yelped, popping his head up, followed by his body, as he climbed into my window.

“Oh, for the love of all things sacred, Lore! I could have killed you! Might still do it, depending on why you’re here. I have a door, you know!” I said, my emerald, green eyes flashing my non-amusement at his antics.

“Hey, I shifted into an animal just to climb up to your window.” He chuckled.

“Ever the prankster. Not cool Lore, you scared Chebbi half to death!” I scolded, relieved my pet baylam loosened her hold on my neck.

Chebbi purred as she rubbed her fuzzy big-eyed head against mine, her four arms still around my neck. Her brilliant green eyes glowed a bit. Loren approached her. “Sorry, Chebbi, didn’t mean to scare ya.”

Chebbi chirped loudly at him before turning away, her long mahogany tail whipped across his face. He frowned and rubbed his left cheek.

“Good girl, Chebbi! That mean ole man scared you, didn’t he? He deserves a lot more than that.” I shot him a twisted smile.

“Oh, come on! It wasn’t that bad! I was just trying to scare you, not Chebbi! I apologized!” Loren protested.

“Not to me you haven’t.” I quipped.

“Really, Ry?” He smiled in exasperation.

I didn’t reply. I just gave him a steely look as I softly rubbed Chebbi, who happily went back to purring deeply.

“I’m sorry, Ry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” His voice was softer. Maybe he regretted his little prank on us. Then again, maybe not. He was about as unpredictable as they come.

“What do you think, girl? Should we forgive this horrid man?” I asked Chebbi teasingly to mess with Loren. Chebbi ignored me, of course.

“Oh, I suppose I forgive you.” I relented.

Loren stepped toward me, and with a deep, unsteady breath, I stepped back. I knew he wanted a hug, but Chebbi can be quite possessive. Not to mention her loud chirping grated on my nerves. So, I pulled Chebbi off my shoulder and set her down on my bed. After I put her down, Loren grabbed me from behind in a big, tight hug that would have broken the ribs of anyone else. But my skin is my armor. It toughens at will. He couldn’t hurt me, even if he wanted to. I shrugged off his tight embrace, turning and punching him in his left arm.

“Ow, Ry! What gives? I thought you forgave me?”

“That was for you interrupting my meditation! You know I’ve been trying to connect with my father’s spirit in ancestral meditation.” I said seriously.

Loren looked apologetic. His face softened again. His extraordinary hazel brown eyes were now bereft of amusement.

“Hey, I really *didn’t* know. I would never have pulled anything like that. I thought you were asleep still. You rarely get up early unless you are leading your Death Patrol grunts in drills.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t sleep.”

“Why not?” he asked with genuine concern.

This is the Loren I prefer. The one I grew up with. The most serious looking boy in our class. I like to think I was the reason he stopped taking himself so seriously. However, the way he is now, I think I created a monster.

“Oh, everything. Who knows? I just can’t seem to sleep, is all.” I sulked.

“Does it have something to do with your dad?”

“Maybe. I guess I’ve been thinking about him a lot lately. I hope he’s not disappointed in me for not getting married and having two or three kids by now.”

“You know he’s proud, Ry. He wanted you to be strong and be able to

take care of yourself. He prepared you well. You were in the top of our class in the academy. Look at everything you have accomplished. You're amazing!" He beamed.

I smiled at him. "Okay, okay. You hungry? Wait, of course you are! Let's get some breakfast!"

"You know me so well! Our favorite diner?" He chuckled.

My meditation would have to wait. Loren may be a pain sometimes, but he's, my bestie. I love him and his twin sister, Soren, like siblings. Especially since I lost mine.

On the way, my army cell phone went off. If that rang, you had better answer! "Captain Denver here." I answered. Colonel Mack, the head of the Covert Corps, was on the other end.

"Captain Ryla Denver, you are ordered to the royal palace immediately. You're to head up the Crown Prince Theodoric Enfield's security. You will accompany him and the royal family to the Kingdom of Day for a wedding." He stated matter-of-factly.

"Pardon me, Sir, but doesn't the palace have royal guards for things like this?"

"Are you questioning your orders, Captain Denver?" Colonel Mack bellowed.

"Sir. No, Sir." I assured him.

"Good, after that stunt you pulled with your grunts at the General's luncheon, you're lucky to still be in The Great Army! This is a great opportunity for you, I suggest you take it and be grateful!" Colonel Mack barked.

"Yes, Sir. I meant no offense. I will make my way to the palace forthwith, Sir." I spoke. My right hand gripping my cell.

Loren looked at me and frowned. "No breakfast?"

"No, I've been called to the palace immediately. To guard Prince Theodoric. Sorry, Lore."

“The Blood Prince that can’t use his powers? I mean, sorry.

He’s the one you’ve had a crush on since the academy, right?”

“Yes, that would be the one.” I whispered, feeling my face flush. I’ve only seen him in the papers and on TV. For as long as I can remember, I have had a crush on him. I’m six years older than he is, but I didn’t see the harm since there was no hope of ever meeting him. So, I pushed those girlish fantasies out of my mind until... now. I’m going to guard Prince Theodoric Enfield. *Shit.*

I hope I don’t make a fool of myself.

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