

Once upon a time, the angel went to the land of souls.  
AND FELL FOR DEATH.



TEMPTING  
DEATH AND  
DESTRUCTION

DEATH AND DESTRUCTION BOOK TWO

EMILY SHORE

# TEMPTING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

EMILY SHORE

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***TEMPTING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION***

**Book Two of the *Death and Destruction Series***

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# OTHER WORKS BY EMILY SHORE

## POST 2020 AUTHOR JOURNEY:

[Kidnapped by the Krampus](#) (#1 Amazon Bestseller/Top 100) – Roars and Romances Series Standalone

[Bride of the Corpse King](#) – Book One (Kindle Vella Bestseller – Now on KU)

### ***Hell's Angel Series***

[Bride of Lucifer: Hell on Earth](#) – Book One (Kindle Vella Bestseller – Now on KU)

[Bride of Lucifer: The Bride Trials](#) – Book Two (Kindle Vella Bestseller – Now on KU)

[Bride of Lucifer: Mate of Destruction](#) – Book Three (Kindle Vella Bestseller – Now on KU))

### ***Her Monstrous Boys Series***

[The Sacrifice](#) (Kindle Vella Bestseller/Trending on KU Kindle Top 100 New Release/Dragons)

[The Surrender](#) (Kindle Vella Bestseller/Trending on KU/Kindle Top 100 New Release/Dragons)

### **Kindle Vella Original Works**

[Bride of the Shifter King](#) – (Kindle Vella Bestseller)

[The Grymm Beauty](#) (Kindle Vella Bestseller)

Find all of [Emily's Kindle Vella works](#) where she rebranded after finding her voice\* \* \*

## PRE 2020 AUTHOR JOURNEY:

### ***The Uncaged Series – temporarily unavailable***

*The Aviary* – Book One, *The Garden* – Book Two, *The Temple* – Book Three, *The Temple Twins* – Book Four, *The Aquarium* – Book Five

### ***The Roseblood Series***

*Shifting to KU in 2024*

### ***The Flesh and Ash Series***

[Flesher](#) – Book One

*Flesher: Resurrection* – Book Two (WIP)

***For all the girls who were ever compared to a Jezebel or Delilah who  
deserve to know how precious and priceless they are.  
For all the girls like Esther/Hadassah, who have the courage to know when  
it requires a heart of love and not a sword to fight the ultimate battle. And  
win.***



# PLAYLIST

## **ELYSIA'S THEME:**

“Rise” Katy Perry – SUPERFRUIT Cover

## **ELYSIA and NEO:**

“Never Enough/Praying Mashup” – Kesha/The Greatest Showman

“Glass” – Thompson Square

## **ELYSIA and THANATOS:**

“Clarity” Zedd feat Foxes – Sam Tsui Cover

“Show Yourself” -

## **GENERAL:**

“Wait For You” - Elliot Yamin

“Here Without You” by 3 Doors Down – Sam Tsui and Kurt Hugo Schneider Cover

“No Air” - Jordin Sparks Boyce Avenue Cover

“Bleeding Love” - Leona Lewis

“What About Us” – Pink – One Voice Children’s Choir (Elysia’s Border Song)

“One More Light” - Linkin Park – One Voice Children’s Choir Cover (Elysia’s Border Song)

“Keep Holding On” - Avril Lavigne

“Once Upon a December” – Amy Manford Cover of *Anastasia* Soundtrack (Lake of Souls Scene)

“Kingdom of Love” - Shani – from One Night With the King (Elysia and Neo’s first intimate bedroom scene)

“Speechless” - Naomi Scott from Disney’s Aladdin

“Say Something” - Pentatonix Cover (Destruction Court Scene)

“Deliver Us” – “Prince of Egypt” Caleb Hayes Cover (Elysia’s Border Song)

“One Night With the King – Unsummoned Full Film Clip” – J.A.C Redford etc. (ELYSIA’S CLIMACTIC COURT SCENE)

~

*Once upon a time, the angel went to the Land of Souls.  
And fell for Death.*

~



**Special Thanks to Elisha and Amber for the pretty!**

**Want to see MORE special ART?**

**SUPPORT ON KINDLE VELLA \*KICKSTARTER\*:**

While I originally wrote *Courting Death and Destruction* before Kindle Vella, I brought it to the platform where it joined the bestseller rank next to *The Sacrifice* and *Bride of Lucifer*. It also won the championship round for the Kindle Vella Summer Madness!

**What is Kindle Vella?** Amazon's new serialized fiction platform.

**Why?** It helped me rebrand myself and kept our family afloat through 2021 and 2022 with my husband's cancer and all my chronic health issues.

**How?** Please consider voting for any of my \*crowned\* books on [Kindle Vella](#) and supporting me as an author. The minimum to vote aka **Top Fave** is less than \$2.00 a month via tokens. Consider it like a Kickstarter since it

enables me to bring my books to paperback!

**PERKS:** ALL my Vella supporters get exclusive super fan group perks like the art above and **UNCENSORED NSFW art**, voting rights, spicy bonus scenes, and even advanced chapters! If you Top Fave, message me, so I can show you how and so you can get the perks. I'd love to send you an art postcard as a thank you, too!

**PROs:** NO signup. NO subscription. NO app download.

**CONs:** Only for USA. (It's OK! Radish or Ream supporters still get the perks! [REAM LINK](#))

Learn more at "*Emily's Vella Verse*" on Facebook: a public group where I share fun memes, teasers, games, and giveaways.

Please follow my TikTok: @authoremilybshore and my IG: @emilybshore.

# MAP OF THE COURT O' NINES



AUTHOR'S NOTE: MENTAL  
HEALTH/CONTENT WARNING

\*\*\*PLEASE READ\*\*\*

*The Death and Destruction Series* was birthed from a dark place and dark triggers. While I channeled my symbolic trauma into the first book, book two still took me on a deep journey into my heart. And how I love to write aggrieved heroines like Elysia, who do not need a sword to be strong. And how it can take the greatest strength in vulnerability to get down on our knees for something greater than ourselves. As is the *D&D* theme, dark trauma scenes are related by the protagonist but written with emotion, intimacy, and feminine power. And light in the darkness.

It's NOT your typical fantasy book. This book is character-driven, focusing on the heart and soul and relationships—namely the romance.

First and foremost, Elysia is a *healer*. While she heals with her Halo, she heals the heart most of all. Not only other hearts with her love and empathy and empowerment but her own heart. She is also a princess, a smuggler, a witty feminist, a proud bisexual, and a friend.

All LGBTQIA+ identities are normalized and accepted.

**P.S.** As always, I feature women empowering women relationships beyond the female gossip, bickering, and snarling emotional abuse one sees in many fantasy books while men are elevated for patriarchy and toxic masculinity.

\*\*\***DID NOTE:**\*\*\*

One significant character, not the protagonist, has the mental health condition of Dissociative Identity Disorder. What is known as a DID systems. This used to be called [Multiple Personality Disorder](#). It is negatively stereotyped in society. As someone who has DID friends, including sensitivity readers, they are worthy of profound respect. And their alters.



This may be difficult to understand, but one must accept the alters as separate identities from the original known as the Host. Alters are not manifestations of the Host's imagination. They are not spirits or ghosts. They are their own entities, who rise, for many, during extreme trauma periods. They exist to help the Host cope with the trauma. Examples of alters include the Internal Systems Helper, the sexual alter, the protector, the trauma alter, child alters, and more.

DID systems individuals are not broken. Their alters are not broken. You will meet multiple alters over the series. For the sake of this book and inspired by a DID systems friend, I feature the hypersexual alter most as she was the first I met in real life. And full of life herself! The trauma alter is the second most featured in Book Two.

I ask people to keep an open mind, to separate the alters from their Host, and to respect the beauty of these survivors. And to research if you want to learn more. Extreme trauma is referenced in this book but not shown while accompanied by overcoming and healing.

Thank you for reading these valuable notes! I appreciate it!

## CHAPTER I

# “YOU WILL NOT TREAT ME THIS WAY.”

**M**y heart thunders a crescendo as gold dust glitters off my skin, reflecting off the fallen snow that tangles with the ash raining from the sky. Both ash and snow muffle my movements as I steal away closer to the Tenth Court blood farm.

Like bitter fangs, the frigid wind sinks deep into my blood, causing my bones to shiver. Though it's not yet nightfall, the sky is dismal with no sunlight—only a perpetual tapestry of shadow-gray. My inner Halo light warms my skin, but lament weighs down my chest.

When Neo returns from his “holiday”, I might just stake him for the second time.

Tax season finished the night after I returned to the Tenth Court. And the Court O' Nines took Neo away for continent-wide business...for the past couple of *months*. I bite back the tears burning my throat.

Our Hallowtide night as husband and wife seems but a dream within a dream. Especially when I spend my nights curled up in a shadow-wrapped ball inside his enormous bed, drunk on venom wine, empty and cold, except for Spitfire nestling next to me to prevent my skin from freezing.

Neo took Lux with him.

Thanatos hasn't summoned me since that one night.

Maybe I could poison Neo's morning blood. Or whatever Lux drinks. Both are incredibly tempting.

Sighing a ghostly breath, I focus on my mission. The Underground takes the edge off because the Princess smuggler will always be a part of me. Over the past couple of months, I've trained my Halo powers with Nita while transporting children just like the night I rescued the Father's reaped girls.

Like a funereal shroud to a host of ghosts, my black cape mates with the ashy snow as I weave around the iron trees. The Father must suspect the missing children are my doing—but since he’s more interested in accompanying Neo on his Court O’ Nines business and using my mother as his personal weapon for his lazy ass, he has little time or concern for a few handfuls of missing Tenth Court farm children.

Bonus for me.

As long as those ruthless blood masters don’t catch me, which they never do and won’t tonight, the Underground will claim *ten* new children. I duck behind a tree, pressing my back ramrod-straight against the iron body. Breath hitching, dry lump lodging in my throat, I’m thankful for the black venom disguising my pure blood from the overseer patrolling the area.

For the past few weeks, I’ve embarked into Thanatos’ Tower to kill a ghoul...or three and claim their venom. They’ve seemed more subdued lately, and I imagine it’s the Prince of Death’s doing.

Not that I need *or* want his help, I wrinkle my nose, almost snorting. Asshole bites me, marks me, sings a lullaby from the shadows every night, but can’t bother to show up for a chat or breakfast. Or something.

“I’ve got a jar of black venom. I’ve got a jar of black venom!” I remember channeling my inner pirate as I tore off the bloodied clothes and thrilled in a bath after hacking at the skulls. Neo left all his baby scythes at home. A smile tugs at my lips from the memory of Spitfire gnawing on a ghoul feast. He’d bring me fleshy treats, but I’ve disappointed him in my refusal to join him in the carnage. I’ve also passed a decent store of venom to Jesula, the Underground Queen, for her own use.

Just as the master scents the air about a hundred yards away, my Halo responds to my fear. That treasonous emotion betrays me with tendrils of light scattering.

On instinct, I gather the opposite *destructive* entities, pleading for their help. Whenever I leave Neo’s shadowy room, his baby-shade friends hitchhike all over my body. They caress my Halo tendrils, snuffing them out with tender whirls and wisps. I pull in a deep breath, eyes softening upon the little shades. Since they are byproducts of his subconscious, I have erred on the side of hope.

Somehow, he still loves me.

“This is Under Queen,” Jesula alerts me from my ear implant, causing me to flinch. “Do you copy, angel?”

As soon as the patrolling master passes, scenting the area and wrinkling his nose, I roll my eyes and open my mouth to correct my good friend and mentor, but Jesula does it instead, “Excuse me...*Halo*. Do you copy?”

“I copy. Diversion in place?”

“ETA: sixty seconds and waiting for your command, Princess.”

“Now, Under Queen.”

I imagine Jesula’s gunmetal eyes granting me strength and lunge into vampire speed, thrilling from the wind whipping and biting my cheeks.

After a few moments, I reach the iron fencing, arriving at the sixty-second marker—careful not to touch the burning metal. Sometimes, new children, who don’t know any better, will test the iron—only to have the punishing fence bite their flesh, warning them from trying to escape. Not that they could make it beyond the miles-long great Iron Walls that border the Father’s Court O’ Tens. How I want to lash out at every overseer’s harsh treatment, at Neo’s indifference, and the Father’s devilry.

They will make it beyond the Iron Walls tonight.

With ten thousand breath prayers gushing from my heart, I commend the parents for having their children ready. Only three at a time to ward off suspicion. As soon as the parents pass the children into my hands, I transport them to the other side of the Walls. The Halo’s power surges from my heart to swirl golden heat in my bloodstream, kindling my veins. Lightning pulses up my spine. All my nerves are hyper aware.

This is a leap of faith, even if it’s more like a half-blind step since Nita has aligned with our cause. Thanks to her binding me, binding my Halo to her strength and power, we can help more. Since Neo and she aren’t in the soul-capturing business these days, Nita has joined me instead. Though she delayed her return to Valhalla—something about permitting anarchy to make it more challenging upon her return—I know why she’s remained in the Court O’ Tens despite its traumatic memories. My heart radiates warmth from the knowledge: she’s here for me.

With tears caressing her sunken cheeks, one mother reluctantly hands me her toddler. I choke on a raw breath as I curl my arms around the child. When the mother coughs, splattering blood onto the pallid ground like a crimson constellation, I lurch. Concerned, I knit my brows, my stomach sinking. I swallow the dread clogging my throat, eyes fixed on her, on her blood. Tenth Court farms don’t allow sick humans to live. They drain their blood, recycle it, and cleanse it while burning the remains to prevent the spread of any

infection.

The Goddess' new prophecy burns my blood and heart with the reminder of a *Scourge*.

I can't think. I can't stay here.

Instead, I suck in a deep breath, balancing the power in my heart. Just as Neo taught me, I harness my power, picturing a beautiful, soul-hammered, and tensioned scythe—even if my emotions are more like passionate whips of pure star fire.

I weigh my overflowing emotions—justice, righteous wrath, and most of all...*empathy*. My time here has given me the ability to release Empath Elysia from her cage more often. These raw emotions might torture me and strain my heart, but I need them more than ever.

The Court O' Tens is my gilded cage, but these children will find their freedom. I will return to Neo's Tower, knowing they are safe.

I don't stop until I've drained the Halo to its last dredges. It dims in a warning. Finally, each beautiful soul arrives at Jesula's Underground route.

*Well done, sweet girl*, Nita commends me through our mental link—the one *she* created. At our meals with Quillion, I'm forever asking questions, wondering how her fathomless abilities work.

*Sooooo sweet*, echoes Kitty with a soprano chirp.

I bite my lower lip, cheeks reddening from the awkwardness and my dark curiosity about Nita's DID systems. So far, I've only met Kitty, Amanita's hyper-sexualized alter, and a glimpse of Bryony, her tragic trauma alter. No, I can't deny how attractive Amanita is, how Kitty would love nothing more than to get her hands on me and every other body part. But that's a line we will never cross out of respect for my relationship with her *brother*. So, Kitty must be satisfied with just a kiss on the cheek. Okay, and I'll occasionally let her smack my ass or grind against me. Love and sexuality might be her only form of expression, her best and only gifts, but she still respects my boundaries. Our boundaries.

After the final child, I catch my breath and lean against an iron tree. The blood moon has begun its ascent: the only indicative of nightfall in the Father's Court O' Tens. That blood moon ignites my very cell matter with the memory of mine and Neo's wedding. And how he watched me with those pupils dilated, how I went off-script with my vows, how I truly captured my Prince that night.

Burning pins and needles pierce my flesh, my blood, my heart. I jolt,

almost crumbling from the pain. A gasp escapes my throat. The pain. Our blood oath.

Holy fucking shit! Neo is back.



THE ACHE in my blood grows but can't compare to the throbbing pain in my chest when the fang maids prepare me. Not even smuggling all ten children comforts me from this *mortification*.

Months ago, I could refuse to wear something. This time, I cannot refuse because of not one but *two* oaths that he's cashing in tonight. I bristle. Those vows taunt my mind, reminding me I'm at his mercy.

We believed our bond was stronger than his mind. Perhaps it could be if his heart was just gone—if it was frozen...not *replaced*. How can I hope to reclaim his memory when I must wrestle with this foreign heart Lux holds?

He's mocking me with this "outfit". According to the Prince's command, the fang-maids have taken a sample of my blood and used it as paint to scrawl the Tenth Court flames and roses all across my naked flesh. They scrawl gold petals around my areolae and rouge my nipples, leaving them exposed—like the flushed buds to the fire-blossom petals.

Gold teardrops roll down my cheeks while the fang maids finish with the designs on my back. They sweep my blood down my spine and around my backside. They tickle my navel with their brushes, twirling them down until they disappear in my fine gold curls just above my sex. Transparent swathes of crimson fabric attach to a thin gold belt trussed around my pelvis. They do nothing to cover my intimate regions.

By the time they're finished, I'm struggling for breath. My lungs constrict, throat tightening with the need to find Neo, to crash into his arms and offer me a reprieve—the only way to satisfy the blood oath. But an unbridled fury storms my system.

So, I test my boundaries. After they've buffed my skin with a needless glitter-glow and formed my curls into a crown on my head, I shrug into a white cotton robe and knot the sashes multiple times before I rush up the stairs and plunge through the shadow door.

He doesn't catch me.

I suck in a deep gust of air, searching for him.

He doesn't remember carrying me in the honeymoon hold to our bedroom. He doesn't remember my whispering praise of our "lovely, dark, and deep" bedroom. Somehow, the Triumvirate laws resolve the timing, but he still knows our blood oaths. He also knows I am a Princess, the daughter of Reyna Rose.

Everything else is a poison in his mind and a scourge in his substitute heart.

For a few moments, I stare out the window—my hand bathed in scarlet beams of the blood moon canting through the glass. I sense him, smell him one moment before his icy shadows and heated flames stroke me. Tickling my naked legs, curling around their lengths—just as they did on our wedding night. I startle from his essence closing in on me, his dark and masculine dragon energy, his scent of dark water and vetiver essence. Spine-tingling breaths of lust drift their heavy heat onto the side of my neck as his hands descend to the robe at my shoulders.

It takes everything in me not to flinch, but he undoubtedly senses my rattled nerves.

"This is not what I ordered you to wear," he snarls against my neck.

I shouldn't be surprised when I turn and find him stark naked like the first time, his vamp shaft bounteous, thick, and full—hard as his black diamond armor. Even if he hates me, his body knows me, wants me.

On our "honeymoon" night, I cursed and tried to escape him. If I tried to do it now, Neo would sniff out the lie from a mile away. I won't win his heart by pretending.

"Neo, this is mortifying," I repeat from history—one-sided history.

Ignoring my statement, Neo closes in. Backing me against the window, he grips the ties of my robe. An irritated huff leaves his throat as he works at the knots.

"You'll live with a mere few nights wearing whatever *I* desire, Elysia," he growls low and cruel, his fingers unraveling the next knot. Sorrow settles like ash in my stomach because his words don't belong to him. He doesn't kiss my cheek like he did the first time. "Even if it's only your blood-painted skin," he adds, voice scythe-like and dangerous.

"Where's Lux?"

He undoes another knot. "My *first* wife deserves some much-needed rest



after our honeymoon. She will undoubtedly be sore for quite some time. Now, it's your turn."

I wrinkle my nose, but Neo tugs hard at the next knot, pausing, glowering. He grips my chin hard. "Not one word from your smart mouth," he orders, voice bordering on deadly, expression dark beneath his furrowed black brows. His thumb rubs my lower lip. "It was your choice to pull a disappearing act on our wedding night. My Father informed me of how you used your power to wipe my memories of months before Lux's arrival. And how you broke our oath during that time. You will pay the price tonight. And perhaps redeem yourself in my bed."

So, that's what he believes. I press my teeth into my lip, hating his words, his dangerous, foreign tone. The breath of those words travels like poison into my lungs. I should thank him for filling in the gaps, but I won't. I promised the Father I'd rise to his challenge.

"Why my blood?" I narrow my eyes as Neo finishes, his thumb circling along my navel where gold vines blossom with rosebuds.

Neo jerks the robe sash from its belt loops. My breath hitches when he coils it around my neck, tugging me closer, eyes turning to pretentious silver weapons. "Oh, sweet bride, why do you think?"

I grimace. Inject ice into my voice. "No."

He cocks his head to the side, eyes like silver blades. "What was that?"

"No," I repeat louder through gritted teeth.

Neo testing boundaries is nothing new, but I still freeze, longing to go to Flight when his hands cup my hips, thumbs digging into my pelvic bones. "Shall I take the little fire cat and fling him back into the Chasm then?" He sharpens the invisible scythe, threatening me with the purpose behind our blood oath. "I have granted you peace for several weeks. Now, it's time you fulfilled your marital duty."

Neo slides his greedy hands up the sides of my body, mouth diving to my neck. His dark growls tremble down the curve of my throat, traveling to my breasts. Tonguing the painted blood, he snarls, appreciative. A hiss catches in my throat. The glint of his fangs winks at me. Liquid heat stirs in my center, and I gasp, working so hard against the desire rising inside me. My body grows firm, flush against him. My limbs shudder with the need to touch my lips to his, for him to lick his way around the edges and curves of my body as he once did.

"Be a good girl, satisfy me, and I'll make it pleasurable for you."

He could. He would. His voice, alone, would become a delicate caress to tickle my ear. The Prince of Destruction has centuries of practice in the art of pleasure. Heat thrashes in my core, inviting a shiver along my spine. If I narrow my world to his breath, his body, his masculine energy, and the deep purr of the dragon inside him, I could do this. My breasts, barely covered by the robe, grow heavy...and ache.

Horror gnaws at the lining of my heart—a reminder that I am more than just flesh and blood, no matter how starved. We crashed together like black holes of infinite gravity. I won't settle for anything less than all of him, than *everything*. I deserve that. So does he.

With his lips like warm gossamer along the curve of my neck, I somehow summon my resolve. My hips jut out at the same time that I shove him back. “No, *Neoptolemus*.” I mark him with my eyes and thrust an accusatory finger. “You will *not* treat me this way.” I fasten the robe ties again, pressing my mouth into a stubborn line.

Desperate, I plead to royalty. “I’m a princess if you remember.”

“And I am still the highest authority in the land.” He brandishes a finger, stabbing it at me like a spear. “Perhaps I’ll treat you like one of my harem girls, so your stubborn high and mighty ass may learn a little humility,” threatens Neo, closing the distance between us. I swallow a petrified knot as he cups my neck with one hand, fingers curving around my throat like a prison. “Perhaps I’ll put a collar on you, drag you to Court, and keep you beneath my throne as my pet.”

My breath hitches. He wouldn't.

Neo's fingers slither along my chest, and he glowers at the Grail piece at my neck. The Halo scalded a flawless circle in his flesh. Our wedding rings. He blinks, eyes narrowing in confusion. Hope floods me at the memory of the night I learned the ring was the first piece of the Grail.

Shaking off whatever sense of *Déjà vu*, he recovers, dismissing whatever his mind told him—he's returned to some master deception of mine. He probably believes I forced him to give me the ring.

Eyes burning, I stand my ground and stab out my chin. “If you want a pet, Neo, then you'll see just what a *bitch* I can be. But we know you'll do no such thing. I will not lie down like a dog. I'd rather be dragged and eaten by *hellhounds*.” Another lost memory, but I'll try with everything I have. Even if his mind doesn't remember, the *body* remembers. His heart just needs to follow.

Guilt throbs in my chest from how I used his analogy, comparing the girls in his harem to a dog. Puppies, maybe. I can't help but smile when I consider how those girls herd around him.

He told me his harem doesn't suffer—except when he's between his visits or the *Harem of Hades* filming. Our honesty oath was in place then, so I know it's true.

Hard and destructive, Neo grips my jaw and crashes his mouth on mine, silencing me. His tongue stabs past the seam of my lip to tangle with mine. Some hint of the passionate Prince of Hallowtide lingers deep inside him. The same master tongue that could make my fire-blossom weep. His deep groan reverberates in my breasts like a low purr of thunder.

Traitorous liquid gold drips more as I bend beneath his power force. A wealth of heat flourishes in my womb, curling downward, marrying with the coiled tension.

I've spent these months craving him. Replaying our honeymoon night again and again in my head. I've touched myself. Every night, I've tortured myself with a path that led to nowhere but a burning bridge. I've dreamed of his hands, his mouth, his tongue exploring every inch of my skin night after night. But never get off. Empath Elysia won't let me.

He shoves the sides of my robe down the curves of my shoulders to bare my front to him, scooping up my breast and pinching one rosebud nipple. My inner muscles clench as his mouth devours mine.

*Dissociate*, my desperate body pleads. I could go deep into my mind and become flesh and blood tonight. A trickle of gold oozes from my sex as if hinting, as if tempting, and granting permission. But I would break something far worse than our blood oath.

I would break my Ezer.

So, as his mouth descends to my collarbone and lower, I sharpen my resolve, indulge a wicked Halo thought, and let it fly.

Shoving him away, I thrust fiery chains from my chest, binding them tight around his wrists to secure him. Adrenaline igniting my nerves, I create more. I spiral them around his body to lock him in a temporary time-out, pull up each side of my robe to cover myself, and spear one finger at him. "You said yourself no touching *under* the lingerie you'd have me wear."

Neo growls, the muscle in his jaw hammering, every vein throbbing in his neck as I remind him of our oath when I'd traded a morsel of my dignity for Spitfire. His shadows destroy some of my Halo chains, but not nearly

enough. So, I circle him and reinforce the holy fire. “I’d say blood acts as a substitute for lingerie, so you’ve already broken the oath. Especially when only *supping* was the bargain.”

All Neo’s muscles bulge with the need to break the chains, but I narrow my eyes on his, deadpanning. I wince from the scent of his flesh smoldering from my power. It drains me, wears me until my limbs tremble, my hands shaky from the force. But I am his equal, even more in the bedroom.

So, I dip my head low, touch my fingers light to his cheek, and command his damn throne. “*Neo, you are my husband, and I am your wife. Until you choose to destroy Neoptolemus, the Prince of Destruction, I will use my Goddess-given authority over what you do with your fucking body when you want to use it against me!*” My anger burns hotter from my emotions, causing Neo to wince and bow his head, blowing smoke through his nostrils. Just like his Dragon. “You want to weaponize your body, Neo? Now, you know I’m armed, too.”

I wave my hand, retrieving my chains and storing them back into my heart, leaning against the wall for support. Breaths tattered, lungs shriveling.

Neo gets to his feet, his eyes practically roaring. He commands his shades away from my body to lick his wounds while I double-knot my robe ties. Something deep in his subconscious recognizes our bond, but I know it will take more than my smart mouth and my Halo to bring him back.

“There is no doubt in my mind now, Elysia,” Neo gnashes his teeth to his shadow-balms repairing his flesh. “You are some Everblood harpy. Heaven-sent for my destruction just as my Father warned.” He cocks his head to the side, eyes preying on me, promising wrath and ruin. That’s when I realize how much I traded in the Triumvirate. I curse myself for my own stupidity but also remember: Neo was there the whole time. Not even he could have predicted how far his Father would bend the Triumvirate oath. Adam and Eve on repeat to this Father’s serpent. How much of Neo’s memories has he tampered with?

Before I can object, before I can rouse my Halo, the Prince seizes the knots at the waist, dragging me until I crash against him. His hand snakes up to the back of my neck, where he scrapes the brand, causing a flare of pain. “With my brother’s damned mark on you, I can only assume you intend to bring back that bane of my soul.”

I breathe fury through my nostrils. The Father must have ripped the Altar right from his body and hid it elsewhere when he’d injected him with the

substitute heart. It means he warped Neo's knowledge of the prophecy. Neo only knows the *Prophecy of the Prince of Death*.

*Her hair to form the roots*

*Her tooth to birth his fang fruits*

*Her tear to wake his eyes*

*Her flesh to birth his disguise*

*And her blood to grant Death his life!*

I pinch my lips, unsure if I'm more infuriated by Neo, by the Father, or Thanatos. Anything will sound like a celestial deception to Neo.

When he peels his upper lip back to reveal his fangs and crawls them along my throat, he tells me, "You are my greatest curse, Elysia. And *Lux*...is my salvation!"

Everything in me freezes when his fangs prick my skin, drawing two tiny drops of my blood. Neo anchors his hand on the back of my neck, Dragon claws growing.

He flares his nostrils, scenting me, nose rubbing close to those blood drops weeping like tears down my neck. I hate how my body responds, how my back arches to that delirious touch. "Oh, how you've sought to torture me with your sweet, forbidden pure blood!" I shriek when he shakes me hard by the neck and commands my eyes, lowering his voice to a deep, predatory bass. Foreign and destructive. This is not my Neo. "Or perhaps not so forbidden after all..."

My eyes fly open wide. He's going to make me pay.

Driven by anger, Neo destroys any chance of my summoning my Halo. Triggered, all I can do is freeze from my damned limbic system overpowering me when Neo scrapes his fangs along my skin. No, he can't bite me, but he can slash and scrape all he desires. And he does. Until I *bleed*.

My husband, no...not my husband. *Neoptolemus* doesn't permit me to scream. He grips my wrists, forcing them behind my back to prevent me from raking my nails along his chest.

Sudden frost nips at my flesh, at Death's brand, prickling me with the reminder of his protection.

*Noralice!* I scream.

An invisible tether hauls me right out of *Neoptolemus'* arms and into a tremulous, dark haze—like shooting through the eye of a black hole to the long-lost side of the Soul Plane.

*Neoptolemus'* furious rage fades like a nightmare behind me. "Yes, run to

my brother, you heavenly harpy!”

Weeks since I crossed into the Soul Plane. Weeks since Thanatos summoned me.

Now, I'm shaking inside his arms. They possess me like a tomb while the Prince of Death narrows his eyes blacker than a warpath. He gazes down at the bloodied fang marks and asks in the deep and seductive voice of a reaper, “What the devil has that hellish imposter done now?”

## CHAPTER 2

# A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM

I stare at the black hole eyes of Thanatos and shiver from his frost sprouting tiny barbs along my neck—like a cold water-serpent to slither toward Neo’s fang bite.

At first, I panic until I realize what he’s doing. His frost whispers into the broken flesh to slow the blood, then his Death shades wrap around my flesh like a sacred sepulcher to *annihilate* the marks. He erases them.

My whole body shudders.

Neo triggered my trauma, and Thanatos has just *reaped* it—I can’t fathom what bewilders me more. I tremble against his very-clothed chest. While Neo prefers little else but his chaotic shades to clad his slabbed fortress of a body, Thanatos is veiled and enigmatic—black robes cloaked and daggered to his form like a second skin. It doesn’t hide his own marble musculature, his masculine prowess not like Neo’s warrior but more like...a *god*. A god who was only ever conquered by my Creator mother. Not by me.

Slowing my gasps, I press my head to his chest...and breathe in the scent of Death—far sweeter than I’d ever imagined. Like snow-clad black roses.

I flinch when he strokes the top of my head.

“Shh...” his hushing voice soothes my quavering. My shoulders sink as he removes the pins from my hair, one by one, so my crown of curls sinks, cascading to protect my face. He knows everything I need.

Here, in this tattered reality, his domain, I am not a Princess. I am simply...*Elysia*. Here, I am a gold scribble of soul. My spirit is more alive than ever, it’s difficult to believe I have ever been part of a world where my body requires such mortal necessities as lungs to house breath and bones to shelter marrow. Only blood and heart apply here.



And nothing but Death's godlike fortress surrounding me.

Somehow, I find my voice like a breath prayer in this deep darkness. "What am I supposed to make of all this, Thanatos?" I tilt my chin up, eyes stalking him, just waiting for him to thrust my mouth open, ready to steal my tooth, raze my flesh, and rob me of my blood. All so he may live again. Fear pulses through me, thrumming my blood. "Neo bites me, and then you just heal me without expecting anything?"

Thanatos narrows his eyes to slits. Startled, I almost leap back, expecting that black hole to devour me as he responds, "First, the Goddess made it very clear that your tooth and anything else must be granted to me by your willing hand. Death may not be bound to the rules of earth, but we certainly abide by the laws of the divine, Elysia. Not even I will tangle with the Goddess or her winged beast servants. And second: I did not heal you. I merely erased what my brother destroyed, something I gain much pleasure from."

My eyes fall, not in shame but in humility. "At least you're honest."

Sighing, Death traces his finger across my jawline, coaxing my chin upward. Tingles break out all over my soul skin. "Would it please you to learn the blood oaths that bind you and my brother also apply to me? I cannot lie to you, Elysia, even if I desired." I wish his breath didn't wrap around me like a sonata of shades and ice, calming me until I feel safe.

"So..." I lick my lips and scrutinize him while slowing my breath, "...I must sleep in your bed every night...with you?"

"Only when you are in my tower," Thanatos defines, pursuing my eyes.

"The Soul Plane," I discern, whipping my head all around at the room that is eerily similar to Neo's. I peer over Thanatos' shoulder, discovering the same bone door, the same multi-leveled suite that is stipulated as mine, the same archways leading to other unexplored rooms. "Is it all like one upside-down black mirror?"

"As much as I appreciate your oversimplification," purrs Thanatos, his finger departing from my jawline and his frost slipping from my neck, though the dark sanctum of his form lingers as he finishes, "the Soul Plane cannot be contained to a mere reversal. The only reason you view it as such is thanks to my glamour for your rather *mortal* eyes."

"Will you show—"

"No."

Death lowers his head, suffocating all my preying curiosity in one pupil dilation, his fragrant breath carousing my face. I part my lips, wanting to sink

into his dark abyss, wondering if he desires me as much as I do him.

“You are not ready to see the fullness of my domain, Elysia,” he diverts me before offering a faint smile. “But you are in dire need of a bath.”

He gestures to my body. I peer down at the blood designs that have transferred to my skin and cringe. Only then do I realize the bathrobe has been exchanged for a chemise, empire-waisted with a lacy bodice.

“How in the—”

Thanatos rubs his eyes, sighing...but not perturbed as I imagine Neo would be. I am so new to this world, and he is showing far more restraint and patience with me. He remains calm and collected, proffering an explanation, “The Soul Plane is not bound to the laws of nature. You will always arrive in my realm garbed in your heart’s truest desire. The only transference that may occur is *blood*. Hence...” he sweeps his hand to the adjoining bath...except Thanatos’ is filled to the edges and covered in—

I break away from him to approach the bath with a soft smile. Warmth blossoms in my chest. “Rose petals?”

“Such as they are,” Thanatos breathes behind me.

What they are is death. I sit on the edge of the bath and dip my hand into the layers of shrunken, dead petals, twirling my finger into the rose corpses. “I love them.”

“You do?” Thanatos’ voice is tinged with surprise, which honestly bewilders me because I believe he understood me in deeper ways than Neo. Perhaps I’ve been wrong. He may hold my greatest secret of Noralice, but not even Death can fathom all that is *mine*.

*I love them more!* I choke on a raw breath but cage my emotions, hold back my glistening tears. Neo had to fucking work for everything. Thanatos will, too. Except, I will set the stage this time.

“The water is icy cold, but you may warm it with your Halo,” Death mentions as I begin to slide the strap of my chemise down the curve of my shoulder. So comfortable with him. Nothing like Neo. And why not? He’s already stripped me to my most vulnerable level. He knows the rawest, deepest part of me in a way Neo never could.

Because Thanatos was there.

“I’ll get in...” Feeling mischievous, I smirk and incline my neck so I may gesture, “...but only if you join me.”

When Thanatos blinks, the black hole of his eyes subsiding to reveal not silver but father-fucking *gold!*—I thrill in that tiny but splendid victory. I

clench my hands to prevent myself from clapping and jumping up and down. Claiming his shock and that seductive gold as a holy rolling stone, I define, “If I am going to get all wet and wanting, it’s only fair that you be, too. Besides, I need someone to wash the blood from my back.” I border on squealing as I test him.

With heat swelling within my entire being and flushing my cheeks, I shrug the chemise from my shoulders so it pools to the floor. Thanatos’ control confounds me because his eyes do not retreat from mine. Not even to blink. As if he is not even *tempted*. By now, Neo’s eyes would be vagabonds roaming my body.

“I will join you, Elysia. But only if you resist the urge to compare me to my brother.”

His words are a scythe piercing right through my Haloed heart. His words have exposed my soul far more than I’ve hinted. Sighing, the back of my neck hot with shame, I slide into the bath...and go deep. When I emerge, I almost expect to find Thanatos centimeters from my face. Instead, he waits for me to rise, then immediately positions himself behind me.

When I open my mouth to object to his full garb, Thanatos leans down and murmurs in a voice like a winter’s night, “Do not ever ask me to remove my clothes.” His hands cup a collection of dead rose petals, then compile them along my shoulders. They feel like soft sackcloth. “In your words...we are not there yet.”

“Yet?”

I lean into him. Though the water is icy, I decide not to heat it. I welcome the gooseflesh budding along my skin, tranquilizing the heated orb of my gold flesh.

Thanatos drapes the blossom scraps lower till I sense the water reddening from the blood paint. I chew on my inner cheek, uncomfortable at the pinkish water, until Thanatos touches one finger to the liquid, obliterating the blood. My lips part in a silent gasp. Neo would cup a handful...he would suck—

“Elysia.” A solitary warning from behind me. Not a growl. Thanks to the bond and as my soul is bared, he knows all my thoughts, my emotions.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize and press the heel of my palm to my head. “In the real world, thoughts...musings are not easily read. Even with mine and Neo’s bond, we can still shut the door...” I shake my thoughts out, wishing I could execute them as easily as Thanatos.

“I can teach you.”

“What?” I swing my head back, chin in line with the curve of my shoulder.

“To control your thoughts just as my brother has taught you to control your Halo and emotions.”

Raising my legs so I may touch my chin onto my knees, I consider his offer. Do I want to feel indebted to Death? He already owns the greatest chunk of my soul, even if he hasn't used it against me...yet. I remember his words in his Tower. I remember Nita's confirmation: *he plays the long game*.

Pinching my lips and furrowing my brow, I shake my head. I refuse to be his pawn.

While Thanatos scrubs away the last of the blood, I ask, “Why did you summon me tonight?”

“You called for me in our bond. I answered.” Finished with my back, Thanatos scatters the dead rose petals. A few land on my sodden curls like an offering.

“At least you kept your promise.” After all, he did tell me in the desolation of his Tower that he would protect me from *Destruction*. Licking my lips, I recognize my mental *Noralice* was a cry for help, and Thanatos chose to come to my aid.

“While he was away...” I prompt him, rubbing my lips together to boldly approach his throne with an accusatory question, “You did not summon me for weeks. Why?”

Brushing aside my curls, combing his fingers to raise my hair above my neck, Thanatos bends his cool mouth to his brand in a brush of a kiss and confesses, “You needed to learn to sleep on your own.”

I snap my head back, flicking my eyes to seek his gold beyond the dark holes.

At first, Thanatos deadpans in a silent stalemate because we both know he owes me absolutely nothing. If anything, I owe him. No, I scold my inner landscape, my spine prickling. I will never owe the Prince of Death or Destruction anything. Chin rising, I remind myself that I am the Halo-Bearer. Higher than them. Some nagging voice at the back of my mind whispers its treason: not in the Soul Plane.

So, I seek Elysium, paradise in Thanatos' iris orbs, and his ice shivers the hairs on the nape of my neck.

Who the fuck am I courting?

Thanatos relents, shoulders dropping, chest lifting to take a deep breath—

as if he's taking a leap of faith. He reveals the truest glimmer of his eyes. I arch my neck, and a raspy gasp escapes my throat. I whimper. Tears shimmer on the corners of my eyes as I behold the expansion of those irises that remind me of a morning star. Of honey from the hive, autumn fruits, and golden sunlight. While I bear a ring of gold, Thanatos holds the very entrance to heaven like an angel's ladder. The gloriola and crown of the constellations. Ten billion chandeliers could never hope to compete.

Nearly blinded, I somehow harness the strength to keep staring...just as I faced Neo's dilated pupils on my wedding night. My heart ricochets in my chest until Thanatos finally narrows those effervescent orbs to a slit, "Sweet *Elysia*..." he speaks my name in a low hum of a blessed recitation.

I close my eyes and memorize the recitation as if it's a deathly lullaby, a requiem. I bind the melody around my heart and gird it around my neck. While Neo sought my heart and flesh, my mind, here in the Soul Plane, Thanatos tempts my soul!

The bath seems to grow colder, the water numbing my skin.

Raising my curls, the Prince of Death touches his black ice mouth to his brand and whispers like a prayer within our bond:

*Take this kiss upon the brow!  
And, in parting from you now,  
Thus much let me avow —  
You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.*

OH, Saints! Holy fuckety fuck!

With my tears falling into the water to tint it gold and with my Halo like a glowing frost to mirror Thanatos' power, I lower my brows and dethrone him, "You supercilious *ass*! You dare quote Poe to *me*? Take me to sleep now!" I grin, revealing my teasing taunt. Ultimately, I command him here—just as I did Neo.

A smile spreads across his lips from the connection we've formed. He bows his head. "As you wish, *my love*."

Oh, Saints!

Death gathers my naked, glowing form into the tomb of his bed and lulls me to sleep with his breath upon my neck. Safe, safer than ever in his Soul Plane where he is ruler, where his protection of ice and shadows folds around me like a shield, I breathe in his scent.

Overwhelmed by the torrent of emotions inside me, from the frost nipping my soul form to the craving fire in my core, I latch onto that scent of snow and dead rose petals on his bed. I rest my head on the pillow and murmur to the Prince behind me, "Thank you for answering when I called."

"I will always answer...whether you need me or not."

My Halo forms a gleaming shield, binding to his shadows, his wintry presence. His hands never stray. At least my thighs don't weep with gold liquid. Because of the bond between us, this emotion runs *deeper*. I don't feel the need to conjure a chemise.

Naked and unashamed, I stay Elysia...and sleep inside this soul dream within a soul dream. Safe in the arms of Death.

## CHAPTER 3

# “MAYBE THIS WOULD BE A PERFECT TIME TO DISCUSS HOW QUILLION HOPES I’LL BEAR YOUR CHILD!”

When I wake, it’s to Thanatos’ breath on the back of my neck, his mouth against my curls.

The split-second memory of the trauma of my night of a hundred bite marks returns, and I wait for the pain. I brace myself for my limbic system to catapult me into a tsunami of screams, but there is nothing but a peaceful hushing glow on my skin. Like stardust and frost welcoming one another.

“You will never feel any triggers with me, Elysia,” coos Thanatos, his hand slipping from my waist so he may part the curls on the back of my neck. Still, I shiver to his familiar mouth rubbing against his mark.

“Why?”

“Do not ask me today. It’s time for you to return to your room.”

“It’s *their* room,” I specify, lowering my head, wishing I could stay here and go back to sleep.

“And miss out on the opportunity to verbally denigrate that imposter of my brother? And his faux bride? Not a chance, Elysia.” Thanatos departs from the bed, and I can’t help but smile from his assurance. I crane my neck to where he fetches my chemise from the floor before tossing it to me. “I look forward to learning all about it when we meet again.”

*Again...* I chew on my lower lip, pondering, then shrugging the chemise over my head and shoulders. At least I will get to see Quillion. And Nita, undoubtedly. Finished with the chemise, I procrastinate with a groan and dangle my hand over the bed, prepared to climb out when a familiar hot tongue scratches at my palm...followed by a little love bite.



I snap my head up and squeal to my hellcat pouncing on the bed to tackle me. “Spitfire! How in the—”

“Chasm creatures may cross the boundaries of the Soul Plane,” explains Thanatos while Spitfire licks my face, pinning me down with his newfound strength. He’s now the size of a small mountain lion. “He must have followed your soul trail. Probably took him all night.”

Hopeful at the prospect, I peer up at Thanatos and plead with him, “Can you keep him here? Protect him?”

Thanatos knits his brows over his hooded eyes. “Why?”

“He referenced that Lux would need a week to recover. I’ll break the oath every day, Thanatos. I won’t let him use my body. Not that way,” I hint, trembling but shaking my thoughts from the blood paint the previous night.

Thanatos chuckles and clasps his hands behind him. “You won’t need to worry about him the next few nights. He will scent death on you.”

Death doesn’t seem enough to ward off Destruction, especially given his hatred for his brother. Surely, it would drive Neoptolemus to the extreme until he wishes to ravage me more, but I don’t question Thanatos. Why would anyone?

First, I twirl my Halo light into a fist-sized orb inside my palm and grin as Spitfire lashes his tongue to lap up my flames and sate his aching belly. A warm lightness in my chest, I curl my fingers into his thick, furry hide, marveling at the heat blooming along his belly. His arrowed tail erupts into a flicker as he finishes his treat before I grant him a molten meal of flame shreds.

Finally, I climb out of bed and steady myself before making my way to the Prince. “Thanatos?” I squint, seeking those halcyon irises through the black holes, but he offers nothing more than a starry twinkle in his pupils. What a paradox he is to Neo. Even his dark skin, perhaps only one shade lighter than Destruction’s, echoes frost, not flames. And his hair is not silver but the purest obsidian black—and silky as an angel’s wings.

When Thanatos chortles low, I flush. My Halo mimics my embarrassment with a rosy glow curling from my skin and even from my curls.

“I’ve never been compared to an angel,” Thanatos confesses, hands falling to his sides. “But I’ll welcome any of your future musings on my Princehood. Perhaps you will happen upon the right one at some point. But you have a question for me before you depart...”

I part my lips, then purse them, hesitating. Thanatos doesn’t comb his

fingers through my hair like Neo or brush his knuckles across my cheek. No, Thanatos is far more *calculating* in his pressuring encouragement. He prickles frost along my spine, so I gasp and arch, my body collapsing against his. He smirks down at me as my breath quickens from those minuscule ice crystals needling all the way up to the site of his sickle. This is Thanatos' special touch—reserved for me. His feather-light fingertips of hoarfrost: an icy kiss that both heightens and soothes my nerves.

Inhaling a sharp breath when his fingers retreat, I gesture behind my back, wondering, “Your mark...”

“Yes?”

“I understand the sickle is a reaper symbol. It's just not what I expected.”

“Did you expect a skull?”

For a moment, the corner on one side of his mouth tugs up. A shadow of a smile. Squeezing my shoulders together, I smile and shake my head. “No, I just imagine there's a story.”

“So there is, but you will be late if you don't depart. To keep it short and sweet, the sickle is older than the scythe, which evolved after it. My baby brother prefers the long-handled scythe, but I prefer the sickle. Used on a smaller area, one must lean over...” When Thanatos lowers his head toward me, a vein thrums in his dark neck—not with silver blood but black while he finishes, “...to small cut with each precise swing.”

My core churns heat, and I inwardly chastise myself before Thanatos shakes his head and proclaims, “No, Elysia. Do not ever condemn your fire blossom as you dub it. You may control your emotions, your responses however you deign. But never chastise them.”

One solemn Death fingertip traces my open palm from my left fourth finger and follows the gold vein along my arm, the same vein erroneously believed to lead straight to the heart. How surprisingly *romantic*.

Thanatos then flexes all his fingers and drops his hand to finish, “Not even when it seems to betray you. In fact...” Thanatos raises his finger with a wry smile, “Give him the fire blossom today when you dress for breakfast. Remind the Prince of Destruction of your holy flames. You will bring him to his knees...eventually. Now, off with you and our dream within a dream.”

*And to the land of the living...and Destruction*, I echo within our bond, heave a longing sigh, already missing him. Closing my eyes, I sense the portal of the Soul Plane that is always open to me. Much like Neo's shadow door—except Thanatos' is comprised of ice crystals and darkness.

Once he skirts his hand to part the crystals and shadows, and I embark beyond the veil, a supermassive black hole of solar masses launches me back into the center of Destruction's tower within moments. Wind almost knocked out of me, I must catch my breath.

I'm in Neo's bed, dressed in the same white robe from last night but without the blood designs. No fang mark, thanks to Thanatos. I snap my head up when Neo deep-snarls next to me. As if he's waited for me all night. Fear cripples me, but my blood rushes at the same time.

Before I can rise, Neo pins my struggling arms to the bedpost and mounts me—in his full and naked glory. Yes, he's waited for me...all night. Oh, heavens! His eyes dilate with hunger and lust. My heart slams against my chest as every muscle in his body bulges, and he thrusts the robe to bunch around my hips, preparing to plunge into my sex.

I'm ready to...*burst*.

"Oh, hell!" he growls through gritted teeth and immediately releases me because I have burst—well...sort of.

*You pretentious bastard!* I yell at Thanatos in our bond because while Neo slammed the door to our blood oath, Thanatos has left his wide open. *He will scent death on me...not Death!*

Thanatos chuckles at the little secret he scented on me first.

I laugh. A wild, violent heat blossoms throughout me despite the bloating and the mild cramps. No regrets because I have *never* felt more thrilled to have my period! It's the only time I bleed *red* and not gold. While Neo flares his nostrils, I practically rub my bloodied sex into his sheets. "Aww, poor squeamish Prince...can't handle a little *destruction*?" I devilishly remove my white robe and press my fingers to my bloody thighs.

"Stop that now!" fumes Neo, backing away to the other side of the bed as I circle my fingertips along my flesh.

"Would you like to fetch me a cork then, Neo?" I get a wicked glint in my angel eyes and leap, pounce on him, and wrap my legs around his hips to wipe my sanguinary sex all over his tickle prick of an enormous dick. "Yours will do nicely." My heartbeat thrums like hummingbird wings. Weaving my arms around his neck, I lick his agape mouth and rub my heavy breasts along his chest.

"Ugh..." Neo chucks me back onto the bed and gets off, examining his pussy-painted lower regions.

I spread my glorious body, my fire blossom weeping crimson all over his

bed while I mock him, “Did you know in an average lifespan, a girl will bleed for about *seven years*? Imagine all the people I could drown with that blood.”

“You win this round, Elysia,” Neoptolemus snarls.

I rise to curl my knees up to my chest but keep my legs parted to give him a good view of my sex. Tilting my head to the side, I sweetly hum to Neo, “Maybe this would be a perfect time to discuss how Quillion hopes I’ll bear your child!”

“At least your anger last night makes sense now,” he stabs.

I flip him off, then crouch on all fours with a feral glint in my eyes as I hiss like an adorable plague. Immediately, Neo turns his back, and I revel in those tense muscles rolling as he storms away. Practically dancing, I make a break for the Infinity Wardrobe, more eager than ever to get dressed and pleasure in Quillion adding more tallies to my chart.

After the Infinity Wardrobe showers me off, I select my undergarments and proudly stick a smart pad that sucks my blood into its inner tech-fibered lining to be vaporized so the fabric can be replenished and used again and again. Best feminist invention ever! What was that Thanatos had said? Remind the Prince of Destruction of my holy flames? Huh...I peruse the options, scrolling until I find the perfect gown.

“I’m going to break Neo’s fucking chart!” I declare and tap the program.



“RESPECT SUCKS!” Kitty fawns over me as I slide my hand along the railing to greet my allies in the Commons. “That’s it, I am officially drawing up my own contract. I get to hit on Elysia once a day.” She raises her finger and taps the side of her head. “Pretty please, Nita?”

Nita’s spine, like an exalted throne, postures, her crown of horns glittering as she approaches me with her thigh-high, black velvet and high-heeled boots skimming the floor. Her form-fitting strapless gown, black and speckled with diamonds, reminds me of the constellations—apart from where it slits to expose the winter twilight skin of her thighs, barely skimming her hips. “What does our glowing angel have to say about that?” Nita wonders

before bowing into a crouching Kitty.

I shrug but beam, alerting the alter with a kiss to her cheek, “You can hit on me all you want, Kit...but no touchies. Okay, one twerk a day. Gorgeous shoulder shawl!” I admire the lacy piece that crests Nita’s shoulders and drapes around her back. Along with her snug black gloves, they perfectly complement her sexy, yet feminine gown.

“I hardly know why you are paying attention to anything I wear,” Nita declares and waves her hand. “You’ve even impressed Tourmaline.” She drags one finger along the side of her head and gazes at my “fire-blossom” gown, as I’ve fondly dubbed it.

“And me!” Quillion echoes from the breakfast hall, rocking back in his chair. Oops, a little too much since he falls, his ascot tumbling to flip against his mouth. I giggle as he rights himself and glides out into the Commons. “Is that a painted bodice?” he practically squeals.

“My personal ‘fuck you’ to Neo.” I preen and touch the crimson and gold flames the Infinity Wardrobe sealed to my breasts. They branch off but leave my cleavage of autumn gold skin between my breasts untouched and along my upper chest and navel, of course. “He had me painted naked in his Tenth Court rose designs last night.”

“Prick!” Kitty sticks out her tongue.

Quillion touches a gauzy blood-red strap that dangles low along my upper arms. And Kitty practically sings over the three-layered fire-fold ruffles—scarlet on top—that drapes like petals to the middle apricot layer with the innermost fabric of brilliant sunshine yellow. All the ruffles sweep past my knees in an inverted V-center slit.

When Kitty rubs her cheek along my erotic apricot ruffle, she shrieks, “Holy fire-fuck! Do you smell *that*, Nita?”

“I do.” Quillion lifts a finger.

Nita returns, posturing. “Oil of the angels,” she banters, crossing her arms over her chest. I imagine Kitty hears her response through their inner bond. Does Tourmaline?

I bat my eyes at the two vampires scenting the air and tap my matching blood-red lip to express, “Neo had a bit of a *surprise* in bed this morning.” I’ve even adorned my hair in that same crowned style he’d had his fang-maids arrange last night. A single gold circlet to rest on my brow. My reclamation.

Nita pivots her whole body to the Commons staircase, hips thrusting out,

“I trust *our brother* has learned his lesson not to mess with the badass battleground of a woman’s vagina.”

I spin to where Neo marches down the staircase with *Lux* on his arm. I’ve prepared one of my verbal spars in advance, so I overthrow my Haloed heart that flutters with raging butterflies and quip, “We may have battled to the blood moon last night. But my red sun rose proud and splendid with her war victory this morning.”

Quillion opens his digital interface tattoo and begins recording, awarding Neo with only one check mark and me with...multiple.

Lux sidles up against Neo, who doesn’t bother to respond but instead leans over and touches his lips to her brow while winking at me. Supercilious ass! Envy thrashes inside me. That’s *mine*.

At the base of the staircase, she touches his arm. While his shades and flames ride her like a carousel, she stands on her tiptoes to kiss the side of his neck. Her lips seem swollen, and I understand it’s due to the aftermath of their honeymoon.

“What an encouragement to see you in a better mood after you debased our bed earlier,” Neo mocks me, upper lip curling to glimmer a fang.

“Oh, you mean my Satan’s sacrificial waterfall?” I hint and stand with my hands on my hips, reveling when his eyes roam to my painted breasts. “Perhaps I can fill your bath tonight, Neo.”

“Um...” Quillion’s words trip over themselves as he tugs at his ascot. “The Satan comment, Neo...I—” he rubs his chin.

“Just give her a damn hundred, *Bishop*...” Neo seethes before slinking his hand around Lux’s waist, but when she winces, he sighs and stops. I pinch my eyes, focusing on one of her marks...or several since so much of her skin is exposed.

*Yes, sweet Ezer...Nita tries to assuage my suspicions, my mortification. There are one hundred and one fang marks in all, including his. The same road map as yours. And he has sunk his fangs into every last one throughout their honeymoon. One hundred days and one hundred marks.*

I bristle but make my way to Nita to continue our mental conversation while granting Neo a decent view of my painted back. *Just saying...when this is all said and done, when I put your damned origin in the ground and close up the Chasm, I’d better get a one-hundred and one-day honeymoon!*

*Valhalla will be yours if you desire it.*

“Elysia...” Lux’s voice sparkles behind me.

The guttural low growl in Nita's throat is not lost on me. Lux approaches me, but I stay Nita's protective instincts because Lux is inevitably a pawn of the Father. Regal, I raise my chin because this silicone halo hussy won't intimidate me. Not even with the spider web-like lace that barely covers her breasts and sweeps to curve along her sex—a simple gauzy lining covering her privates. Long and sinuous, white drapes cascade from her hips to exhibit her swan-white legs. She also wears a single birdcage lace veil over her eyes, whatever that's about.

Lux clasps my hands and stands on her tiptoes to kiss my cheeks. I steel my spine as the soft feathered wings of her circlet crown brush my crowned hair. "I know I am first-wife, and your history with my husband has been *tempestuous*, but I truly hope we may all be family." She squeezes my hands, her gold eyes glistening with tears. "I dream of the sound of our children's laughter filling the Tenth Court!" I guffaw at that last statement, swallowing back bile, ready to interrupt when she continues sing-songing, "Of course, I'll have the oldest ones and the most as the *shining* first choice for Neo's bed."

*Steady, Elysia, Nita declares in my head. Remember the end goal: his heart. Be that Ezer Queen I know you are. You will command his throne and overthrow her pedestal.*

Adopting Ezer, I lean in to touch my lips to Lux's cheek, tap her shoulder, and sweetly banter, "Because that worked out so well for Rachel *and* Leah, didn't it?" Not that I am Rachel or Leah, but it's still a blessing to watch Lux's cheeks flush right before I flick one of her ghostly white tresses and saunter past Neo, beaming.

Before I can escape, he seizes my arm, smoldering those silver blades right onto my gold-ringed thrones. Nita hisses from the invasion, but I shake my head to her and face Neo, burning my eyes against his.

"You will treat my first-wife with the respect she deserves, my bride," he growls through gritted teeth. "Or we will see how well you can play *Bathsheba* to my David."

Oh, no, he didn't. That fucker did *not*!

Behind me, Quillion tilts his fedora down over his eyes because he can't bear to watch.

*I give you full credence to emasculate him, Ezer, Nita liberates me. Any punishment will fall on my back.*

So, I raise myself proud and sure—higher than him—clutch the Grail ring between my breasts, and pronounce with my chin high, "The next time you

get the urge to try and *debase me*, Neo, remember that David had to send *soldiers* to bring Bathsheba to him. And she *freely* left David the morning *after*. Because she never fucking wanted to be there in the first place. And she still ended up commanding his throne as his *true* first wife at the end while he went on to ruin.”

Kitty fans herself, Quillion gives me another hundred, and Nita...bows at the waist. A low, deep growl buds in the Prince’s throat, but I wrinkle my nose and twist my arm from his grip. Chest tight and muscles tense, I flip him off and head for the breakfast hall, already plotting how I’ll get Thanatos back for the “he will scent *death* vs *Death*” mis-capitalization.



## CHAPTER 4

# FROM THE DEPTHS OF MY PURE-BLOODED HEART, I CANNOT ALLOW DEATH TO TAKE HER

Despite how the Prince spent the entire breakfast serving Lux at the head of the table, nothing can mess with my ‘red sun’ victory. Not even when Neo stands at the end, narrows his deadly hooded eyes to slits, and commands me, “You will come to Court today. I wish to keep my eye on you.” Neo knits his brows low and snaps his head to Quillion. “My bishop will escort you both...”

Nita rises to confront her brother, stalking around the table where his back faces her. “Neo, for the love of the Goddess!”

Something is lost on me. Some mental stream she has read in his mind, but Neo swings back to his sister, seething, “It is that Goddess’ blessing in *her* heart that is my greatest curse, Nita. And she will learn to respect me in my Court.”

“*Our* Court,” Nita reminds him of their significant bond—one bought and paid for with their blood that dark night in the dungeon where Neo’s Dragon came face to face with Nita’s Hydra. Her curled, keen horns stab the air as if reminding him of how he’d signed away his Destruction license to his Father so he could buy Nita’s freedom.

I study Neo’s body language. How the tension in his shoulders abates for a few precious moments when he stalemates with Nita. Even from the side, I discern how his mouth curves down, his eyes turning to soft silk—alert to a fresh wound. Wounds his Dragon had caused and the ones she’d grown her alters from.

“Nita...” his voice is tender as he pronounces her name, and I close my eyes and slow-tiptoe into the backdoor of our bond, asking and seeking but not knocking yet.

I lurch when Nita tethers my consciousness into their bond, folding around me like a net of silver blood. *Neo, we love*, she repeats from our history the first time he asked her about her opinion of me, desperate for her approval.

*I do not.* His words destroy my hopes, dimming my Halo currents to a deep place that only dreams of lovely and dark. I curl my fingers along my aching throat and bite back tears as Nita combats Neo.

*You will. She is your true bride.*

Then, Lux's hands tread onto Neo's back. I stiffen, insides boiling because his whole countenance changes, warped from that hellish heart inside his chest. His shadow overthrows Nita as he stalks out of the breakfast hall but doesn't neglect to jab his finger back at Quillion to issue the order, "See to it, Bishop!"

Neo ends the command by throwing a teacup at the vampire, who is still content reading his morning news. Their age-old pattern. but this time, Quillion does *not* catch the teacup. Instead, he dodges to the side so the teacup shatters against the wall behind him. Neo growls low, nostrils flaring, eyes centering on his closest friend for a few moments, giving me the full awareness that Quillion's miss was intentional...and *symbolic*. As if something between them is broken. Because of me.

Shoulders sinking, I lower my head because I can't help but blame myself for it all.

"No, sweet angel," Nita reassures me, either reading my body language or my stray thoughts. She cups my shoulder once Neo has stormed off in a huff. "You are the only one who can save him. Save all of us," she adds and leans in to kiss my brow.

I fondly rocket a handful of tiny little stars to twirl around her horns. "You saved him first, Nita." She saved me in a way, too. My heart warms at my sister's approval, her alliance.

Behind us, Quillion clears his throat, and I pivot to survey him as he closes his news app, righting his ascot and standing to offer Lux and me his arms. "Lady brides?"

Lux touches my arm. "I meant what I said, Elysia. I do truly want us to become sisters," she mentions in her lilting soprano, far too flawless of a voice.

I have to refrain from allowing my eyes to wander across the familiar roadmap on her flesh—the bites I still feel every damn day like writhing

serpents preying on the shining fortress of my heart. Sometimes, they still squeeze. Neo's fang mark on our honeymoon was the only exception—the one time I freely allowed a vampire to bite me. Except for Thanatos' spirit in the tower.

But the Father ensured my honeymoon mark disappeared when he took Neo's memories. Unfortunately, Thanatos' sickle mark remains along the back of my neck.

Whether out of pity or logic, I can't help but soften to Lux. If she is simply the Father's pawn, then she deserves every mercy I can grant. I don't have to like her, and I certainly don't have to trust her. I'll tread carefully and learn about this new wife. Perhaps Thanatos will be of service later.

I sigh, prepared to open my mouth to make amends when Lux adds, "I empathize with your struggles, Elysia." Her voice lowers an octave, and her eyes swing to my nether regions. I tense when she throws her arms around my neck and hums in my ear, "Except in my case, Neo's been making me bleed every day for the past hundred and one of our honeymoon."

All of me tenses. Nails biting into my sides, I hiss through my clenched teeth. When she feathers a kiss across my astonished parted lips and takes Quillion's extended arm, I scream inside Nita's head, *I take it all back! She's the fucking devil in human flesh!*

*Elysia...*Nita's silver eyes kindle like righteous angel spirits upon mine when she admits, unashamed, *we despise!*

As the Tenth Court's high bishop, Quillion escorts Lux and me and serves as a worthy buffer. But my Halo light weaves around his body to nip at Lux's transparent gown folds. Unfortunately, I find myself on the receiving end when hers don the form of white serpents to coil around my legs and shoot into my sex to bite my sex. My pulse spins. Oh, that scarlet, little strumpet!

Always the perfect gentleman, Quillion acts with grace and dignity and cool composure as I pit my Halo against her faux one. He doesn't balk at how the flames lick at his tailcoats and singe its ends. Unlike Nita and I, who are adorable plagues, Quillion is simply adorable with his warm mahogany skin, dark and glassy eyes, and forward-fashionista persona, along with his love of trashy romance novels and celebrity gossip—and occasional rainbow-painted wings.

Nita struts ahead of us. Make that Kitty since Nita doesn't strut.

Déjà vu rears inside me when Quillion escorts us to the highest level of the cavernous and cadaverous, five-leveled Court arena with its sprawling

stadium seats, raised outer circle, and inner Court ring. Encompassing the back of the arena, countless pillars, molded of hundreds of vampire bones, teeth, and fangs, form part of the foundation. I appraise Lux's reaction, but all she has are sweet smiles when she admires the Court of skeletal vampire remains. Apart from the Father statues surrounding the inner circle, where Neo deals his justice in carrying out sentences, everything echoes the Dragon.

Lux takes her esteemed seat in the private viewing box. Like an open oyster shell of skulls and bones, it sits within line of sight of his throne of blood rubies—a throne that is the apex upon a soaring pillar of vampire and human skulls fused with silver blood tech.

Neoptolemus, Prince of Destruction, crouches on his throne—a perfect predator, gaze swooping vulture-like over his Court as always. Unlike Tax Season, he does not wear black diamond armor. Instead, he merely robes his throne in those same unconquerable, labyrinthine shades and flames while his nebulous black cape flows a hundred feet to the floor behind him. At the base of his throne, it pools like burning ink. A single gold diadem graces his head.

My blood warms and heat reddens my cheeks because I can't deny how gorgeous he is to this day, how his prowess in his Court is a turn-on, as is his clever way of dispensing justice and mercy. Does that sense of justice and mercy exist anymore with this new black heart?

After releasing Lux, Quillion sighs and reluctantly hands me something. I peer down, confused at the transparent lacy birdcage veil. I wrinkle my nose and shake my head. "Not. A. Fucking. Chance."

As if he senses my rebellion, Neo's raptor eyes roam to the bone-box. They turn to soft silver mist irises for Lux, who wears her birdcage veil to bar her eyes from all other vampires. His gaze turns brutal as a scythe when I incinerate the little scrap of material with my Halo fire currents.

Only Nita dares to rise to the balcony where she clenches the railing so tightly, her dark knuckles paling to a gray. With her silver-song hair like a thick blade down her back, she makes her disapproval obvious. In return, Neo clenches his steel jaw and presses his lips into a seamless line before curling his upper lip in disgust when he scrutinizes me.

*I can take anything he throws at me, Nita.* I reassure her, hoping to assuage her concerns. *Just like I did before.* But I refuse to wear a veil. Just like I refused to wear his ring on my fourth finger. He cannot dictate the terms of what I do with my body.

*You're not dealing with the same man, sweet angel. This is not the*

*brother I have come to know. This is a machination of our asinine ancestor. He raised you higher, sweet Ezer. Now, he's determined to save face and bring you to your knees.*

Holding up my chin, I approach Nita and step onto the balcony next to her, lighting my fingers on the back of her hand. *I wouldn't be Ezer if I expected you to bail me out all the time. If Neo wants me to pay a price for cracking his crown, then I'll pay it.*

The Hydra Queen sighs and kisses each of my cheeks before she turns a cruel glance at Lux, who only shrugs and flutters a hand to Neo. I bite back an insult but still roll my eyes until his dark shades swell around me. Freezing, I swing my head, my breath catching in my chest, my heart lodging in my dry throat. His swollen pupils are an inch from my face.

I part my lips, freezing at that invasion of space, but Halo dust buds between my thighs. Leaning in, I recognize how I desire nothing more in the world than to kiss that dark, full, and lithe mouth—until he gathers me in his arms, rips the breath from my lungs when he leaps from the balcony and crashes to the ground. A raging fire tears through me when he deposits me in the pool of black ink that is his cape at the very base of his throne. His shadows smother me, debase me. Just as his heart degrades me.

Releasing my waist, Neo grins, cocks his head to the side, and purrs a growl, “Sit, stay, good bride.”

With that, Neo kisses my cheek and vaults back to his throne to pound his fist against the blood-rubied armrest. At my fullest expense, the entire Court explodes into a rip-roaring laughter and applause, thrilled by the Prince disciplining his bride. A righteous fury rattles my ribcage. Contempt stings heat under my skin. My heart teeters on the edge of Noralice, the urge to run tempting me to avoid this humiliation, to drown myself in my sorrows within layers of dead roses in the Soul Plane.

As if sensing my urges through the trifecta bond, Thanatos shadows into my mind, so I feel his frost prickling and tickling my thoughts like a slow crawl along my brain stem to kiss his sickle mark. *You do not need me, Elysia*, he soothes me but does not bolster me.

I do that all on my fucking own. *I know, Thanatos.* I set my mouth into a hard line, then crane my neck, daring to sweep my gaze to my *husband*, who grins to one side like the Prince cat that ate the canary Princess. Except this bird will escape the cage and sing again. She will rise from the ashes like the matriarchal Phoenix Queen's daughter than she is.

Neoptolemus's voice is cannon fire when he commands his Court, gesturing a hand to Lux, "Give my bride the honor she deserves." Bride. Singular.

After Neo stands, raising himself so he's higher than Lux, she approaches the balcony, the raised platform that is *my* Court throne. Adopting Halo armor, I force myself to study her as thousands of butterflies dance from her skin to the sight of all the Court vampires dropping to one knee before her.

Instead of merely showering her butterflies toward Neo, as I suspect, she scatters them all around the arena to bless her adoring audience with her golden creations. Oh, she's good. Flaming pins and needles ignite my spine when Neoptolemus' eyes drift down to ravage mine, kindling hatred deep to my core.

If it's the last thing I do, I will get him back for this. And her.



DESPITE THIS DEBASED throne with not so much as a chair to sit upon, I remain upright the entire time of Neo's Court. Not on my knees, I sit cross-legged and try in vain to avoid the glimmering crimson pupils of the vampires in the arena chairs not a hundred feet from me. The closest ones dilate those pupils every minute or so—as if scenting my period blood. Every time I lift my chin to gaze at my *husband*, Neo senses it, dips his jaw low in an obliging nod before he blows me a mocking kiss.

For the most part, I remain still and silent as Neo does Court. Thankfully, it's nowhere near as busy as Tax Season. Only a few hundred arena seats vs. a thousand or more. Some trade deals, one arranged marriage, the signing of blood master property, multiple blood pawn inductions, the distribution of armed forces, and next...the requests of human cargo trains and homeless encampments nearest the Iron Walls.

"My lord Prince," a border emissary, a glorified blood pawn who tends the Iron Walls, proclaims and approaches the outer circle's raised platform flanked by the Father statues. "It is the dead of winter, and we have already lost a quarter more lives at the homeless encampment due to a new SIV plague infecting the human population."

What? I tense. The Goddess' prophecy beckons to my Haloed heart like an omen in my blood: *You will carry healing to all the innocent who suffer from the Scourge.*

Neoptolemus' carnivorous eyes return, promising pillage and plunder when they sharpen upon the border emissary. Unlike last time, his silver tongue is merciless. "A *quarter*? Do you enjoy tempting Destruction to spare your meaningless fractions of seconds while understanding the Dragon does not grant any *quarter*?" He rouses his flames, shooting them throughout the very fabric of his swinging black stain of a cape to surround me like a burning, bastardized halo. As much a warning to me as it is to the emissary.

I knock against our bond, predicting he won't answer. Nothing but a shades and flames barrier to block me from gaining access. A quarter is no small matter. That is nearly a thousand homeless souls in the permanent border encampment. How can Neo possibly not care about such a loss? The ashes collect in the pit of my stomach. It's as if I can hear Thanatos' voice: *because he is Destruction.*

"My Lord Prince..." the emissary bows his head, arms fanned out to each side in a desperate beseech, "the border patrol humbly petitions you to send but one blood bishop scientist to the border to determine the root cause of this mutated SIV strain, so we may continue to provide the masters the required reap as dictated by the Father's laws." As many lower Court denizens have, this emissary visibly shakes before the Prince—not that I blame him.

For some reason, I shift my gaze to Lux. A stream of gold currents ripples from her chest to pirouette in the air. One Neo masks in his shades, transforming them into a silent coruscating entertainment solely for his amusement. The notion of using my Halo to flirt with him like I used to deepens the ache in my chest. But I won't be shamed by any of the Halo's responses of my subconscious. Not even when it betrays my desire with liquid gold.

"I will clean up your mess that you are too ill-equipped to handle," the Prince asserts without rising from his throne. "Did you bring any proof of this SIV mutation, or do you delight in wasting my valuable time?"

My gut tightens when the emissary nearly cowers as Neoptolemus leans forward to add a thread of a gap to his throne. On the verge of rising, of dealing justice. Instead, the Prince gestures an insta-command to one of his blood masters, who produces a document stamped with the seal of rose of the Court O' Nines. From my lower position, I can't make out what the



document transcribes, but Neo merely glances before he rolls up the document and distributes it back to the blood master. History repeats itself because the master would never dare to tread his feeble wings above the Prince's feet.

Neoptolemus barely regards the emissary when pronouncing, "Bring forth the blood slave to deliver proof."

What?

Two pawns arrive with the blood slave. Molten rage and icy fear slam into me. Closer to her, I sense that Goddess' words harking to my blood, a heavenly echo.

*You will carry healing...*

My very blood howls with unchecked longing and power as the pawns carry the weak girl to the center of the platform. They thrust her to the floor at the feet of the border emissary, at the feet of the Prince. Heart lurching for her, I can't help but get to my knees. But Neo's shades surround me like cruel serpents to drag me back, to paralyze me. My breaths turn ragged as I strain against him, against those shades growing colder.

"My Lord Prince..." the emissary gestures to the sickly girl, no older than me, with her veins like black filaments branching all over her ashen skin, marking her for an early grave. Tiny rivulets of blood weep from her eyes. Her skin dangles loose around her bones from weeks of sickness and starvation.

Death must haunt her soul. I sense his presence more than ever, the hint of frost beyond the layers of reality, those dark shades—mirrored twins to Neo's.

*I can ease her suffering,* Thanatos coos to me, a silent promise of reaping her soul.

It would be a mercy. More when the emissary rips at her clothes to expose her cadaverous flesh, covered only by her dirty blonde hair. "We have brought one of the worst infected to proffer proof."

Her shallow breath thunders in the arena. She grits her teeth, even going so far as to break a tooth. Oh, she is a twinkle of survivor soul light who still tries to stand. Somehow, I understand Neo will not drape his robe around her like he did with the abashed human girl from my first time here.

Instead, Neo rises from his throne, earning the riveting gaze of his full Court before he charges to the floor, causing it to shudder. The emissary drops to his knees in the wake of the Prince's growl.

When the half-naked girl does not crumple before the domineering shadow of Neoptolemus, he must force her to her knees before him and scent her flesh, huffing from the stench of infection. From the depths of my pure-blooded heart, I cannot allow Death to take her.

“Proof enough.” Neo jerks his head in a nod and cradles the top of her head. I curl my Halo currents around his shades because I know what he’s about to do.

The Goddess said I would not face Thanatos, not Death. I would face Destruction. If I don’t act now, he will destroy her twinkle of a heart.

Destruction fingers her dirty blonde hair, shrugging before directing his gaze to the inner circle. He picks her up and carries her there to where he deals his version of justice. My heartbeat gallops in my ears, raging out of control. Pulse burning. Breath pounding drumbeats in my ears. She is but one grain of sand in an hourglass, squeezing into the slit as her time runs out.

For the first time, I sense the former-bonded souls of Death and Destruction treading close to one another. Invisible to all but me thanks to our bond. The tremulous dark haze of Death abides in the Inner Circle, awaiting his younger brother’s Destruction table scraps while Death courts the heaviest burden. Neo’s muscles bulge, his shoulders tight from what he believes he must do.

All the Court stirs, eager for their destructive Prince to work his skill... even upon the innocent.

Raw emotion and power hum under my skin. Slamming my eyes shut and sucking in a deep breath, I unleash my Halo-light to suffocate Neo’s shades—and rise to my feet in one Father-fucking monarchical move.

With his past words wrought into my very blood and flesh like a bridal seal—*You are a Princess. My equal in every respect. You will always be higher than me, Elysia. You are the Halo-Bearer, the Everblood.*—I stand!

Rippling murmurs and all laughter choked, the entire Court stills as I boldly approach the Inner Circle. An even greater transgression than my exalting myself to a higher position before him within the viewing box balcony. Girded in blazing beacons of Halo-light with heat pulsating through my entire body, I embark into the realm of Destruction. Earning every single eye in the arena.

The bond unlocks. Neoptolemus opens the door, his shades struggling to emerge through my holy fire bathing him. He sweeps inside like the brush of a raven’s dark wings, bending before my righteous glow. Still, I descend the

staircase as if I'm in a trance. I descend into the lower dais of the Inner Circle where the Prince stands as fixed and frozen as a god statue, similar to the Father ones surrounding us.

With my Halo like a million stars shimmering from my flesh and blood, radiating from my chest, I stride past Neoptolemus, who has no choice but to lower his eyes from my blinding light. In this moment, I am not Ezer to be his shield. I am not here to protect him from danger.

I am the Everblood, the Halo-healer. Even with Death waiting in the wings to welcome her one-in-a-billion-soul into his domain, I ignite my angelic flames and command Thanatos to his knees. His shade form bows before me while Neoptolemus' eyes nearly self-destruct to my maddening power.

Unwavering, I strengthen my muscles and lower my head to take the girl's face in my hands. No words, I rub away her silent tears and slowly lean in to kiss her eyes, the windows of her soul—my Halo-healing kiss.

A million blessed breath prayers from my mind unite with a million blessed golden arrows from my chest to inject deep into her skin. Full-bodied tremors explode within me. Together, those prayers and arrows cast out the Scourge, repair her flesh, and annihilate the blood tears from her eyes.

“You have no power over her!” I profess in a voice like the seraphim, like the cherubim, like the mighty Nephilim warriors of old. *My* robe of light mantles her shoulders. *My* Halo torpedoes through the whole arena like a missile—one that transforms into a shower of constellations to burn the heads of every vampire until they fall.

I bring the whole Court to its knees!

Finally, the last stars rocket from my chest. Once the girl's eyes open with no blood tears and healthy blushing flesh, the last of my strength ebbs. Undone, my breath labored, I fall into the familiar arms of my husband. Too exhausted for surprise. Because, for the first time, his eyes have become silver mist—not scythes.

Somehow, I resolve not to pass out from using a surge of Halo power. Instead, I huddle up in Neoptolemus' arms as he dips his head low, brow kissing mine. But my very heart shivers when he purrs a low promise, “You will pay for that, Elysia. In *blood*.”

## CHAPTER 5

# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL KISS I COULD EVER IMAGINE. A KISS OF ELYSIUM

**D**azed when Neo carries me across the threshold, I comb through my glittery thoughts, wondering if it was all true. Did I really crack Neo's Court?

For some reason, I remember my power detonating through the arena, not just to sprinkle holy embers upon the Father's children, but it also fissured the bone pillars and fractured the Father's statues surrounding the Inner Circle. When one crashed, Neo unleashed his wings and carted me up to his glorious throne. He'd *protected* me. Even now, the memory causes me to shudder, to whimper.

"Forgive my *second-wife*," he'd roared at the audience even as I was trembling in his arms, stroking my cheek to my halo mark in his chest. "Her jealousy toward my true bride has led her to some extremist sexual passions. Perhaps we should give her a guest spot on *Hades*."

Despite how the Court had laughed at the joke, I could still feel the undercurrent of my power in the bone powder dusting the air from my cracks, the Father's shattered statues in the Inner Circle, and how the knights had led the restored girl away. I'd gone so far as to tap Neo's jaw and hummed, "I don't think they bought it, Neo."

Now, he ushers me into his bedroom where his shades massage my body, bearing up my neck when my fatigued head falls, curls tumbling over his arm. Gold dust pirouettes from my skin to tempt Neo's shades.

Slowly, he lowers my fatigued body into the dark expanse of his bed. Sheets fresh and pulled back, to the familiar scent of incense and vetiver... but not deep water. I sigh, knowing it's been too long since he visited the grotto, our Soul Pool. For some reason, deathly roses clothed in frost haunt

my senses with longing.

Desperate to stay centered, for this first true glimpse of care from Neo to last, I tug his arm before he can leave, desiring his strength—those powerful muscles surrounding me...his bulwark of wings.

To my great astonishment, Neo pauses, roams his gaze to my fingers, then sweeps his eyes across my painted bodice to settle on the Grail ring nestled between my bosom. Heat flushes my cheeks, betraying how much I still want him.

Sighing, the Prince of Destruction climbs into the bed, weaving his right hand around my head and tucking it under my chin so his well-muscled forearm drapes around my neck. The other secures my waist, jerking me back until his pelvis nudges the base of my spine. Well...not *just* his pelvis, especially when he idly traces the outline of my breast, rubbing its swell. I'll allow that. Warm butterflies erupt in my belly.

"Mmm..." I moan and try to arch my neck so I may eye him, but Neo grunts and tightens his forearm, giving my breast swell a slight pinch in warning.

It's the first time in months that his drawbridge lowers. His blood bond tether cinches around me and grants me entrance for him to growl in my mind, *For once in your damned existence, couldn't you stay on your knees?*

I offer him the barest of head shakes and confess, "I love you, Neo. But I am not your servant. I vowed on our wedding night to be your Ezer, your equal, your shield. Side by side, we face our battles together. The warriorress of light to your Dragon."

When all his muscles flex behind me, and he cups my breast, I whimper to the Halo warmth radiating from my chest down to my core. My body always responds to his touch.

"I am bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, and now blood of your blood. Three in one, Neo." I turn my chin as much as possible to study him out of the corner of my eye, unsurprised to discover his black-fattened pupils. "I can't exist on my knees," I breathe against his jaw, close my eyes in a gasp at how he rubs the calloused pad of his thumb over my nipple pebbling through the paint.

"And yet, *you* disappeared on our wedding night," he snarls low in my ear, nipping its base. "*You* took my mind. *You* stole the heart right out of my chest and left me bleeding. And the only reason I came back was because Lux found me after she'd climbed out of the Chasm and into my Tower. She

used her halo to bless me with a new heart. So, tell me, Elysia, why should I believe a fucking word you say when all you are is a tempting mask who wears Death's mark?"

Gold-speckled tears glisten from my eyes. How can I possibly reach him? I won't appeal to him by indicating she could be a liar. Not when she wears an angel face, swaddled in silvery skin that is marked all over with my *Noralice*...

Suddenly, Neo pauses mid-stroke, every muscle thickening. His shades reinforce around my throat and chest to squeeze. I narrow my eyes, confused. "What did you just say?" Before I can recover, Neo mounts me and thrusts my arms above my head. "What the *fuck* did you just say?"

"Neo!" I cry, whipping my head to the side, eyes canting to where he seizes my wrists. "You're hurting me!" Fear paralyzes me. Too spent to do more than nip at his shades with my Halo dust, I have no defense against Destruction...except perhaps, Death.

"Neo!" In the most bizarre twist of fate, Lux's shimmery voice and her faux halo light settling upon him become my salvation. "Let her go."

Fury swarms through his nostrils. After eyeing me for one long moment, he pushes on me, shoving me harder. Fingers clawing at my throat, I suck deep breaths as he stands, then bows his head to his first wife. Envy colors my cheeks red. She cups the side of his face while he traces his fang mark before studying the hundred-bite roadmap on her flesh. *My* invisible roadmap. The best deceptions are woven with kernels of truth.

After his mouth folds hers back in a deep kiss, he swivels his head to me, his eyes like dark ravagers. "She had no right to take that from you." Of course, Lux has already shared my stolen history with him.

"And yet, everyone needs grace...even those who have fallen so far from it." Oh, her audacity! I shift, so my back is turned from them, wishing I could stuff my ears and block the sound of her advocating for me, "Elysia is a Princess, Neo. Let us not forget how you destroyed her home and her father. Or how her mother is but a puppet for your Father. It's little wonder she sought vengeance, especially when her ultimate quest is the packaged deal of demise for you and your Father."

It's a sharp stab to my gut, and I hold my ailing stomach. Lux has just checked me. I still can't fathom if she's simply a twisted machination of the Father or if her story is true. Did she come out of the Chasm? If I want to give Neo a new heart and recreate our bond, which is the key, then I have to

know who I'm dealing with. Between her and the ever-preying Scourge looming into Tenth Court territory and the double-sided coin of dealing with Thanatos, the non-venomous serpents are slithering closer to my heart. Closer when Lux crawls into the bed alongside me after Neo departs to clean up the mess I left in his Court.

I consider the tragic paradox of it all and turn over so I may face Lux. Smiling, she reaches to finger a few of my curls, rubbing the gold threads woven into the dark strands. Her gold irises are nothing like the splendor of Thanatos. His are constellations while hers are witch light burning a hole straight through my chest. Ice shoots up my spine.

"You don't know how we first met, do you?" Lux combs my hair back onto my shoulder. I clamp my mouth shut, eyes narrowing, discerning for any lie in her silver-lilt speech. "I was a child crusader, Elysia. Yes, I was deceived as many children were by such horrid race-culling beliefs. I bore a cross and banner and followed Nicholas of Cologne over the Alps, seeking the holy land. Someday, perhaps I will share with you what happened to me during those years—such as my hundred bites—just as I have with him."

I grit my teeth, noticing how luminous smoke crawls off my skin, but I lock my flames in a cage, so I can listen to the rest of her history.

She taps her nose against mine, and I cringe, belly roiling with scornful heat at her invasiveness, at the way she lulls me, "But while so many lives were lost, I was the one child who finally arrived in Jerusalem. I joined the Knights Templar."

Oh, heavens The Knights Templar!

"I was a protector of the Grail. And Neo was my greatest foe." She smiles and fingers the Grail ring at my neck. "After I was reincarnated, I couldn't believe he'd given this to you. You must understand...mine and Neo's rivalry went on for months. Back then, his Father had tasked him to seek the Grail instead of the Everblood for a time. So, I would run from the Prince for days with the Grail, hiding with vampire Templar families who kept me safe, much like your Underground. He would catch me, we would fight, we would spar, and then...he'd protect me."

She touches her knuckles to my cheek as if reminding me of that familiar battleground. I freeze. Holy fuck, she's good. No wonder Neo fell in love with me. For all I know, Lux could be my foremother.

Lux smiles and rubs her finger along my painted bodice where my heart beats. I stiffen, pinching my lips, but don't interrupt. "Over time, we



discovered that we shared far more in common than we realized. Yes, he and his brother were still fused, but their history kept ripping them apart. Neo had grown to hate his Father more over the centuries. Not Thanatos, who still sought his favor.” She wrinkles her nose in disgust, her gold carousel eyes riding mine, mirroring her circling finger, which travels down to smear the paint around my breasts. Her pale fingers are too foreign—like flaming rods, preparing to brand me. All I want to do is lean away and scramble out of the sheets, but I force myself to swallow the knot in my throat and endure.

“Only I knew that side of the Prince of Destruction that no one else had. Enough for him to trust me, to show me the Altar. Oh, that night was glorious, Elysia!” She fawns, pressing her hand down over my heart, overlapping my wedding ring. “We shared our trauma. And I captured a dragon.” Her eyes glint while mine are ready to combust. So much of me wants to burn every sterling strand on her body. “After we shared our love, we made a choice. We made a blood oath. We vowed to hide the Grail from his Father. So, if it took centuries for the Everblood to arise, then at least the Father wouldn’t be able to find the Grail. We *broke* the Grail!”

When Lux squeals and thumbs my ring, the Grail piece at my chest feels like a molten poker against my skin. I hold my breath, so ready for flight when the silvery strumpet’s fingers cross to forbidden territory, and she taps her fingernail three times around each nipple, counting, “One, two, three, four, five, six pieces. Neo melted down one piece and made it into a ring... for me. And I for him.” She wags the ring at my chest. “When the Father discovered Neo’s betrayal, he forced Neo to destroy me, and Thanatos reaped my soul and claimed it for his own. I guess the Prince of Death wanted to claim my afterlife as a trophy against Neo. So, now you know, Elysia. All my history, my trauma, my sins laid upon your Everblood altar.”

Lux cups my cheeks and touches her lips to mine. My chest tightens like a bowstring, and I clench my jaw so hard, it aches. She tastes like sin and suffering. She tastes like sulfur from the Chasm. She tastes like...destruction. Every part of her is a live wire with lightning tendrils branching from her angel-white skin. Oh, how Neo must love that, I glower. My Halo itself short-circuits before her as if she’s a scourge in my blood, blazing right through mine and Neo’s oath with her poison.

Suddenly, Lux nips my bottom lip, her teeth like fangs sinking in as she purrs in a low threat. “Now, who do you think Neo truly believes is here to kill his Father and bring his salvation? The reincarnated soul of a Knight who

was the Prince's greatest foe and lover? The one who helped him split the very Grail and hide it from his Father before he was forced to destroy her? Or a raging feminist with a smart mouth and the daughter of the Phoenix Queen who killed the Prince's brother? Neo knows you're only here to finish what your mother began."

Lux shatters the dam that has held back all my tears. I start to crumple into an Elysia-shaped ball, wishing I could fold in on myself until there's nothing left but the Halo the Goddess should take back. I'm not strong enough for this. My breaths turn to shreds as a hollowness settles inside me.

Wrestling with Neo's patriarchal positions is one thing. Thanatos' with his Death secrets is another. But Lux is like the soul of ten thousand child crusader ghosts haunting me with her heart's fire.

"Now, perhaps if you show yourself to be truly penitent..." Lux hints and begins to mount me, dominating me and moving against me, taking more of my breath. "Perhaps if you lay your Ezer down on his altar for even one night to *please* him, to please both of us..." A devilish grin spreads on her lips.

As soon as Lux cups my breasts, I scream to Thanatos, *Noralice!*

Lux's lilting laughter becomes a kite tail fading behind me when the black hole cosmos of Thanatos' Soul Plane sucks me into its quavering dark arms. Again, he catches me, harnesses my trauma, and wraps cold shades and frost around my body. He holds me until the shaking stops.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I sob into Thanatos' shoulder, clinging to his robe, burrowing my fingers deeper.

Death swipes my curls off my neck, fingers traipsing across my chemise strap to cup my shoulder. He leans in so he may frost-kiss his mark: his traditional greeting. So different from Neo. He always feels different, the polar opposite.

I shiver when he cups my face, overlapping where Lux touched, his eyes revealing the golden galaxies to dethrone the memory of hers. "You are his true bride, Elysia. Never doubt that. You are stronger than her."

"No, I'm not." I shake my head, mad panic lacing up my spine. "I'm always running, Thanatos! Only three times in my entire life when I didn't run. And I got burned both times."

"*Both,*" Thanatos points out, and I sharply gust when his finger tiptoes along my spine, forming crystalline ice to cool the panic. He urges me to reflect on those times.

"My Noralice night."

He nods and spreads that frost further up my spine, his finger tender and soothing until it reaches his sickle mark. His tranquilizing touch stems my tears and prompts my pulse and breath to slow, my limbs to soften.

“And?”

“The night I took Neo back...and then the Father’s damned Triumvirate that’s cursed us.”

Death cups my chin, his dark fingers forming a strong throne for my jaw to settle upon. “Go on, Elysia.”

I understand where he’s leading me. To the moments before I captured Neo’s soul. To the time my solar eclipse rings stared down Thanatos’ black holes in his tower when I’d proclaimed and professed my blessing and my new prayer, “Ezer Kenegdo.”

Thanatos grins. A true smile as if...as if he *treasures* that night I drove him and his Father to their knees. The night I owned my trauma, my scars, my wounds, it felt like a rebirthing.

“You will never lose your value,” Thanatos preaches to me, his breath fragrant as a black rose. It may feel like a betrayal, but I desire more of that aroma. Not simply to nullify the taste of Lux’s mouth, her touch. With his words like a lullaby of deathly ice humming its promise through my sickle mark, I stand on my tiptoes so my mouth can greet his.

As soon as I do, I swear a celestial force strikes my blood, causing me to leap back, lurch, and shout, “Holy fuckety fuck!”

Death chuckles, but unlike Destruction, Thanatos does not pursue me. Only observes me as I cover my chest and back up against the wall. Overwhelmed, I gush, sliding down to curl into a ball because I’ll never forget this memory. The way he feels...the way he *tastes*.

I’ll never escape the Prince who tastes of serendipity and starlight, who tastes of every dream within a dream, of every *fantasy* I’ve ever had...no matter the flesh. The most beautiful kiss I could ever imagine. A kiss of Elysium.

While I dig my fingers through my scalp, Thanatos simply shrugs and murmurs, “You’ll get used to it.”

I drop my heavy arms to the side. “Is that your warped, dark humor?” I hurl the accusation. When he nods, I prop my elbow on my knee and rub a tear from my eye. “I expect so much better from Death.”

“Perhaps later.” Thanatos turns and reaches for an additional black robe with its ends tattered and frost-tipped. “I must leave you for a short time. I

have my *own* Court to command for now. Syn will protect you in my absence.”

“Syn?”

As soon as I speak the word, Thanatos nods towards the bone door fused with shades and frost. After the knock like a single clap of thunder, I raise one brow as Thanatos beckons the door to open to reveal...

Oh, Saints!

## CHAPTER 6

# “IT’S TIME THIS ANGEL COURTED DEATH. I’M GOING TO CLAIM MY JUST MARKER...”

Syn is the delicious embodiment of her name. Thick horns of milky twilight corkscrew from the apex of her flawless bald head while dozens of razor-sharp spikes fuse into her chest and shoulders.

At the sight of her fifty shades of flint gray skin, my fingers tingle, and heat flushes my body. Biting my lower lip, I pinch my eyes to take in those spikes like overlapping iron feathers while her black talons for fingers remind me of my armored claws the first time I danced with Neo to *Scheherazade*. Those claws seem alloyed into Syn’s formidable cheekbones. All of her is devilishly naked apart from that—

*Holy fuck, Thanatos! Is she wearing...?*

*A chastity belt, yes.* He circles me, the corner of his mouth tugging to one side, betraying the dark humor I’d dared him to unleash. Unlike Neo, Thanatos doesn’t need to boast with words. His expressions are everything, and I adore his smirk.

Syn jerks her head to me and puckers up her lips in a kiss before her mouth again turns stoic. There is something so *familiar* about her.

Thanatos pauses at my side, his frost and floral scent hovering along my curls. *There was a soul who came to me not long ago. A soul my sister could not capture and hold in Neo’s Soul Pool. She was far too quick with pure lightning energy.*

I snap my head to Thanatos, my lips parting before my eyes dart between him and Syn. My heart short-circuits, but all my nerve endings run wild.

“Thanatos...” I gasp as I study Syn. “Is she...?” *Verena?*

Syn juts her chin toward me while Thanatos sways his hand at a tilted angle, indicating a *sort of*. “Her soul remained in my domain for a time, as all

ghosts with unfinished business do.” He clasps his hands behind his back and curls a shade or two around Syn’s chastity belt. “She escaped my clutches many times, but finally, I offered her two paths. Verena chose to bind her soul to my bounty hunter, Syn. They’ve grown quite close over the past few months. But Syn is very much the forward persona. Something Verena is still struggling with, considering the role she once provided for you.” He hints at my underground lair.

*Oh, hell...how much did she...?*

Thanatos shrugs. *She didn’t kiss and tell, Elysia. But rest assured, I understand why you desired to escape to your lair following your Underground rescues.*

I blush as I remember our history and why I chose Verena for my high guard. It wasn’t just for her *public* protector skills or her ability to piss off any vampire suitors with one lightning burst. In a way, my Halo and Verena’s lightning bonded first, our energy united on a metaphysical soul level. Verena was my first kiss, my first touch, my first partner...before the Halo shut down. Her energy currents helped me cope after every Underground mission, where I relived my trauma. Verena lightning-kissed it all away.

I’ve never stopped loving her. And now, the scar from her absence has filled me with more hope than the night she brought me Neo’s soul tether.

“Where’s the key?” is my first question to Syn since I can’t seem to tear my eyes from her black diamonded chastity belt.

She flicks her eyes upon Thanatos with a fox-like smile before deadpanning with me. “I ate it.” Her voice is low and malicious but also playful.

I press my lips into an uncontrollable smile as Thanatos makes his way back to my side, hands still embraced behind him. Smile knowing and sultry, he dips his head to me, and I roll my eyes, tossing back my curls. “I am so going to get you back for this,” I warn him.

“Thanatos: two. Elysia: zero.” I understand the additional check mark was due to that “death” vs. “Death” remark. However, Thanatos taps my cheek, granting me a single sprout of frost—a crystal kiss before he adds, “I thoroughly enjoyed your memory of triumphing over my brother earlier this morning in bed and in the Commons. Consider your chart with Death a lesson in humility.” He cocks his head to the side with a subtle smile.

I cross my arms over my chest and throw him a look. *Oh, I’ll teach you some humility, Natos.*

The Prince pauses at the nickname I've given him, but he remains cool as bones in winter. Finally, he nods to us, moves toward the door, dons his Reaper robe, and declares, "I'll let you two get acquainted."

"What kind of bounty hunter?" I question before he steps outside. Again, that barest trace of a curved smile when Thanatos gestures to Syn, freeing her to respond.

She parts her lips to reveal a set of black armored fangs. "Runaway rapists." My jaw drops, and Thanatos' chuckle overlaps her next words. "I hunt them down, dismember them, and bring them back stumped and bloody so Death can finish them off."

No wonder she and my Verena bonded!

*By the way...Thanatos summons me through our bond, and I note how two of his fingers tap the bone door in a staccato, seductive rhythm as he finishes, Verena may be as pink as they come, but Syn is asexual. Have fun, Elysia.*

I flip him off before pivoting my body toward Syn.

Immediately, she wags a finger and weaves past me. "Don't get any ideas, little angel," she warns, sticking out her tongue over her shoulder, which mocks me like a black snake. "Verena's already having a pity party in my closet. Little spitfire."

"Asexual with an ass like that?" I dip my head toward her rather impressive and very plus-sized curves. When she spins her head with a snarl, I raise my hand to cover my giggles and bat my eyelash finery. "Sorry, Syn. Purple peace?" I flash the peace sign at her.

Syn grumbles and flutters a hand, almost dismissive. No, I am not about to let her get away with that. Until my Spitfire pounces on me from behind and starts scratching at my chemise. Laughing, I spin to greet him, more warmth filling me at his sweet, playful presence.

While I kneel to scratch my hellcat behind the ears, Syn pauses to eye us. His warm tongue practically lathers me, begging for my flames, but he's powerful enough to knock me down, large paws pinning my chest.

"Spitfire!" I squeal and laugh, but a moment later, Syn seizes my cat by his scruff, grinning at the creature who howls in protest, trying in vain to bat at her with his claws. Her muscles bulge, but her breath doesn't labor, and I can't help but salivate more. How fun Verena must have in that body!

"He's cute." The demoness waggles her nose at Spitfire, who scratches at her nude chest, three claws striking, but when he doesn't spill blood, I



understand her skin must be armored three layers deep. “You know, for a daemon.” Syn chucks him to the ground, and Spitfire immediately coils himself between my legs, huffing out smoke.

I kneel and rub his cheeks. “A what?”

“A daemon. You know? A shifter...guiding spirit. He’s just a runt but very eager to earn his stripes.” Syn crosses her arms, her bulky shadow draping us as I twirl my finger to offer my hellcat an extra-large portion of Halo shreds. “You named him well since he was gutsy enough to imprint on the Halo-bearer.”

Spitfire chomps on the flame scraps while I pat his heating belly and muse, “Huh...what does all that mean?”

“As long as you feed him, he’ll continue to grow. If he wants to earn daemon spirit points and take on new forms, he will follow your every command. Best. Pet. Ever.”

I rise and touch my hip, jutting it to the side. “If only Neo were that easy.”

Syn hisses, showing all her razored fangs. “Destruction *never* makes things easy.”

“Or his twin,” I hint, mouth curving down in a glower.

“I’ll take Death any day.” Syn wanders toward the window and props her hand up on the glass, all her back muscles tensing. “His Court is cooler anyway.”

An eager shiver ripples up my spine at the thought of that Court. “So, Syn...” I free my eyes to travel across every last inch of her and admire the metal-balled whips coiled at her chastity spike belt.

“Quit staring at my ass, angel,” she snaps without turning her head. I get a little sample of how those spikes work when one springs up, twisting into a Medusa-like serpent to hiss its fangs. Halo vapors swoon from my skin, and all the hairs on my arms and neck prick to static life. Nita would absolutely love her. Ooh, so would Kitty! Now, *that* I’d love to see.

“About this Court of Thanatos,” I hint.

“Forget it, Halo-Bearer.” Syn tenses and pushes herself off the glass to block me from the door. “You’d have to pass by the Chasm and cross the Gates of Death, and there is no way in hell he would ever let that happen. Why do you think he summoned me here? I’m only cranky because I’m not used to babysitting.”

“Oh, I’d love to be your baby, Syn.” Clasp my hands around my back,

I approach her, swaying from side to side.

Syn sticks out her tongue. “You’re cute, Halo-bearer. But we just met. I may be asexual, but I am panromantic. Much to Verena’s less romantic sensibilities. I simply happen to be more graysexual. Not that I’ll make it easy for you to bond with me. Humans are messy and dramatic, and they bore me.”

I may have a bit of the devil in me. Or at least his two grandsons...okay only one grandson ever inside me. And if I ever want to enjoy that again, I’m going to reap those secrets right out of Thanatos. Besides, there is no way I’ll let him one-up me on that chart. I lick my lips, anxious to show Syn how *not* boring this particular human is.

“I will love getting to know you more, Syn. But first, I have some unfinished business with Death.” I swish my daring hips back and forth, advancing toward her.

“What are you doing?” Syn bares her armored teeth, more of her spikes turning into serpents to hiss their warnings. “Don’t look at me that way, Princess.”

“She used to call me her lightning rod.” I lean toward her, throwing my curls back and batting my lashes. “We used to play hide and seek,” I hint, coaxing Syn with a mischievous grin.

Syn doesn’t back away, but countless spikes writhe from her chest, striking the air and spitting venom at me. “If you want your girlfriend, you have to go through me first.”

I tilt my head to one side. “Is that a threat, Syn?”

Syn shakes her head. “I don’t make threats. But I’ll offer a challenge.”

Upon closer examination, Syn’s serpents don’t just have cobra-like fangs. All their mouths hold the rows of shark-like teeth as Syn’s.

Clutching my hands in front of me, I deadpan with her. “Consider me rising to your challenge then. Poor Syn. Spending all that time with those rapists. I bet it would truly take an *angel* to set your honeypot on fire,” I tease her sweetly.

“My honeypot’s just fine, Princess,” Syn denies, baring her teeth. “And you are the one in *my* line of fire.”

When I get a bit of a leaping start, Syn pushes me away—too weakly, acting on the defensive. But I know why. She doesn’t want to hurt me. And her serpents’ venom splatters me.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” I coax Verena with heat

spiraling from my chest to my thighs. Biting my lower lip, I grin, touch my heart, then arch my lower back and thrust out my chest to grow my own Halo serpents. Much larger than hers!

“Holy fuck!” Syn’s eyes nearly pop out of her head.

“Totally holy,” I tease her as I grip the ends of my two largest serpents and twirl my wrists so they become spinning, serpentine halos. They soak the heads of her serpents with gold venom showers. “Still think I’m boring?” I wink and blow her a kiss.

“Now that I have your undivided attention, there are three things you should know about me.” I step toward her, and Syn backs up against the bone and frost door, intimidated by the embers that singe her flesh. “One: I am on a Goddess mission, and I won’t let anything or anyone get in the way of that mission—badass bounty hunter or not.” I consider the Scourge...and how I must win Neo’s heart. “Two: I’m a feminist and confident in my womanhood. And three: even though I am married to a sexy Dragon vampire beast, I really have missed my V for Verena and her energy lighting up my life. So, are you going to take me to that Court of Death, or should this purple Princess show you what a thing she has for badass bounty hunters that dismember rapists until you’re begging my V for Verena to come out?”

I shudder, all my nerves mirthful at the idea of seeing Verena again. And challenging Syn because I fully intend to win her over. Even if it means we do battle first.

Syn’s dark eyes narrow while her serpents lunge for me. At the last second, I dodge and weave, sliding across the floor and praising the frost. Like gliding on an icy surface.

“I’m warning you, Princess!” Syn jabs a finger at me while I twirl my haloed serpent whips and do a little pirouette. Happiness swells in my throat. Verena did say I’d see her again. It’s been months.

The demoness sends more venomous serpents my way, but with one flick of my wrist, my scaled lovelies devour hers in one bite. It’s the first time she blinks.

“That’ll teach you to go all snakes on the Soul Plane with me!” I stick out my tongue with a crazed laugh. More spikes regenerate from her shoulders, and I know I’ll have to bring my full A-game because she’s been holding back.

Syn crouches. “I’m gonna bite that pretty little chemise right off your pretty shoulders and use it to tie you up!”

The demoness flies off in a rage and shoots dozens of serpents my way. At the last second, I expand my serpents and form a cage of them to tangle with hers until they've burned them to ash. Still, Syn's spiky serpents grow and grow—an endless supply. As soon as I smother three, reducing them to embers with Spitfire leaping and snapping his jaws to gobble up the aftermath, Syn barrages me with double and soon triple the amount.

When my breath comes in tattered gasps, I realize I'm slowing down.

My limbs tremble from the strain. I should have known better than to tangle with Death's best bounty hunter because she tricks me with six well-timed serpent punches to my face, distracting me from the ones she'd sent in a slow slither on the floor. Now, they rear up and spiral my ankles.

I go down hard.

Syn cackles and prepares to make good on her promise. It's doubtful that Thanatos would allow her to do anything truly maddening, but I'd rather not find out. The serpents nip at my skin while climbing up my bare legs. Thanatos' shades creep into my hair as if drawn to his sickle mark, encouraging me with their chilled kisses.

Before Syn can stomp toward me, I ignore the biting snakes on my legs and whip my Halo, leaping for her. It strikes her flesh, upending her, but she recovers faster. Out of the corner of my eye, Spitfire cocks his head to me, tongue lolled out to the side, belly swollen with fire.

Remembering what Syn said, I lock eyes with the daemon and yell, "Spitfire, attack that naughty demoness!"

"What?!" Syn screams, but it's too late. My boy pounces on her chest, sending her crashing to the ground. Aww, I'm so proud of my little pouncer!

Gripping the savage serpents twisting up my legs, I burn them, thrilling in how they squeal before I dance across the floor to where Spitfire digs his claws into Syn's chest. His fiery jaws close over the heads of multiple attacking snakes while he wags his arrowed tail. The serpent teeth can't penetrate his thick hide.

Before Syn can force my kitty off her, I gush my Halo chains from my chest and wrap them around her neck. Adrenaline thrilling my blood, I bind them around her chest and wrists, weaving them into a veritable labyrinth around her entire body. Stars strut over my skin as I finish the job until Syn can't possibly twitch. Enough to tie her up but not enough to damage her beautiful form.

Finally, I crouch and smile sweetly down at the demoness, who fumes,

muttering a round of expletives before warning me, “You’re mad, woman!”

I shrug. “To be fair, commanding the daemon was your idea, so thank you,” I bend at the waist to peck her cheek, earning a snarl and a snap of her teeth.

“Don’t you realize what’s out there?” Syn sighs, shoulders heaving, but her eyes narrow. “It’s nothing like Destruction’s Court. Death’s Court is at the *edge* of the Chasm, Elysia. You won’t make it to the Lake of Souls. You won’t even make it past the Gates!” There’s an underlayer of desperation in the demoness’s voice, and I know it’s not just for my safety but for what Thanatos could do to her if anything happens to me.

I shoot to my feet, hands on my hips as I stare past the windows at the tremulous dark force, trying not to shiver because I’d be a fool if her words didn’t give me some pause, especially given her profession. But then, I remember the feeling of Lux mounting me. I remember her history and her promising threats. I remember I must put a new heart in Neo. And the Goddess stipulated I would not face Death this time.

Death will be my ally, the Father had said. Perhaps Thanatos is the only one who can help me claim Neo. In this case, the enemy of my enemy is my...friend. I remember the Goddess’ other words: *no Scourge on my soul*.

The Lake of Souls.

So, I pour steel into my spine. If I can explode my Halo in Neo’s arena, I can only imagine what I will do here.

Balling my hands into fists and pressing my lips into a fixed line, I approach the bone and frost door. “It’s time this angel courted Death. I’m going to claim my just marker. And after I do, the Prince of Death will owe *me*.”

A slow crawl of frost crystalizes my bare feet and legs, tantalizing—Thanatos’ subconscious offerings responding to my triumphant emotions. All my gold veins thrum, my skin awakening with starry luminescence. My pure heart pulses, whetted by power...and even fear. Compared to Neo’s shades and flames, Thanatos’ frost is much harder to shake.

“So, the servant has become the master...”

Recognizing the words, I spin on my heel to discover the familiar facial expressions of my former High Guardian, my girlfriend. The same knowing grin and prevailing eyes.

Without hesitation, I cross the floor to her, kneel, cup the sides of her face, and fold my lips to hers. Yes, they feel different, but she doesn’t. Not

when she shows her dominance by opening my mouth beneath hers, overwhelming me with her kiss. A tiny current of lightning penetrates my face to prickle my curls and the hairs on the nape of my neck.

When I finally break the kiss, Verena announces, “So proud of you, Lightning Rod. Syn will be back soon.”

“This is the calling you spoke of?” I consider the last time we met.

Verena nods, blinking her luminescent eyes. “It was my choice. I respect Syn. And don’t worry, she likes you. It will take some time. But go and show Death what my Lightning Rod can do. May the feminist force be with you!”

“Love you, V for Verena.”

Like she said, it will take time, but we’ll make this work. I may need to win Neo’s heart because our bond is the key, but Verena and I will always share another bond.

Striding away, I coil my Halo around the bone handle doorknob and use my power to unlock the door that only opens to Thanatos’ command. Tonight, I won’t be climbing down Death’s tower...at least not on my own. So, I whistle to Spitfire. “Time to earn your stripes.”

Grinning, I jerk my thumb to the walkway of solid, glassy ice. So glassy I can make out my reflection. Spitfire immediately glides to me, positioning himself at my side so I may mount him. Leaning in, I clutch my hellcat’s hide scruff and promise my fiery kitty, “You get me there and back in one piece, Spitfire, and there will be a giant, flaming steak in it for you, buddy.” I pat his side, then bind myself to his back with Haloed ropes.

Spitfire unleashes a mighty yowl. I clench my legs tight around his belly and hold on for dear life as the hellcat leaps from the walkway straight onto Death’s Tower.

## CHAPTER 7

# DID I CRACK YOUR CHART, NATOS?

Spitfire amazes me! To him, Thanatos' Tower is a scratching post he must conquer. Whenever he leaps from one crevasse, buttress, or gargoyle, he's already judged exactly where to land. More than a few times, my body is chucked from side to side, and I'm thankful for my Halo ropes. Considering his body is dark as thunder, my gilded figure is a fire flower with a trail of gold dust echoing behind him like a kite tail.

Fire sizzles through all my nerve endings thanks to adrenaline.

Now and then, Spitfire instinctively scratches the Tower. "Marking your territory, boy?" I murmur in my daemon's lofty ear. It pricks to my words, and Spitfire lets out an arrogant snarl that resonates into my thighs. "I'll have to remember that."

I've marked Neo, but Death is the opposite: he's marked me, I consider the sickle. In some ways, he's double-marked me. No, my hundred times bitten marks are not from his fangs, but he was there that night, and I gave him the memory through my eyes. If it's the last thing I'll do, I will own something of Thanatos'.

Tonight, I will settle for the answer to one question—whether how to defeat this new Scourge of Destruction or how to grant Neo a new heart.

Time passes differently in the Soul Plane. Combined with my hellcat's mighty thundering body, it doesn't take Spitfire as long to reach the ground with the Chasm spread out like a mantle of nightmares before us. All one hundred miles of it. Something deep in my soul registers that once we leave the sanctum of Thanatos' Tower territory, I will be free game for any of the Chasm demons and monsters that roam the Chasm portals into this Soul Plane.



I will take my life, my soul into my own hands.

At first, ice shoots up my spine, but not in the good way as Thanatos does.

Just then, I snap my head to gaze at a twinkle of light on the Chasm horizon. Something resembling a star, but that's impossible in the Soul Plane, where no sun, moon, or constellations ever shine. So, what is that twinkle? I narrow my eyes, but all I can make out is a tiny glimmer of *frost*.

*Who are you, Thanatos?*

Arching my back to tilt my neck and bracing myself, I whisper in Spitfire's ear, "Take us to that horizon, Spitfire."

They say some large cat predators can run up to fifty miles per hour. I'm betting mine can double that. My muscles begin to ache and burn after Spitfire bounds away from the Tower, carrying us close to the very edge of the Chasm, where my Halo light sheds from my soul into the darkness below, showering glittery trails to the air. My curls transform into a wild comet shooting behind me.

It doesn't take long for the demons to come a 'calling, but Spitfire is faster than all. My stomach flips again and again. Still, I cast flames behind me as a warning, some to flick at the robes of the Fallen, at the ragged wings of the ghouls, at the soul skin of countless demons and demonesses daring to nip at my heels.

In these realms of the dead, the energy in my soul is an atom bomb just aching to explode. But tonight, I don't want an explosion. I don't want the mushroom cloud I'd released in Neo's Court of Bones. I want...slow. I want a challenge. I want romance and rapture, bliss and blessing...euphoria. Serendipity. My heartbeat hammers in my ears at the thought.

On the other side of the Chasm are the most monstrous dual trees I have ever seen. I gasp, tipping my head to gaze at them. Towering and titanic, they soar like skyscrapers while their labyrinth of roots descends into the abyss of the Chasm like drips of great ink. With multitudes of macabre branches coupling into a massive network, no soul could divide them. They block my vision to everything but that twinkle of crystal—a tip of a spire canvassed in the never-ending tremulous depths of the Soul Plane.

These great black trees are the Gates of Death.

Upon reaching the edge of the Chasm, Spitfire slows near the ledge that spans those Death Tree Gates. Frost blossoms grow all over the trees' pillar-like trunks. Dismounting from my hellcat, I reach a trembling hand to touch

one gargantuan tree. Everything around me is a dark heat with noxious vapors spewing from the Chasm of monsters, but these trees are ice to my palms. Far too high and cold for my hellcat.

*You think this will stop me, Thanatos?*

He's silent, which I find a little...alarming. Is all this a test? A game to him? Since he's the one who bit me vs. my blood bond with Neo, I can only imagine he wields more control over this nexus we share. But why can't I sense him? Nothing in my mind, in our bond, but black ice and an undercurrent of echoes—as if millions of souls wait for me on the other side of these branches. For a moment, an echo of the past warns me in my head:

*Run and hide, Elysia.*

A chill crawls up my spine, but I pinch my lips, determined. No, I won't hide. He may hide, he may play his games, and keep his secrets, but I'm here to *shine!*

So, I climb. My fingers numb almost immediately, and I must warm them with my glow. Just as soon as I find a knot of a handhold, a crystal sprouts beneath my palm, pricking and bleeding my skin. Whimpering from the pain, I slip, I fall, landing hard on my side. This tree is alive...with death—with his essence and power.

Growling, I get to my feet and attack the tree. He has his ice, but I have Goddess fire, so I form gold spikes and stab them into the tree: my Halo picks. Nothing worthy in life can be won without blood, without heart, without soul.

I press on, climbing the building-high trees, picking up my pace because those noxious fumes threaten my soul figure. Countless ghouls clamber around the base of the Tree Gates. Due to their blindness, they are the only creatures that may approach.

Alarmed at first, I cringe, prepared to form a Halo weapon until I realize they cannot fly close to the Gates of Death. No, they teeter near, seduced by my light, by my soul blood, but they don't approach. Instead, Spitfire is having a field day, leaping up to bat at their wings, crouching and pouncing upon others, sinking his jaws into their flesh to tear at their throats. Ghoul blood splatters his hide.

Invigorated by my hellcat, I toss my curls back with a laugh and shout down at him, "Go back to the Tower, Spitfire. I'll join you later!"

If I make it past these Gates alive...I almost say but continue climbing. My pace quickens until my body feels lighter than a feather, lighter than

starlight. I understand why. This close to the Court O' Death, where there are no secrets, my soul's pain haunts me, exposing me, stripping me of hidden motives, masks, or inhibitions. The higher I go, the more my hundred and two fang marks show. Death's fang mark from where Thanatos bit me and staked his claim in the Soul Plane lingers on the right side of my throat—laced with a hint of frost. Despite my chemise, I am as naked and unveiled as a peeled fire fruit

Tears become waterfalls on my cheeks when I arrive within the womb of those branches that are a maze. Only momentary gaps of twinkling light. More frost pricks me—icy spindles drawing my soul blood to spill like golden drops. Not even this dark force can stop me. Not when I've lived with a hoard of hundred fanged serpents stalking my heart every day. My breath turns to soft, shallow gasps. I treasure the feeling of this *bleeding love*.

The twinkling gaps expand. I press on toward the edge of the Gates as the maze of branches begins to clear. My dripping blood slows, my flesh repairing itself, for all this is but a soul dream within a soul dream. My heart only falters when I peer down to find my chemise in tatters, in scraps that barely cover me.

“Sweet little Halo-bearer...doesn't know we will ensnare her.”

I jerk my head at the chilling voice of stanzas and leap back against a tree branch at the sight of a *peculiar*, dark figure swinging in a hammock within the very body of these trees.

“Who are you, and how do you know me?” I wonder to the creature who leaps from the hammock and lands directly before me. My eyes scramble all over him, unsure where to look.

Dozens of honeybees buzz around him, some occasionally settling. In this darkness, they glow, reminding me of humming fireflies. He's some sort of demon meets vampire meets monster—as if he's a compilation of all. Three sets of massive bulging horns protrude from his head: one highest pair curling out, another corkscrewing up to overlap the apex one, and a lower third pair coiling down on each side of his neck to wind over his pointed ears.

My eyes wander along his face, which is long and diamond-shaped with a sharp, angular chin, flattened nose, and hoodless eyes of shimmering pearl orbs. His mouth, a thin crooked line, grins from ear to ear—unopened but still exhibiting two long and impressive fangs.

The creature steps toward me, cornering me against the tree's body. Overwhelmed by his mass, his strength from his skin of blackwood and iron,

much like these tree gates, and his lower half of herculean muscle...and hoofs, I do my best not to cringe or cower. Fear still threatens to cave in my chest.

The demon croons to his honeybees, “Little angel birthed from heaven... desires to know our true confession.” His voice is a paradox of a deep lilt. I shudder like I’m some wild animal this demon is just waiting to cage. “How shall we greet this star-blessed human...whose soul needs some *protection*?”

I cover my lips and slam my eyes shut, cringing at the enormous, unashamed demon member that thrusts from his nether regions beyond his fur. Not like Neo with his desire to be comfortable or to tease me. No, when this monster does it, it’s to provoke an...*emotion*.

“Yes, glowing girl of heart and soul...*Violent* ones are my control!” A taloned finger swipes my cheek as he leans in to coo in my ear, “From panic to love, how they collide...especially in Destruction’s tempting bride! That heaven-scent upon her breath...enough to tempt our Reaper Death!”

“Ugh...” I wince when he rubs himself against me, invoking that panic to skitter up my spine. Triggered, I unleash my whips, my chains, and my throwing stars, but this maddening creature only laughs before all my weapons dive back into my chest in a wild hysteria. Hands quaking, I clutch my stomach as more fear rips through me. How can he command me like that?

“What do you want?” I demand, wishing to get as far from him as possible, wishing to find Thanatos.

“Answer my riddle, little saint...I’ll let you go with no constraint. I’ll grant you a boon, a sweet little kiss,...or I’ll reap all your violent bliss!” That taloned finger sweeps down the center of my chest as if threatening to rip what little chemise I have left.

“Death will—”

A rumbling laughter puffs from his nostrils, transforming into more honeybees. “Sweet, sweet, sweet, she does contrive! As gold honey straight from heaven’s hive!”

I bite my tongue hard, more comfortable with that pain instead of his enormous length prodding my sex. Ugh. Now, I regret tying up Syn and leaving her.

“Death, Death! Lost his flames to frosted breath! I am *older* than Death, Halo-bearer...I don’t answer to him, but I love games, Star-wearer. Do you enjoy games, honey sweet?...I’ll make it easy for your blessed heartbeat!”

He circles that phallus.

“Oh, foremothers, tell me your riddle and be damned!” I almost sag, doubling over, but force myself to listen even if all I can seem to remember is my own name: *Elysia*.

*“The beginning of eternity  
The end of time and space  
The beginning of every end,  
And the end of every place.”*

As soon as he finishes, I deadpan with a grin because my name was what I needed. All the demon could manage to take from his talons sinking into my mind right after I’d agreed to his riddle. That is his power. Control of the mind for a mere moment in time. I’d felt it. Like an invading glimmer. A silent, predatory ripple of pain. Now, I reveal the answer, “The letter E.”

“Oh, tsk, tsk, tsk...” he immediately sheathes his dick behind his fur while my shoulders sink in relief. “Very well, dear Haloed heart...time for you to depart. Go and tempt Death with my kissing boon,...and please enjoy your *honeymoon*.”

That grinning mouth kisses my cheek. It feels like nothing more than a bee sting. Not wanting to linger, I battle my way through the remaining branches and don’t look back once at the conniving trickster of a demon.

To my great relief, on the other side of the Tree Gates, a walkway leads into open air with no railings and no sides, encompassed by branches. But those branches clear to unveil the Court of Death!

My whole body pitches, and I stumble, taking a few moments to breathe it in. Shimmering tears burn my eyes at the Court presented like a scintillating offering to bless me. Dazzling as only Death can. Fused together, hundreds of billions of ice crystals form a Soul-scraper of a cathedral tower twisting into that tremulous dark haze that can’t hope to smother Death’s ice. It’s like staring at a host of pearls kissing diamond lovers. Like staring at clarity and purity. I whimper, I sob, fingers shaking with emotion.

Holy foremothers!

Getting a hold of myself, I pinch my arm and shake my head with a laugh. “I’m going to deal him so many *Frozen* references!” Game. Set. Match!

*Oh, heavens! You’re here...*His rapid breath of *violent emotion* resounds in my ear like a Death drum.

Pulse thrashing in my veins, I beam from ear to ear, thrilled at how I’ve

stunned him.

*Thanatos? Where the hell have you been?* I keep going, keep walking down that path toward the ice crystal tower, my steps quickening until I'm practically gliding, though the path narrows.

*When I'm at Court, surrounded by the Lake of Souls, it becomes much more difficult to feel you. If we had a true blood oath—*

*Did I crack your chart, Natos?* I giggle and do a little jig, garbed in nothing but the tattered scraps of my soul chemise. Enough to get one secret? The Scourge, Lux, Neo's heart, Death itself...I hope. Eyes wide, heat frolicking through my body, stardust spreading to clothe me, I press on. Finally sensing him, unhindered, through the bond we do share, I lift my eyes to that icy Court O' Death and discern him on a hundreds-feet high balcony that extends over—

*Elysia, if you want to come to my Court, you must pass across the Lake of Souls,* Thanatos alerts me, gesturing to how the walkway descends to that Lake spread like a silvery raiment. I must refrain from bursting out laughing. Destruction has a pool. Death has a vast, boundless lake: the Lake of Souls!

Armies of souls, millions if not billions, abound in that watery sanctum. Even from here, their energies flow all around me with a multitude of endless wild emotions. Waves and torrents of rapture, pain, woe, elation, regret, and even peace. To anyone else, it would be overwhelming. Instead, I absorb those energies, bind them to my Halo, and write them upon my heart, knowing I would heal every soul in the world if I could. The Lake spans hundreds of miles. Nothing but this single bridge of a path narrowing.

Without pausing in my step, not even when the walkway thins to barely the width of my feet like tiptoeing across a balance beam, I raise my chin high and proclaim, "I'm coming, you radiant Reaper!" Jubilation shining within me, I cross the threshold of the Lake of Souls.

A dark, seductive chuckle before Death announces in our bond, *Crack, Halo-Bearer.*

Crack. I've cracked his chart! One check for me.

Now, the Lake is but a breath of space below my feet. Souls congregate around me, drawn to the Halo dust exhaling off my skin, to that atom bomb of energy that desires the purity of release. Like will o' the wisps, those souls echo their stormy serenade to my heart. Dozens leap from the water to kiss my skin, to spiral around my legs, cold as ice and hot as flame. Spreading my arms wide to maintain my balance, I move forward while smiling at the soul

sirens.

Until that walkway narrows to nothing more than a hairline. I'm walking on an icy tightrope! I lift my gaze to Thanatos. There he stands—on his balcony in his Reaper robes sealed to every inch of his form, apart from that Death angel face of dark silky skin, of godlike cheekbones, of a full and bewildering mouth that tastes of fantasy and starlight and serendipity.

Compared to him, I am a naked luminous orb of soul skin, flesh, and blood. A tempting treasure he cannot have, but I do not forget: Thanatos is not the Dragon.

I take my eyes off him, and my bare foot skims the tightrope of stone. When a soul ruptures the water, prancing to kiss me, I lose my balance. I fall! A scream erupts from my throat. Closing my eyes, I prepare to plunge into deep water, lost to all those souls who long for me to unite with them.

I strike something hard. Something *cold*. Without opening my eyes, I curve my nails, gushing at the familiar sensation. Ghosts of frost ripple around my body like an echo of my personal...*dream within a dream*.

Oh, Saints!

Heaving and gasping and choking back all this atomic, violent emotion, I open my eyes and plant one fist on the cold and hard crystalline *ice* beneath my body. On my knees, I gush to behold the Lake of Souls that has become completely and utterly frozen. Nothing more than a single-layered sheen of ice. Thick enough to hold my Halo of a soul but thin enough for the billions of souls to still swim and gather toward me, glorying in my soul form. Like silvery wisps collecting to kiss my shining form.

I snap my head up to Thanatos, biting the inside of my lower lip over a knowing smirk because we both know he's added another check mark to his chart. The tingling in my fingertips and the liquid gold on my thighs confess as much.

Hands on my hips, I stand, stare up at the Prince of Death, and sharpen my whip-smart mouth. *Oh, dear Death, you want to go all "Once Upon a December" on me, do you? Care to know how I kept in shape for the Underground and how I channeled my love of aesthetics? Four years of figure skating!*

*Elysia...purrs* Thanatos as if he knows, as if he understands, as if he knows all my secrets as if he...*I see you*.

I flinch when a pair of gilded frost skates appear on my feet—silver and crystalline and more beautiful than any pair I've ever worn. Though his

figure is but a dark shadow, I raise my chin to that tower platform and flutter my hand in a mocking bow. *I'll show you a dream within a dream, Elsa!*

A dark chuckle echoes in my mind.

*Another check for me, Death, I counter.*

Channeling my inner queen where my greatest competition is my own mind or, in this case, my soul, I sweep my hand in a graceful arc like a swan—and smile at the little current of Halo dust fluttering from my motion. Tonight, I won't be just a comet. I'll be the damn meteor shower. Somewhere within the dark expanse, familiar music plays to the motion of my hands. A serenade of serendipity.

*Oh, you naughty Reaper!* I chastise Thanatos, but I know he recognizes my inner smirk at the Swan Lake ballad wafting into my ears.

*Show yourself, Elysia,* he banters.

Did he just—damn that frosty fucker with his checking fetish!

Embracing the lulling melody, I follow the familiar cadence. The rhythm caresses my glowing body, long strokes scrawling over me so I may sway to the tempo. Halo filaments, threads from my resplendent crown, stream from my curls to tantalize the air while I glide into a flawless arabesque.

It's not about the technique. Here, nothing is about the footwork. Nothing is about the memory of all my training. Everything is what it could be—what dreams and fantasy are made of. In this land of the dead that longs for Elysium that is always out of reach, everything is about heart and spirit. Of serendipity and soul. My imagination knows no bounds. The entire world narrows to the emotion, to this elated warmth circulating within me.

And the eyes of Death follow my Haloed spirit the entire time. Tempting, tempting, tempting...my blood, my teeth, my tears, my flesh, always out of reach.

At one point, I sweep my hands into the air, imagining my fingers radiating gold rivulets. They rise and shine—hundreds of feet into the air—aiming for his throne—my splendorous arrowed soul flames. Then, I push out my chest, swing my shoulders forward, and glide my body back in grace, in beauty, in power, in celestial feminist force glory. This is far more about me, my life, and my soul than it is for him. This is my rapture and romance.

Multiple times, I spin, I spiral, I dance, cascading starlight and embers into the deepest of darkness. A darkness that surrounds me like a deathly serenade.

Spirit aflame, I launch into countless twirls, charging higher off the



ground until I spring with *flight*. Thanatos spins his frost to whorl around my skates, mimicking my motions in flawless synchronization. It thrills me. A dangerous fever of desire kindles my blood. My stardust catches onto that frost, becoming a compelling dance of golden Soul and silvery Death.

On a heated high, soaring exalted as the heavens after I nail my split, I shoot my back leg into the air in a high arabesque...and skim my head low to touch my ankle. One last twirl. In the midst of my ninth and final triple, my Halo light bursts into a pageantry of stars. They raise me higher and higher. Hundreds of feet into the air, my glorious soul spins and spins with the host of heavens surging from me like a million meteors just as I'd vowed.

I am magic. I am pure energy. I am soul light!

At last, the music slows...it fades. Frost prickles the back of my neck in a kiss both dark and elegant. When I turn around, departing from the final spin, I pause in midair. There is Thanatos, staring *up* at me from his throne of ice. I am *higher* than the head of Death. And all the souls gaze at me from the now-thawed Lake.

Rising to greet my angelic presence, Thanatos stands and strides onto the balcony just a few breaths from my chest. In response, my Halo beams unleash a kaleidoscope of butterflies to impart a united celestial kiss. Tears freely glisten upon my cheeks from the welling of emotion.

*Masterfully and beautifully checked, Elysia! Please...accept my gift of thanks. Something to honor this Ice Princess.*

A soft but delirious smile teases my lips. On this night, I found not an atom bomb but romance and rapture, bliss and blessing...euphoria.

The next moment, Thanatos' frost dresses me like breath prayers, parading all around my skin and diving hundreds of feet to the ice below us. Violent emotion ricochets in my heart. I part my lips in silent awe at the sparkling soul gown of translucent crystals with a waterfall of frost—a *bridal* train. A crown of crystals dons my curls. My halcyon gold skin is the perfect complement.

My core radiates, betraying a tiny rivulet of gold liquid weeping along my thighs. No shame whatsoever in my body's response to such beauty. No shame in the waterfalls of tears upon my cheeks.

With a treasured smile, Thanatos sweeps his gaze to me, transforming those tears into tiny rosebuds of frost. Ones I catch. He's turned my tears into...roses? Closing my eyes, I gush and cradle the roses, releasing a deep and grateful sigh.

A black shade to my golden storm, Thanatos extends his hand where I hover in his frost gown before accepting so he may tilt his head to me and brush his serendipitous mouth across my knuckles.

In a low voice only I can hear, Death recites:

*“Grains of the golden sand —  
How few! yet how they creep  
Through my fingers to the deep,  
While I weep — while I weep!  
O God! Can I not grasp  
Them with a tighter clasp?  
O God! can I not save  
One from the pitiless wave?”*

With his hand still clasping mine, frigid lips embracing my skin with a frost kiss, I curl my Halo light in golden dancing filaments all around us to mimic my dance, to mimic the frost he'd spun for me on that ice, and whisper back,

*“Is all that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?”*

*Thank you for the dress,* I utter in barely an overwhelmed whisper of the mind.

Death surrenders my hand with a, *You're welcome. Perhaps next time, we will make it a dual waltz.*

Oh, Saints!

He leads me to his throne. A wonder of stalactite and stalagmite crystals fused into the ice palace itself, bound by his soul blood.

When a couple of familiar growls resound, I squint in the darkness to where multiple silhouettes of massive hellcats creep around the throne—fire-wreathed eyes preying on me, drawn to the light beams glowing from my skin. At first, I stiffen.

Cold and calm, Thanatos raises his hand so the flaming felines settle, their fur relaxing from a prickle to a thick hide. I peer at him with a sweet grin and bite my lower lip as one approaches, her muzzle high enough to reach my neck.

“Hello...” I murmur and daringly lift my hand to touch her strong cheek, discovering how...oh, heavens...she leans her powerful jaw into my palm. I feel her heat and sharp scabrous teeth through that thick hide while her whiskers prick me like hot iron. “Oh, she's beautiful, Natos!” I gush and

scratch her ears, picking up on a murmur of a purr.

“These are my daemons, but I’m particularly fond of Persefoni.”

I jut out my hip with a roll of my eyes. “Persefoni...meaning “Bringer of Death”. Seriously?”

That knowing smirk tugs one side of his full mouth. Damn it. I cannot conquer this brother’s humor, and he knows it.

Unlike Neo, Natos doesn’t lord it over me but merely gestures to his hellcat, who snorts as if I’ve scratched her the wrong way before she puffs a few embers to my frost dress and turns, tail flicking my chin.

“You’ll have to forgive Persefoni.” Thanatos curves one finger along my spine, triggering a shudder since my back is thanks to the plunging gown’s open design. “She’s a little jealous since the only son she ever sired imprinted on a certain flame-summoning *angel*.”

I snap my head to Thanatos, my jaw falling. Spitfire. My heart almost sinks as I discern if he just shattered my chart.

While his single index finger ascends to the back of my neck to settle upon his sickle mark, Thanatos leans in, cocking his head to the side. Oh, Saints! That trickle of gold practically moans from my sex. His pupils dilate to show me those constellations. Fingers like cold poems on the back of my neck, Thanatos dethrones himself by revealing, “Elysia, you will *always* shatter my chart. Now, come...I must do Court.”

## CHAPTER 8

## “I WILL RECTIFY YOUR DESIRE.”

With his hand on the small of my back, Thanatos directs me to his throne. “Sit here, Halo-Bearer.” Astonished, all I can seem to do is purse my lips and gaze at that crystal throne that could hold three of my bodies, along with a full-grown hellcat. Then, Death leans in and whispers frost into my ear, “I wish for you to have a good seat.”

Oh, Saints!

I trace my hand along the frost crystals, some as thin as a harp string with others as thick as Neo’s scythe blades. One kiss of frost on the base of my spine coaxes me to sit. With how much the heat of my desire sears my insides, I need the contrast of Thanatos’ power more than ever.

Inhaling a deep breath, I slowly lower myself onto the throne—cold as a wintry moon. The frosted waterfall of my gown slips through one of the balcony gaps to weep down toward the Soul Lake. It barely skims the surface.

Thanatos wasn’t exaggerating. From here, I can see everything. Hundreds of miles of the Lake in all directions with the Gates of Death in the distance. Off to my left is a deep, tremulous haze, but a great tower in the distance rises through the darkness—visible enough to glimpse the spire of a castle. Beyond that haze, the sound of millions of souls echoes their woeful cries.

“What is that place?” I wonder about the eternity of haze.

Thanatos taps my cheek with just a nip of frost, luring my eyes back to his. “Limbo. The Castle of Souls lies beyond at the highest most point.”

I gaze behind me at the soul-scraper, marveling as I believed this was the Castle of Souls. What is this place that lies beyond the Gates of Death,

beyond the Chasm, but lingers outside the boundaries of Limbo?

Curious, I tilt my head to study that fathomless expanse of Limbo. “Is that where you tracked Verena?”

“I harnessed her soul and returned her to my Lake, yes,” he offers, fingers sliding to trace my sickle brand. “Many souls with unfinished business may try to run from me. I’ll bargain with some. Others, I’ll release.”

“What about—”

“Later, Elysia,” he interrupts, voice resolute and commanding as he indicates to the throne. Sighing, I accept, refraining from my host of questions.

As soon as I take my seat, Thanatos orders his hellcats to guard me before he forsakes the balcony—so swift, his frost and shades slap against my body. A spine-tingling chill sweeps over me, but my Halo offers warm ripples to thaw my flesh. Thanatos slowly sails down to the Lake, forming an ice pedestal in midair...where he lands. His gaze passes over the assemblies of souls as if he’s fathomed the light of each one as if he’s read their stories and memorized the beat of their identities.

The Court O’ Death is nothing like the Court O’ Destruction. And at the same time, they are so similar. All of it gives me a sense of déjà vu. Except when Thanatos stands from his pedestal to commence Court, all he needs is one word. “Come.”

Just as I had in Neo’s Court, I remain still and silent. I listen and observe the primacy and dominion of Death. He does not need a quicksilver tongue, and I imagine I’m a rarity who has heard his dark humor. Here, Thanatos is supreme, for while many do indeed run from Death as he’d referenced, none can truly hide from him.

Overwhelming respect and even fear swell in my chest. The fear is a good thing—bred of darkness and danger and deep desire, though shame twists inside me because I should focus more on Neo. Not his brother. I push aside the gnawing guilt. For now, I give all my attention to the proceedings.

Unlike Neo’s Court, there are no blood duties here. For those who have passed, soul light is the only form of blood. So, when Thanatos summons countless souls to rise from his Lake, I knot my fingers and shift until I’m on the edge of my seat. There are well over a hundred—a tapestry of shimmering bodiless star streaks of varying different shades and colors. Lake water falls off them like spirit tears.

*None shine as resplendent as you, Elysia...* Thanatos echoes through our

limited bond without turning from his pedestal. Lashes heavy, I feel a soft smile and lean forward.

The souls hover in the air to his command. None higher than him...apart from me.

For a glimmer of a moment, he allows each one to retain bodily form—arrayed in soul dust. I memorize the different gestures for how Thanatos settles accounts.

For souls who wish to retain the form of a ghost and walk among the land of the living through dreams and lost places, Thanatos imparts a breath of frost and sends them through one layer of spirit fabric to haunt the living. Or to become spirit guides. I notice he does this even with the souls who seem darker, whose souls are haunted by unfinished business. Did Verena have the choice to become a ghost, a spirit guide for me? All I know is she chose Syn. Not that I blame her.

Perhaps my favorite part is when Thanatos officiates the union of a soul marriage by kissing frost into the brows of a couple before sending them on soul wings to Elysium. Ice roses in their hands, no less.

*Will you ever show me?* I wonder about that blessed realm, studying Thanatos, who refuses to pause from his duties.

*Someday.* I hear that knowing grin in his voice.

I almost tremble at the thrilling rush of that simple promise. If he's modeled his Court off Elysium, then I can't possibly conceive what it must look like. Maybe a paradise of crystal-falling raindrops. No, crystal mountains and hundreds of waterfalls of frost. Or—

*Elysia...* Thanatos admonishes me, and I shrug feebly with an undeniable smile. Due to our connection, if my imagination runs wild, it distracts him. No wonder he wanted me to stay in his Tower. Blushing, I mouth an apology.

*Right, yes, please carry on,* I urge, digging my nails into my arms to stay in the present as much as I can.

*Thank you, my Ice Princess.*

A gold flush spreads into my cheeks. I reach to pet Persefoni, who is curled around my legs, warming me through the frost gown. Not one crystal melts. Since the Soul Plane always transforms my clothes into whatever I desire, I know I will never want to wear anything but this gown upon my return.

Another low chuckle. I wish I could know his thoughts, his secrets as he knows mine.

*After Court, I will grant you one, Elysia,* Thanatos reveals, which causes my Halo to beam, radiating right through my soul skin and flesh. I consider Lux and her history with Neo, how I may conquer the new heart she's given him, or how I may conquer this Scourge of Destruction and grant him a new one. Surely, Thanatos must know.

For now, I wait and watch.

Whole soul cargo trains line up for account settling, including the tiniest streak of a child. Thanatos settles thousands!

He commands all from funeral rights so some souls may sleep in his deep and dark Lake. He proffers soul marriages, listens to the requests of homeless souls, and records the Court O' Death's Lake gains and losses. The induction of soul pawns tasked with the register of Lake territories is another duty. And the distribution of armed forces—bounty hunters, fallen demonesses like Syn trying to earn redemption points. Thanatos even possesses rooks and bishops. Some are charged as gatekeepers for the boundaries between Elysium, the Chasm, the Court O' Death, and Limbo. Others oversee his Tower and ensure no ghouls cross into the Soul Plane to invade his spirit home.

I gasp, almost lurching when Thanatos summons a cargo train of souls—all remind me of winter mist, of bitter blue as sickness...as Scourge. I touch the crystal sides of Thanatos' throne, the low rumble in Persefoni's belly reverberating into my soul form. Because she sensed me tensing.

Thanatos' frost curls along my spine in a prickling petition...for me to join him. When I consent, he wraps a shade tether around my figure and draws me from his throne to join his side on the pedestal.

As soon as I arrive, he constructs a new pedestal *higher* than his. Raising my brows, I cast a sideways glance at him but find no mirth or merriment. Only a stoic mouth and his shade dark eyes direct me to the souls.

Holy foremothers!—

Any lightness shatters inside me. Lament and unrest stalk the plague-blue windows of their souls. Their deaths were a slow suffering—a torturous death of blood chilling and congealing. This is the Scourge. Their souls are homeless because their bodies have not been laid to rest. Still preserved in the snows beyond the Iron Walls like frost-encased tears.

Oh, Saints, they kneel before me! My thoughts return to Neo's Soul Pool, to when I implanted the soul of the little girl back into her body, but that was only because Destruction can restore what he destroys. If the Scourge still ravages their corpses, I can only hope to heal one or two.



*How would you transport their souls through the Soul Plane, I wonder, Elysia?* Thanatos' question reeks of a doubled intention.

I prey my eyes on his in a warning because I know what he's hinting at. How he would have the power to cross the boundaries between worlds. How he could transport them to me for healing—if I only pay the price with my tooth, flesh, tear, and blood. I grit my teeth hard, remembering our past, our first meetings. No matter how seductive and alluring he is, no matter how he seems to have changed, I cannot trust the Prince of Death.

*No, Thanatos. I owe you nothing.*

He sighs but nods in surrender. I don't bother to remind him how I bested him twice, from that long night of hundred-bites trauma to the time his Father brought me to him. Not to mention surviving all his mind games. Is all this just another long game for him? Tempt me with his Soul Lake, and I'll give up my tooth, my tears, my flesh, my blood? Can I even grant them all to him through the Soul Plane? If my blood may transfer over...

Instead, I sweep my gaze across the expanse of indigo twinkles. Families who wished for a better life. Now, they have transformed into soul refugees. A few brave ones hover toward me, their eyes filled with child light. I smile as silver ripples play around their soul skins as if mimicking the Lake water where they reside. Meanwhile, my Halo, my heart longs to rush over them with the force of a healing tidal wave. But how...how can I help them?

*What will happen to them?* I wonder to Thanatos.

*I may be able to hold them a little longer in my Lake.* He gestures with a single crystalline touch to my spine. *But eventually, their souls will escape to Limbo.* His fingers drift to the side of my back while he gazes at me from the side. I lower my head, biting back raw emotion, swallow it down. *Homeless ones cannot be bound here. They will seek Elysium, paradise, but they will wander.*

His hand sinks beneath the fabric of the frost dress dangerously close to my breast. Why is he doing this? Tormenting me with the promise of what he could do if I restore him. At what cost? My heart? My soul? My bond with Neo?

After a moment, Thanatos eases his hand into the air next to my body, flexing his fingers. *They will end up in Limbo.*

*Hold them as long as you can, Thanatos,* I plead, already plotting how I may go to the Iron Walls myself and find that blood bishop scientist Neo spoke of. As soon as the sun rises, I will go to the Tenth Court border and

learn more about this Scourge.

“First, you will sleep.” Thanatos gazes and closes the Court O’ Death so he may return me to the Tower. “Oh, it appears you’ve been found.”

He smiles and touches the edge of my cheek, directing me to the demonizes, who balances adeptly on the narrow pathway above the Lake of Souls. I shake my head with a giggle as Thanatos leads me back to the walkway, where Syn perches, wrinkling her nose. Fortunately, she nods to me before bowing to Thanatos.

“You could have warned me.” She sticks out her tongue, and a black serpent hisses at him.

Thanatos beams. “And miss out on the thrill of ranking my two deadly and beautiful women?”

*I am not yours*, I warn Death, furrowing my brow. My hand automatically strays to my chest to Neo’s ring, clinging to it like a precious star.

“I trussed her up good,” I hint with a wicked glint in my eye, desperate to change the subject and how he referenced me in his *possessive* term.

Something *erupts* inside me. Something molten and liquid. A torturous and uncontrollable lust burning through me. Overthrowing all other urges, this primal and unbridled hunger surges a shock wave through me, pulsing from my head to my toes. Holy fuck! With no control over what my body is doing, I launch myself at Syn. Better her than Thanatos.

“Death!” She shrieks as my hands scramble up her stomach. “Get this little wanton angel off of me!”

I leap away from her and cover my face with my hands, utterly mortified. “I swear I don’t know what happened!”

My cheeks burn. Out of the corner of my eye, Thanatos cocks his head to me, brows threading low, suspicious. My core erupts again, spewing liquid gold to wet the frost dress. A storm of desire rages between my thighs. Thousands of tingles prick my nerve endings, and my nipples pebble. Before I realize it, I’ve forced myself right against Syn’s chastity belt, and I’m...oh, Saints!

“Thanatos, your heavenly halo girl is *humping* me!” she protests, snarling at me.

I hear the frustrated groan in his voice from behind us. “Oh, hell. Well played, beekeeper.”

Somehow, I tear myself from Syn, but the carnal need inside me doesn’t stop. I cry my apologies over and over again while backing up against

Thanatos. “What’s happening to me?”

“He was in the Gates again, wasn’t he?” Thanatos touches his sickle mark on my neck as if trying to steady me, but it doesn’t help much. I bite my tongue hard, feeling the violent emotion of erotic bliss surging inside me, prepared to assault me again. I whimper while Thanatos continues, “That exasperating apiarist and his pranks. Sometimes, he shows up and roosts in my trees. Elysia—”

Oh, shit! Another burst of liquid gold. Electrical currents of pleasure hum all over my flesh. I can’t control my hands when they form pricks of Halo blades to rip at Thanatos’s robes. “What secrets are you hiding, Death?” I cackle, wild, losing myself to that pleasure.

“Thanatos, best take her back to your Tower now and relieve her suffering,” suggests Syn before the rippling wave of pleasure passes. Without fulfillment. Groaning deeply, I drop to my knees, hugging myself, doubling over. I’m seconds from plunging into that Lake. Syn pats the top of my head. “You know Pan’s games last all night.”

All night? I gasp, I moan, I shudder. Scratch the Lake. I’ll dive headfirst into the Chasm before that! I’m certain my heart has broken off, implanted itself between my thighs, and is beating so hotly, so violently, it’s ready to explode.

“Saints, save me!” I curl into the fetal position and rub my hands all over my soul form to try and control myself.

“Come here, Elysia,” Thanatos murmurs low and scoops me into his arms, into a honeymoon hold. “I will rectify your desire.”

What does he mean by that?

“No,” I whimper with what emotional and mental reserve I have but still fall into his arms.

He launches us into the air. Within moments, the Soul Lake is below us, but Thanatos passes beyond the Court tower, hovering above that tightrope of stone. It confounds me that he can do this without wings, but I imagine it’s one of his powers in the Soul Plane. Just like I danced into flight a short time ago.

Ugh...I find my hands wandering, diving, *exploring*. I can’t help how they wander over his robes, seeking those sculpted muscles. One particular muscle.

Thanatos hardens, fortifying like ice, thickening sharp as crystal sickle blades as my fingers inch closer to his pelvis. Staccato, salacious currents like

gloried garlands pulse out of me until I'm nothing more than a panting, moaning fire blossom.

I strive in vain to cling to Thanatos and battle this desire like hellfire that feasts on all of me. For some reason, I remember that night in the Chasm— woe overcoming me as my skin turned cold. Now, that night has reversed in a sick and twisted paradox.

Neo was hot as molten iron, as lustful as I am now. Thanatos is his polar opposite. Before, I could smell the sulfur and rot and ruin of the Chasm. Now, it's the aroma of snow, roses, frost buds, and the deepest waters. Before, it was despair, grief, sin, and suffering. Now, passion, craze, lecherousness, and libido conquer me while liquid gold drips river-like down my legs. I know what I'm going to ask Death, beg him for.

Warring against the ardor, I pound my fist into Thanatos' chest. "Oh, that buzzing bastard, I solved his riddle!" I moan, pressing my lips to Thanato's neck, then sink my teeth down. His silver blood awakens to my love bite.

"Did you just bite me?" he guffaws.

"I'm going to get him back if it's the last thing I do!"

"Yes, Elysia," Thanatos purrs, kissing the side of my head through my curls. Again, there's that knowing grin, his subtle dark humor. Almost worse that he doesn't lord it over me like Neo.

"Don't mock my pain!" I scream when another wave hits, and I twist my fingers in his robe.

Not once does Death tempt me. Not once does his hand stray as he wisps us across his Lake of Souls. It would be *better* than this plague of passion. By now, I'm rocking against Thanatos, rolling my hips from the wanton inferno in my blood.

I finally snap. "Touch me!" I cry out as another violent spasm gushes more liquid stars to drip between my thighs. Violent whirlpools of desire plague my belly, igniting heat deeper in my core. The tension between us electrifies my entire soul.

Thanatos does not ask for confirmation. No, his cold hand slips from my naked waist and dips inside my gown. All the breath strips from my lungs as his fingers slip across my flesh to sink, to dive, to plunge frost crystals right into my sex.

Arching my back, I fall over his arm, curls tumbling over his shoulder as the uncontrollable onslaught stems thanks to that ice. His soft fingers treasure my gold-dampened depths...just once. A slow and delicate stroke of my

folds. I clench my thighs, wanting those fingers to plunge deeper. But he imparts a single touch of his fingertips to spread his hoarfrost.

At last, his hand returns to my spine. Feather light. I can't tell whether or not my liquid gold has stained his fingers. In one way, he's like Neo. He refused to touch me. But Thanatos has gone further. Instead of slowing the fire, the craving, he's *reaped* it.

My breath finally returns to normal against his neck, and I murmur through tears, "Thank you."

"You conquered that accursed agriculturist and his irritating limericks. I should be thanking you. And apologizing on my knees." He hints in a frigid whisper in my ear. "But please...accept my gift of thanks."

"What gift?"

Thanatos lowers me before another section of his Lake—little bigger than a large pond. A boundary marks this one, separating it from other areas. Several ferrymen soul-pawns row in crystal boats to record the souls. Erecting another pedestal, this one lower to the Lake, Thanatos stands behind me—his shadow like a dark throne as he summons a singular soul from the water and allows it to take shape.

Oh, heavens! I almost crumble. Tears glisten in my eyes as I behold a face I haven't seen in months. A face, a figure that was reduced to ash right before my eyes.

"Thanatos," I whimper, I sob and touch the Prince of Death's chest.

"This particular soul had some *unfinished business*," Thanatos utters and nods to my father, who touches his brow in fealty to the Prince. "I managed to capture him countless times and kept him here for this significant moment."

"Dad. Can I...?" I wonder to Death, heart yearning, hoping that I may somehow hold my father.

"In a way," responds Thanatos before circling his hand in the air and parading my Dad's form in buds of frost. "They won't last long." Then, he grips a tether...no, a strand! A single strand of my father's soul, which he tugs toward us before placing it in my palm.

"Dad..." I hold onto that strand for dear death and embrace him despite how he's nothing but a cold prickling of frost. No, it doesn't feel like my father's arms around me. Not his dark velvet skin. I can't hear his slow heartbeat, but it's still his essence, his loving energy. In his arms, I cry as waves of heat and cold overwhelm me. Teardrops tumble onto the pedestal.

“I’m so sorry for not saying ‘I love you’ back that day.”

*Elysia! I love you!* His desperate words haunt me because Dad knew they would be his last.

“Elysia...” is all he says with a smile as he holds me tighter.

“Isn’t there any hope?” I crane my neck back to Thanatos.

He shakes his head. “My damned brother left his ashes to scatter. He cannot restore him.”

*Is he stuck here forever?*

*Now that his business is finished, his soul may rest and find heaven. It is both pure and strong enough.*

“I love you, Lyssi,” Dad echoes, the frost already thawing. “Tell your mother I am at peace.”

I gaze up at his deep bronze eyes, his dark skin like moonlit shadow silk. One last tear flees from my cheek like the twinkling tip of a star. No, a drop of a fire-glass. It lands on my father’s soul.

And then—oh, Saints! The frost disappears, and my father evanesces until nothing but golden glitters exist without a strand for me to hold. Somehow, I understand—whether it’s the almighty burst of holy energy that escapes my chest like an atom bomb—energy that rockets me back into Thanatos’ arms—or some heavenly foresight searing a path through my soul, I know, I know, I *know!* His soul has traveled to heaven. And *my* tear sent him there.

Fatigue crushes me, but before I pass out in Thanatos’s arms, he purrs low in my ear, “That was a gift, but I promised you one secret, Elysia. Now, I will grant it: Lux is your ancestor.”

## CHAPTER 9

# “I AM THE BLOOD BISHOP NEO IS SENDING.”

In the morning, I wake in Neo’s enormous bed with Spitfire’s body cradling my back like a warm, fur-covered lantern.

One glance at the time confirms I’m late for breakfast. I blink, curious since that’s never happened before. At least not until Lux. I’m also entirely naked because Thanatos’ frost dress must have melted due to Neo’s flames. It makes me wonder if he or Lux tried anything with me this morning. My breath hitches at the thought until the hellcat at my side vibrates with a deep groan. I’d doubt it with Spitfire next to me, his mighty paw draped over my arm.

Did Thanatos send him through the Soul Plane portal with me? I smile at the gesture. How different, how unexpected Thanatos is compared to Neo. Color flushes to my cheeks with heat tangling in my nether regions as I consider our night together.

Only for an icy wave to crash into me when I remember my first encounters with Thanatos in his tower. His shade voice—like a specter in my mind. *Ask him, little angel.* I cringe, my skin crawling from the memory. Not once have I asked Death the reason for his charade of a persona, why this great change. He revealed it himself: *For you are my salvation!*

I pinch my lips, my cheeks reddening in renewed contempt. Regardless of his pretty ice palace and his “Once Upon a December” Lake that can rival a hundred Olympic-sized rinks or his frost gown...or those fingers injecting their frost patterns to stem the lusty inferno—

“Stop fucking swooning!” I chastise myself in the Infinity Wardrobe mirror, digging my nails into my scalp before pointing my finger at my reflection. “Neo never had this effect on you. Now, get your inner goddess



on, and go and claim your vamp Prince.” *Which one?* My thoughts stray. My stomach tightens, and I’m aware of the longing ache in the back of my throat, a knot burning there. Somehow, I steady myself, change, and emerge from the wardrobe in a gown worthy of royalty.

Just as I depart from the wardrobe, Thanatos’ shade presence lurks through the portal wall, freezing me in my tracks. I stiffen. Those powerful shades tease the air around my face while his frost forms a rose to hover in midair—a token of appreciation. No trace of that Death voice slithering into my mind as he did before.

At first, I lift my trembling fingers toward the icy bloom, yearning to accept. Until that voice in the back of my mind nags at me, and the sickle mark from where he bit me with his claim seems to sting like needle ice. It’s all a game. I’m nothing but a temptation to him. My bond is with Neo—my *husband*—and I must focus on reclaiming his heart first and foremost. Refusing to be Thanatos’ pretty salvation, I ball my hands into fists, turn, and forsake the rose because I’ll be damned if I give him anything beyond that strand of hair. But I still flinch when the rose shatters into crystal smithereens behind me. Regret stings my throat.

On my way out, I rub my hellcat’s head. Spitfire barely flicks his ears since I’d fulfilled my promise to reward him with a flaming steak half the size of his body.

A few minutes later, I descend the staircase to the Commons, the familiar speech in the breakfast hall drifting into the Commons.

“Oh, look who decided to grace us with her presence,” Neo mutters upon my arrival, not bothering to rise from the head of the table. I smile at him even when he fetches Lux’s fingers and proceeds to suck on them one by one. If not for Quillion and Amanita, I’d likely wrinkle my nose in disgust.

Ever the gentleman, Quillion rises, clears his throat, offers me a gracious bow, and extends his hand. “Yes, she comes bearing grace from the heavens. Princess, ravishing as always!” he fawns over the deep, royal purple gown that hugs my figure down to my hips, then cascades to the floor in a dark violet A-line waterfall. “Fully admire your lacy Queen Anne neckline.”

After giving Quillion his moment, Nita sets her blood-filled teacup down on her saucer, scoots out of her chair, and approaches me to lean in and kiss each of my cheeks. Just then, Kitty bobs her brows up and down and bounces one hip against me before thumbing my exposed skin between my breasts. “I like the open keyhole at the bustline the best.” She licks her lips right before

she blinks and shrugs. “What? She said I could hit on her once a day. I’m saving my twerk for later.”

After I peck Kitty on the cheek, I take my seat at Nita’s right across from Quillion and refrain from scorning Lux’s outfit, from the birdcage veil falling over her eyes to the transparent white chemise and gold body paint of stars speckling her skin. She wears no lingerie. Countless fang marks riddle her skin as if Neo enjoys displaying her trauma as if it’s *his* glory. I swallow the bitter taste in my mouth.

The Prince finishes sucking on Lux’s pinky on her second hand, eyes glinting upon her when he nips the pinky tip. “What think you, Lux? If we can expect a late arrival from Elysia from now on, shall I have the staff hold a plate of food so she may lick it clean on the floor like the bitch she is?”

This time, it’s Nita’s turn to throw something, except in her case, it’s a scythe that lands right in Neo’s shoulder.

“Nita!” he growls, ascending from the chair and digging the baby scythe blade out.

Despite his offense, I can’t help but wince at the sight of the silver blood oozing from the wound. Empath Elysia pokes her head out of her cage while the Halo warms my chest. My fingers tingle with the need to heal, even if it’s just a flesh wound. And Nita will have her moment.

After wrapping his shades around the wound to heal it faster, Neo charges toward his sister. I battle the grin that longs to stalk my face from my sister-in-law’s defense. Not to be dominated by the Prince of Destruction, Nita swoops out of her chair and gnashes her teeth at him. “We both know who is acting like a dog, Neo.” They prowl around the table: the Dragon matching eyes with the Hydra.

Quillion nudges me. “I’m betting on Nita.”

I flutter a hand and whisper in his ear, “I’m betting on me.” I hasten to my feet and pick up the ends of my gown to catch up to Nita and loop my arm around hers, leaning on her for strength. “It’s okay, Nita. Neo must be truly *sore* since my red sun hasn’t begun its descent yet.” I wink at him and pucker my lips in a gesture of a kiss. “Perhaps next, I’ll stop shaving, and we can see who is the beauty and who is the *bitch* of a beast.”

Quillion sing-songs and opens the chart as I grant Neo a mocking bow and turn on my heel until he reaches for me, gripping my arm through the violet sleeve.

“Neo...” Nita warns darkly as if she’s ready to use his neck for her

throne, but I lift a hand and shake my head.

“No, Nita.” I prevent her from acting when Neo jerks me to himself until I knock against his hard body. “No matter how much he tries to drag me down, I’ll always be *higher* than him.”

Just then, Lux interrupts our conversation by wandering to our circle and invading our triumvirate. I wince when she presses her breasts against Neo’s side and plays him like the harpy she is. He releases me as she pleads, “Please, Neo, I just want all of this to be over.”

When she buries her head in the crook of his arm, I roll my eyes, considering how she had her hands all over *me* last night, and ridicule her, “Bitch please, you’re so fake, Barbie herself would carve an idol in your likeness.”

Nita coils an arm around my waist and kisses the side of my head, wondering, “Tell me, my angel, does your diabolical mind ever pause to process, or do you just blurt it all out?”

I shrug, smile sweetly at her, and take my seat next to Quillion as Neo escorts a weeping Lux back to her seat. “Beats living with my head up my ass all the time.” I thrust my chin to Neo.

“Your ass will be quite *red* later tonight, Elysia,” he purrs the threat.

“Hmm...your hand might be a little slippery on my red sun,” I counter with a wink and roll right into my next words, “Perhaps I’ll tell you all about the demoness I chained up in the Soul Plane last night.” I drum my fingers along the table. Heat stirs within me at the thought of Syn.

“Or...” I continue, unhindered with my diabolical mind, “how I conquered the Gates of Death, ice skated on the Lake of Souls, and your brother was a perfect gentleman the whole time. Or how his souls knelt at my feet, but their corpses are begging for a proper burial. Not that you care about the affairs of humans unless they can warm your bed and sate your destructive thirst, isn’t that right, *Neoptolemus?*” My eyes burn against his to mirror the pain in the back of my throat.

With a low growl, Neo digs the point of his scythe into the table, but one touch from Lux, and she tames him as if she holds his very heart tethers. Thankfully, his soul is still preserved in my Halo ring. But that night, when I’d clung to his tether through blood and tears and pain, I claimed my husband and captured a Dragon—commanding him to bite me until I pulled his soul back from the dead. It feels little more than a memory. A dream so lovely dark and deep. Heart heavy and aching, my Halo dims while

goosebumps pebble on my skin.

Lux doesn't bring up the corpses, the Scourge, but she does tell him, "I'm rather tired, my Prince. I still haven't recovered from our honeymoon. Will you please excuse me from Court today?"

"Of course, my love." He touches his lips to her brow. *My* kiss. *Our* kiss.

Quillion interjects from the seat next to me. "While I am not quite certain how to rate Ice Queendom on the chart, I would be more than enthusiastic if you would prefer to skip Court today and accompany me to the border, Elysia."

"You?" I raise a brow.

"Yes, I am the blood bishop Neo is sending."



"QUILLION," I reach over and touch his arm from the opposite side of the carriage. "You never told me you were a scientist."

He shrugs and adjusts his ascot. "You never asked."

"Did you just bust my chart?" I tease my lips into a smile as warmth curls into my heart.

Quillion shakes his head and folds his hands in his lap, a few chocolate brown curls tumbling onto his sienna brown cheek. "I don't do charts."

"And that's why I love you. Why everyone loves you, Quill." I get up from my seat and sidle up against him, tucking my head onto his shoulder so my curls cover his ascot.

Quillion weaves one arm around my shoulder and squeezes me in a tight hug as the carriage ascends to the causeway reserved for bishops. "Aww, thank you, sweet girl. It is quite irresistible to *not* love you, too."

I sigh and settle against him as the carriage rolls onward. Though the Walls are still a few miles away, I can make out the hoard of homeless encampments and cargo trains in the distance spread out like moving barbs of figures to form a rippling black ocean along the snowy expanse. A deep weight settles in my chest at the thought of all those people. I balance on a tightrope of emotions that threatens to undo me—too reminded of every time I rescued children from the Underground, the soul-saving business. My Halo

responds by forming the imagery of little golden birds fluttering out of my chest like it's an open cage.

Quillion chuckles as he lifts a hand toward one of my little birds. Smiling, I tilt my head to the side, hovering one above his palm. She opens her beak to chirp. No true music, of course, but I imagine musical notes, and she obeys the direction of my mind, my heart. Just a little something I figured he'd appreciate.

"Chopin..." Quillion nods and presses his hand to his chest. "Thank you." Then, he folds his hand into mine while my birds flap around the carriage. "Tell me about the Underground. How did you get involved?"

Pursing my lips, I study the scenery outside the window, but my mind is far away, wandering onto the footnotes of the past. "It started with me taking pictures and leaving gifts. I'd leave my home just before sunset," I recall my history.

Even now, I can scent the familiar earthy Redwoods around my home. But it fades to the memory of smoke and flames of the human blood farms, the iron stench of leached blood, the salt sweat of so many bodies massed together, and even the feces of the elderly and children left unattended and not given fresh clothes or diapers.

Empath Elysia rattles her cage, and a tear rolls down my cheek, a whimper threatening my voice. "I remember the crack of the whip from the vampire overseers," I confess the images of deep, dark brands in my memory. My golden birds turn violent from my rising emotions, their wings beating wild with flames flickering from their beaks.

Quillion squeezes my hand, rubbing his cold fingers along my knuckles, freeing me to continue.

Comforted by his gesture, I go on, "I remember how the blood masters would stand by and laugh when their overseers would lick the blood spilling from their backs. I remember babies crying when they were ripped from their mothers and bones breaking when those mothers would fight back."

Unashamed of my emotion, I swipe at flaming golden tears, scattering their embers to the bottom of the carriage.

"You must have loathed our kind," Quillion mentions, but I shake my head.

"Never. My father was a vampire, and save for you, he was the most honorable and kindest vampire in the world." I cross my arms, holding my shoulders to protect my fragile chest, to protect the ache from the memory of

Thanatos taking me to my father. “I hated *those* vampires, I lamented for the humans, I cried out in my heart for justice while capturing everything I could on camera.”

Tethering my birds, I draw them back into the cage of my chest before they risk setting the carriage on fire. “Nothing happened overnight, Quill.” I squeeze his hand while he tilts his chin to my hair. “It was a slow process. First, I sent the images to the Underground through anonymous internet messages. Dad helped me cover my tracks because I know how easy it is for the Tenth Court’s hackers to trace some messages. But it wasn’t enough.

“I kept going back, getting as close as I could. I covered myself in bone powder. I used my lesser powers to hide myself from the overseers. I started by bringing the children food, little gifts...whatever I could to lift their spirits.”

I recall the light in their eyes whenever I’d return—like pinpricks of haloes. Some eyes...I would never see again. I bury my face in my hands—full-on Empath Elysia, and sob. The children were the most precious of treasured light. Their thin, little fingers would curl toward the fence gaps, aching for my candy, for my trinkets—ones I told them to bury so the overseers wouldn’t see while I smuggled bags of canned items to their parents. All were Nora and Alice to me.

“And one day...” I sigh and touch my chest to retrieve my star-fire and spin it into the form of a young woman. “A teenage mother begged me to take her infant son because the overseers were going to brand him for a Court O’ Sevens’ blood master’s manor.” I show Quillion the golden image of the woman, who was barely older than marrying age—and the baby—no bigger than our fingers, a meager, little image of my snapshot of memories. “Something happened in me that day. I’d felt little twinkles before. But it was the first time I believe I truly felt my Halo. For years, my mother trained me, but I could never control my emotions. I could never unleash it like she wanted me to. But that night...I took the baby.”

I swipe at more tears because of how close I came to losing him. I pour out everything in the carriage to Quillion. “He felt so beautiful! Like holding a baby angel. He felt like...*Moses!*” I grin at the code name Jesula, our Underground Queen, and I adopted for all future children we rescued. “The overseers tracked my pure blood. They got so close. But my mother arrived in the nick of time and dealt with the overseers before they encroached into our territory.”

Quillion angles his head to the side. “But didn’t Father strike a bargain with the Phoenix Queen?”

“He did, but she agreed to let him have the world without interference.” I trace Halo light into the window, patterning threads into roses. “She still found ways to bend the rules but not break them.” With one flick of my wrist, the rose shatters into petals. I sigh, piecing my heart back together one bit at a time.

“So, she bent the rules for you that day?”

“Yes.” I feel a smile tugging the corners of my mouth. “We kept the baby. And she put me in touch with my uncle, who already had Underground connections. He brought me to my first meeting. And that was how I met Jesula.”

“From what I hear through my connections, the Underground Queen is indeed remarkable. Are the rumors true that she was a bishop’s consort until she spurned his advances, and he transported her husband and four sons to a blood farm?”

I nod, thrilled at the leader’s history. “Yes, and she went to that farm and slaughtered all the overseers and freed everyone! She is a miracle to many, including me.”

My eyes fall, and I sense my Halo dimming because I haven’t contacted her over the past couple of months. Mom insisted on Verena accompanying me on all my missions. I spoke to Jesula once on my last.

So much of me has felt on autopilot—whether sleeping whole uninterrupted nights without another body in bed, listening to reports to hear if Neo returned from his honeymoon, spending my days touring the Tenth Court and subsequent Court O’ Nines castles, and uniting more with Nita and Quillion.

The carriage descends. Outside the window, we draw closer to those Iron Walls where hundreds of vampire blood pawns and knights act as border patrol, especially near the gates. I set my jaw, muscles tensing.

“Thank you for sharing part of your history with me, Elysia.”

Quillion doesn’t ask for anything else, but he does shift his ascot and unbuttons his collar to reveal a portion of his chest. I’d once viewed the scarified stripes on his flesh upon our first meeting due to the blood bath circumstances, but now, he willingly reveals those stripes. I part my lips, marveling.

“I know you have your scars, too, Princess. Even if none can see them.

But as one who had a whip used on his flesh until the marks sealed permanently, I can attest that we need more Elysias in this world who care.”

I rub my lips together and curl my fingers toward his skin, seeking the windows of my friend’s soul. Quillion nods, granting his assent. Gratitude overwhelms me at his sharing of his trauma. I roam my fingers across the raised flesh of his scars and feel his rushed intake of breath, his silver veins awakening. For the first time since I’ve known him, Quillion’s fangs emerge from his gums. I don’t retreat quite yet and trace the trenches of his brands even after his pupils dilate with a crimson storm.

“Forgive me, Elysia. Dominix was the only other I’d ever allowed to touch them.” I lower my head and let the heaviness of his revelation settle upon me, honor in that heaviness. He inhales again and then buttons his collar, prompting my fingers to retreat. I whimper at the knowledge, a tear tumbling down my cheek.

“Your husband...”

“My bondmate, yes.” He binds his ascot back in place and surrenders more knowledge to me, a portion of his history. “He was also human.”

I lift my brows, my lips parting in surprise. “The whole time?”

“All 56 years that I was faithful to him until his death.” He chuckles as if recalling an inside joke. “He insisted on my burning his body and scattering his ashes where we first said our vows. He said if I took one drop of his corpse blood, then he’d be the personal Cathy to my Heathcliff.”

“Well...” I shrug and flick his ruffled ascot before giving him a kiss, “you certainly look the part. In Kitty’s words: flouncy old fossil. Thank you for sharing with me, Quill.”

“It was Father who whipped me, Elysia,” Quillion alerts me while the carriage rumbles to a stop.

I nod. “I had my suspicions. And Neo—”

“Advocated for me, yes. Would you like to know why?” A hint of a smile tugs one corner of his mouth, a contrast to the shadows around his eyes from his trauma. Heart in my throat, I cup his shoulder and peer up at him from beneath my eager lashes. “Every time he whipped me, I retched all over Father’s boots. Didn’t matter that I’d bowed before him a hundred times at his festivities, vomiting was my brand of defiance. And Neo loved it.”

The Neo I know. I have to believe he’s in there somewhere. He and Quillion are still friends. Neo still loves Nita. Somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, Neo exists and not merely Neoptolemus, Prince of Destruction. I



am battling with one of his masks.

Somehow, I must remind him that I am where the mask doesn't exist, but something deep inside my core fears I won't be able to use the same methods as before. I won't be able to trade fire and blood or lightning. A deep spark of holy fire ignites within me.

"No wonder you don't like the parties." I bite my lip, understanding why Quillion refused to attend Neo's Court Tax celebrations. Then, I remember my encounters with the Father, and I use his shoulder for leverage and murmur jubilation in his ear, "So, you and I have one big thing in common, Quill. I also vomited on the Father's boots!" With flutters in my chest, I giggle and reach for the door handle with Quillion following me outside...to the overwhelming scent of *death*.

The gaiety in the carriage shatters, bowing to the stench. The same feces, iron of blood, the salt of sweat, and flame and smoke from the human blood farms. Except this is magnified by a hundred!

Countless Tenth Court knights and bounty hunters fly beyond the Walls to gather the healthiest and the youngest and transport them beyond the Walls. Many parents willingly surrender their littles, hoping they will have a better chance at life—any chance. Hosts of others are ripped from their arms.

Some elite vampire groups from the Court O' Nines form volunteer parties to drop care packages, but they are few and far between.

I hone my vampire vision so it feels like my eyes cross an abyss of souls. On the border of choking, I stare at the small pockets of landfills where the dead have been compiled, where some knights are setting fire to those pockets, scattering their ashes to the wind.

Regret consumes me, and I bow my head, wondering if their souls are already lost to Limbo. While Quillion receives a report from a blood pawn, their voices fade as I wade into emotions of loss, rage, hurt, and guilt. I settle most upon lament. Sweeping my gaze across the tent city, my gut clenches at the expanse of haggard bodies huddled closer to each other around a legion of bonfires to battle the bitter chill in the air.

A million twinkle lights...

Heart slamming against my chest with my Empath merging with the righteous fire of my Halo, I stand upon the iron balcony and curl my fingers around the railing. Masses flick their heads to me, bodies twisting. Dozens more emerge from their tents while others forsake their bonfires to stare at me. What? All my breath turns ragged and shallow. Lungs constricting from

the emotion, I struggle for air.

Quillion touches my back and leans over to express, “It’s the first time one of Neo’s brides has ever come to the border.”

I refuse to cry because these people don’t need my tears. I steel myself, breathing in deeply. They need my hands. They need the Halo in my heart. Though I can’t take my eyes off the assemblies below me, I battle all those emotions surging through me.

Before asking Quillion what I can do, another voice, far more familiar, jeers at me, “It’s about time you showed up.”

“Jesula!” I spin and launch right into my best friend’s arms, leaning into her mamma-bear heat before pulling back so I may cup her shoulders. Despite the deep velvet shadows beneath them, her eyes have not lost their Black Queen luster, and her crown of dark hair is strong with its brand-new blowout, except for all the fluffs of ash that have smeared it nearly gray. “Where have you been?”

Jesula wrinkles her nose at me and barks, “Where do you think I’ve been, Lys?” She waves a hand beyond the balcony as if it should be obvious. Especially with her clothes worn and splattered with blood, vomit, and even spit up from babies. Countless bags of clothes and food surround her soiled and weather-beaten boots. Her words claw wounds right through my chest, sinking deep into my Haloed heart. “I’ve been here, baby girl. I don’t stay in the pretty Court and get massages and go to parties with the occasional smuggle.”

“Jes, I—”

“No, you’re going to hear this,” she snaps, humbling and interrupting me while standing with her hands on her hips. I bow my head to her voice and beauty, as beautiful as dark wings that would welcome me and empower me before every mission. “Thanks to my connections with Queen Amanita, Quillion was gracious enough to provide me safe passage and a knight bodyguard so I could help. I’ve been coming here every day since. I’ve been waiting for you to show up all this time. Fout tonè!” She curses in Creole, throwing her arms up in the air right before those eyes soften. “Look, Lys, you’re still my girl. And I know you went through a lot, and you’re going through some deep, existential spiritual crises.” She rolls her eyes before jerking a finger to the tent city. “But maybe, come down from your gilded tower long enough to see some of us are still out here working and—”

I throw my arms around her neck, causing her to curse again before she

relents and hugs me back, that warmth penetrating. “Thank you, Jes. I’m here now. I don’t care what I’ve got going on, it’s not more important than you, than us, and *this*.” I hold onto the sides of her neck and touch my brow to hers. “I’m sorry for retreating. I give you full license to light a fire under my ass anytime.”

“Careful...” Quillion nudges me with his elbow. “She’s got a silver-blood taser.”

I kiss his cheek in a thank you.

Jesula chuckles, her lips easing into a heartfelt grin because Quillion has that effect on people. “Sorry about that. Didn’t mean to stick you the first time we met.”

Quillion waves a hand. “Water under the bridge. And as long as you require my personal knight’s service, you may have it. Now that Elysia will be joining you, the Prince’s official escort will be at your disposal.” He indicates to the row of armored knight soldiers, but I shake my head.

“One knight is something but not the Prince’s,” I refuse. “I have my powers to protect me. Jesula has hers.” I lean against her, and she raises her chin as if to say, “Damn right”.

“Neo will be angry. Even angrier if I let you go down *there*...” Quillion trails off, gesturing to the iron elevator that arrives off to the edge of the balcony.

“What else could he possibly throw at you?” I roll my eyes with a sprinkling of a laugh and move toward the elevator.

“I fear he will throw *me* this time,” Quillion adds as Jesula and I get inside, but he makes no move toward us.

Lightness like wings in my chest, I blow him a kiss and flutter a hand as Jesula closes us in with the single vampire knight. “I’ll catch you, Quill!”

“One hour, Elysia,” he dictates, voice clipped.

As soon as Jesula and I reach the elevator base, I recognize it will take much longer than an hour. It might take all my power.

It might take my whole life. And my heart.

## CHAPTER 10

# “YOU WILL GET WHAT’S COMING TO YOU TONIGHT, ELYSIA.”

**B**y the time the blood moon begins its ascent, the bond pitches through my blood system, reminding me of our bargain, I am ready to pass out.

Jesula finally catches up to me, “Lys, stop all this now!”

For hours, she’s been trying to get me to go back to Court. I’ve managed to slip past her to another part of the tent city, forcing her to search for me again. She reminds me that this is a marathon, begging me to pace myself. But I can’t, I can’t, I *can’t*! My body is heavy, ready to drop, but my heart is heavier, and I won’t let it sink.

I don’t care about the blood splattering my gown or the layers of dirt, smoke, and ashes from bonfires. I don’t care how my muscles howl in burning pain for mercy. My blood hammers my ears. Desperate, my lungs claw for air while a silent moan of pain chokes my throat. My sluggish muscles protest, but I press on with another group that fawns over me after rumors have spread of the Prince’s bride, who is...what did they call me? A guardian angel.

As more families close around me, hemming me in, I shake my head, dispelling the title. All their emotions, their desperation, their agony, and yet their strength!—their love sings to me, compels me. So much stronger than I’ll ever be for everything they have gone through. My chest hitches. If I beat my body bloody for one fucking day to honor that strength, I’ll take that. I’ll become part of the salt, the blood, the scars, the stench, the ash, and the fire.

Thanks to harnessing my Halo, it doesn’t take anywhere near as long for me to transport the wool thermal blankets and sets of clothes. Still, they beg me for food rations. And clean water. That is the greatest effort, but the blessing of the Mother Goddess in my heart is more than up to the task of

purifying any water, eliminating any potential Scourge infection.

Breathless from that cursed oath shrinking my lungs and flagellating my blood, I arch my back and cry out. I'm convinced splinters are shoving through my eyes. Clenching my hands, I somehow channel my warm, gold healing currents into one of many wells in the area that make up their water sources. Children hug me. Their warm bodies surround me like a cage. Their fingers strain with what's left of my clothes. A raw wave of pain shoots through my blood, and I crash to my knees, gown ripping.

"Elysia!" Jesula's scream is a haze, blurring in my ears.

Blood-curdling pain courses through my flesh. I grip my curls, wildly shaking my head. The blood oath punishes me. It launches invisible projectiles like musket balls into my brain and my body. It burns me from the inside out!

*"Elysia..."*

I freeze. That voice—how he says my name, drawing it out with a hushed "ah" at the end. My whole body melts, heart pulling to him like he's my gravity. An enormous shadow besieges my body from where he's landed directly before me, his iron boots shaking the ground beneath me. All the families scatter into tents before his towering force. Others freeze in fear. I tremble and hold my quivering form together. Sweating and panting, I slowly lift my eyes from the ground to stare at him, garbed in all his Court finery.

As soon as Neo gets his arms around me, as soon as he shoots his wings out, as soon as he charges with me out of the tent city, I rake my nails into his neck, scream, and release a tidal wave of Halo energy. Triggered by Neo's presence, by the renewed strength and gusts of rebirthed air in my lungs, I ride the currents of surging adrenaline and torpedo my star fire. Like the day in his Court—the mushroom cloud. If he weren't holding me within the fortress of his arms, I'd lurch so far back, I'd probably tip over and crash hundreds of feet to the ground.

Just before he passes over the Iron Walls, the mushroom cloud thunders out of me, raining down pure gold springs and showers that prompt roars of laughter and cheers.

With a soft smile, I use the last of my strength to lift my hand in a fluttering wave of a goodbye.

"What the fuck am I going to do with you?" Neo mutters against the side of my head.

Heart thudding, I yawn and snuggle against him, joking, "I can think of

quite a few things,” and then pass out.



*WAKE UP, ELYSIA...* THANATOS’ voice resounds in my mind, summoning me but not tethering me, not calling me into the Soul Plane. *You must wake up now!* His voice adds a layer of urgency, of desperation I’m not used to hearing from him. But when I feel tender, lithe fingers seeking the flesh between my thighs, penetrating deeper, I understand why.

In a split second of a trigger, I scramble away, clambering out from under Lux and backing up against the bed frame. Mouth falling open in horror from the invasion, I gather the bejeweled coverlet around my naked form and dart my eyes between her and Neo. He sits on the edge of the bed, patting her head, which she bows to him. Smiling at me, she holds up her fingers, the tips coated in hints of my blood.

“I’m sorry, Elysia, but the Prince is forbidden to touch you when you’re passed out according to your oath. He assumed you’d be more comfortable with me.”

Reining in my frenzied gasps, I jerk my chin to them, but my head still feels foggy...dizzy. All I remember are her lips, her fingers...

“What the hell?” I state through clenched teeth and snap my eyes to his. While Lux is barely clothed as usual, Neo is still donned in his Court clothes with tufts of ash clinging to those dark robes, so it can’t have been too long since he carried me over the Iron Walls.

Neo sneers at me. “You were in the tent city all day, bride. You looked near death, you were covered in stench, and your gown was beyond repair. What kind of Prince would I be if I didn’t have Lux check your pretty pussy to determine if any of those ruffians assaulted—”

“I am not your fucking *property*, Neoptolemus!” I explode and dig my fingers through my scalp, flaring my nostrils as wrathful heat storms my blood. Lux’s fingers haunt my memory—tiny, warm, pillowy tips in my depths. “And while we’re on the subject, Lux, I’ll tell you a little secret about the magic of *my* vagina.” I lean in, pitting my eyes against hers, hoping the dark depths beyond my gold rings will swallow her irises as I finish, “It

doubles as a Venus flytrap, so next time you're concerned about something being assaulted...chomp, chomp." I fold more blankets around myself for added layers of protection. My stomach hardens to rigid iron.

Lux whimpers against Neo, cowering into his arms, and I roll my eyes at her manipulative theatrics. She plays him like a harpist—has his heartstrings wrapped around her lithe fingers.

Just after he soothes her, Neo growls at me. I snap my teeth in a warning hiss, threatening a similar "chomp, chomp". When he lunges and grips my wrist, I seethe and struggle against him, giving him no inch. He twists amidst my struggles, and a sob breaks from my throat his strong hand biting my flesh. Too weak after the day at the border, I tremble as Neo forces me down, pressing my cheek to the pillows before he thumbs his horned mark. "*Second wife, Elysia. I am your Prince. And I will protect and invest in what is mine.*"

Grunting against the pillows, against that hand like an iron chain around my wrist, I refuse to be silent. I hurl out the words, spitting them, "If you want something to own and invest in, Neo, might I recommend a blow-up doll? Oh, you already have one." I smile at Lux, who cups her hand over her mouth, eyes flying wide open. Some tiny part of me twinges in regret for unleashing my anger on her when she's just a pawn *and* my spangled ancestor. Who knows how the Father has poisoned her? And I can't deny that she does love Neo in her disturbed and twisted way.

The Father may be ultimately responsible for all this, but some part of me also registers it's mine...no, it's *ours*. Neo stood by me during the contract. More than anyone, the Prince of Destruction knows his Father and all the tricks he could pull. Could he have warned me? Neoptolemus is truly responsible—for spending centuries molding to these masks. I went through hell and high water to destroy every last one. Damn it all to hell, I'll do it again.

In no time, sweat coats my skin in a thin layer. Hot, angry tears rage down my cheeks, but my muscles finally stop flailing, stop trying to battle Neo. He's got me in an iron lock, and I hate the feeling of being forced down. No, it's not the same position, but the Déjà vu of the longest night of my life, the night of my trauma, rears inside me, launching a throbbing pain into my body. My chest squeezes around its ache.

Lux urges Neo to release me. Hovering above me, she presses her lips to my cheeks, to the uncontrollable tears that have simmered there, I freeze, unable to move. "I understand the battle inside you, Elysia," she whispers.



“Women think they must lead men, but we don’t and shouldn’t. I learned that when I first met Neo during my time with the Knight’s Templar. If he can justly rule the whole Court O’ Nines, then I believe he can lead our hearts. Especially when I gave him a new one.” She kisses me one more time.

Somehow, I manage to rise. I set my teeth on edge. Like a predator of light, I channel what little strength I can, prey my eyes on hers, and lift my chin to respond, “Lux, with all due respect, *fuck* you. I was leading Neo while you were still six feet under. And since I have the *true* Halo in my heart, I’d say I’m the only one well-equipped to lead anyone. But for now, I’ll lead myself right out of here.” I tug at the blanket to wrap it around myself and roll off the bed, getting my feet firmly on the floor and as much space between them as I can.

Neo cradles Lux’s face and kisses her eyes. She fawns over him so much, I expect her to throw her mouth at him, but she doesn’t. Instead, she stares at his eyes like she will find heaven in them when he utters, “Ignore her, my love. It’s obvious she’s still over-dramatic due to her red sun,” mocks Neo.

I spin around. I snap, ready to damn-well bite him. “And what’s your excuse for acting like a pretentious bastard all the time?”

Neo gets a wicked gleam in his quicksilver eyes before he fingers Lux’s sterling strands and alerts her, “Go sleep, my angel. She will learn her lesson soon.”

I huff, all my nerves on edge with the desire to teach *him* a lesson.

Lux purses her lips, touching his chest and toying with his shades that twirl around her and kiss her neck in smoky tresses. “Please don’t be so hard on her.”

Neo sighs and cups her chin, nodding. “I’ll have her on her knees eating out of the palm of my hand by the time we’re finished.”

“In your dreams.” I flip him off and tie the blanket as snug as a toga, promptly snorting.

Lux scampers away with white tresses fluttering behind her as if she can’t wait to leave the room. I wrinkle my nose, thankful her sparkly energy isn’t tainting the air like a shower of fake glitter.

Neo climbs off the bed and stalks toward me, circling like a feral predator. Jutting my chin out and refusing to be intimidated, I cross my arms over my chest, tap my finger against my opposite arm, crane my neck, and appraise that familiar, flamboyant side grin. Oh, I wish I could slink through our mental bond doorway and figure out what he’s up to. Especially when he

coils his abundant silver waves into a knot on his head while meandering around me. His malevolent grin only spreads as he continues his circle.

“I thought you were a dragon, Neo, not a vulture.” I tap my finger again, waiting.

Finally, he finishes and tilts his head toward me. “I wasn’t lying when I referenced your red *ass* earlier, Elysia,” he purrs with an eager growl in his throat.

An instant tremor rocks through me. Defensive, I ball my hands into fists at my sides, thrust out my chest, and mouth off, calling his bluff, “You wouldn’t dare!”

When Neo sweeps out a small paddle from his inner robe, my blood runs cold. I can’t help but startle. I’ve already exhausted all my powers at the border. Precious little Halo light left. Dammit. Shit. Shit. Shit! And my whip-smart mouth. *Or Thanatos...*No, I obliterate that thought. The last thing I need is to owe him anything when he already woke me to the reality of Lux’s fingers.

Hissing and glaring, I dodge to the side. Neo blocks me, shadowing my movements with a cruel grin. “If you bend over like a good bride, I’ll switch to my hand.”

Jutting a finger at him, I command the Prince of Destruction, “You be a good demon and destroy that thing right now.” I back away but remember my training, *his* training, and never take my eyes off the target.

Eyes narrowing, arrow-like, Neoptolemus takes one long stride toward me and steps onto the ends of the toga-like blankets. “Bend *over*, Princess.”

“Higher than you!” I yell. “If you think you’re using that thing on my fine ass, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“*You* will get what’s coming to you tonight, Elysia.”

Fuck!

Too drained mentally and physically, my Halo dims, I know I can’t fight him. I’m not ashamed to take flight. Not ashamed to spin and run. Until I remember he’s still standing on the blanket. It falls, collapsing around his feet.

Neo’s eyes darken, and he sweeps his gaze across my nudity, eyes dilating till they’re swollen. Fucker. All my muscles tense. No matter how much I shiver from my naked vulnerability, I refuse to leap for the blanket or cover myself. Instead, I summon his shades. They still obey me right before he suffuses them, scattering them from my form. Damn it, he looms toward

me again.

“Come now, bride...your lovely gold skin should be honored to wear my bruises,” he taunts huskily. His eyes hunt mine as I take a few steps back, defensive hands raised while getting closer to my suite. “In this case, I’ll have you flush.” A muscle ticks in his cheek, silver veins flaring beneath his dark skin as his grin spreads.

The Halo responds to my terror. Adrenaline charges through me to gift me star-fire. After draping meager strips of gold to cover my privates, I curl my fingers to my chest and withdraw my whips. Neo pauses because he remembers nothing from that night. I deadpan.

“Thought all I had were pretty firebirds and gold rain from heaven, did you, Neo?”

“I’ll take you to the closet, woman. For some seven minutes in Hades.”

He lunges, launching his shades to wrap around my ankles. I come down hard. Unleashing my Halo whips, I bind them around his wrists and neck. Scrambling, I blaze my fire against his shades to smother them and try to get to my feet, but Neo’s already on his knees, jaw like rigid black steel from how my whips singe his flesh. My joy is short-lived.

A savageness overcomes his eyes. Every muscle in his body hardens like an iron buttress. Ice pushes into my veins, slowing my blood, slowing my adrenaline. It’s the first time I’ve ever been truly terrified of him. Something deep within me registers how different this scene would be if it was playful, sexual. Everything in me wishes it would be. Discipline in training vs. punishment for nothing.

With the deepest growl rumbling from his chest, Neo calls all his shades to battle my Halo. They break the bindings until they shower into gold flecks at his feet. He destroys all of them. I pant, on the verge of dropping.

Eyes gleaming, Neo cracks a dangerous grin. “When brides buck, they must be punished...by *me*.”

“Don’t do this, Neo. Neo. Neo!” I repeat his name, reminding him that he is *new*, my *new*. Something in his face softens, the tension in his jaw abating...a glimmer of reflection in his eyes? Hope ripples into my chest. Liquid warmth pools in my belly. Because he is still my husband, and we haven’t been this close—skin to skin and flesh to flesh—since our honeymoon.

So, I move toward him even as he closes the distance between us. “I vowed to protect you from danger. Even *my* danger. Protect me from yours,”

I implore him. I appeal to him and heave a sigh, a whimper when he cups my shoulders, fingers tender and nestling on the edges of my neck.

For a moment, his lips part, and his head dips low to brush against mine. Hope swells in my chest. I close my eyes in a breath prayer...right before he pushes me over his knee until I fall, stomach collapsing onto his lap.

“You manipulative bastard!” I cry out when he destroys my resistance, when he uses his power against me—and puts his hand on my neck so I can barely breathe!

“You’ll have better words for me after this.” He raises the paddle while tears of anger burn my vision. “Especially when I’m *inside* you...” he adds. And brings it down.

My chest lurches. I tense up, bracing for the pain. Some holy force arises from the soft gold strips I’d bound around my nether regions. They rear up and attack the degrading paddle, slicing right through it. They crack it in half, so it tumbles to the floor. I hear it thud.

“What the hell?”

I buck to the sound of Neo’s snarl. I thrash and snarl.

“Ha! I thought *you* were the hard ass,” I shout with a wild laugh. “But that’ll teach you to spank *my* die-hard ass!”

I kick my legs but find Neo’s hand has replaced that paddle, cupping my backside even as I struggle. Rage pulses through my blood. I don’t stop bucking for anything. Yes, ever since he admitted to his desire to suck and spank my bare ass, I’ve fantasized about his dark hand cupping my glowing golden bottom, imparting pain and pleasure and drowning out the voices of my demons. But not like this.

“Stay down!” he bellows, bruising the back of my neck as if trying to erase that sickle mark beneath my curls.

“No!” I thunder right back. Lightning Halo currents bite his hand, causing it a swift retreat.

*I’ll rise up every time. I’ll never break. I’ll never stay down.* And just as Neo destroys my lightning, I unleash the scream in my head, *Noralice!*

I welcome that haze and practically dance right into that fabric of reality folding me into its shivery vapors. In a gold flush, I arrive curls gilded, my veins like halcyon, and a gown of a frosted waterfall adorning my person.

How I long for Elysium!...while I fall into Thanatos’ arms.

## CHAPTER II

# “IF YOU WERE MINE, I WOULD NEVER ALLOW YOU TO LEAVE MY BED...”

“**E**lysia...” Thanatos whispers.

Peering up, I discover his head furrowed, the upper corners of his brows curving toward one another, not in anger...but fear. It brings a smile to my lips.

“Oh, ye of little faith,” I gasp, recognizing how much I’m panting...and gasping.

Rather than merely transferring his frost, this time, Thanatos reaches around me to stroke his icy finger up my spine to chill my nerves. “What happened in that room, Elysia? You let your guard down.”

“I thought I saw...” I lower my head. Because I don’t know what I saw.

Sighing, Thanatos trails his wintertime up to my brain stem, tangling with a few curls. “He was playing you.”

“Like you’re playing me?” I wonder, testing him, feeling my stomach harden as he thumbs his mark.

Thanatos circles the finest hairs of frost patterns along my back. His silver calligraphy has me shivering, but it also slows my breath, calming it until it’s steady and even. I shudder when he shakes his head. “You never require a guard with me. I am Death. You cannot hide from me.”

“Should I run from you?” I press, seeking those golden galaxies, but all that greets me is that nebulous haze mirroring the edges of the Soul Plane. My heart teeters on the edge of a cliff.

Thanatos blinks. Just once. That finger descends from my neck, lowering to travel along my chest until it arrives above my heart, where the Halo is a visible circle of dawn beneath my flesh. I suck one deep breath when Thanatos beds his hand down upon my heart, overlapping the high slope of

my breast. And when his other hand cups my chin, featherlight, so I may finally behold those gold constellations, I wonder if I will ever breathe again.

“You may run from me if you desire,” Thanatos sighs, casting his dark rose scent across my face. “But I would follow you to the ends of the Soul Plane, into Limbo itself ten thousand times over to find you and bring you back to me.”

“To Neo...” I correct, treading even as stardust forms on the curves of my body, tempting, tempting, tempting. My pulse thrums quicker, latching onto hope as if...no. Shame lodges in my throat, then plunges into my chest to nullify the flames burning inside me for the wrong brother, the wrong twin. I am not here for Death.

All Thanatos offers is a nod, hand retreating from my heart. As my heart sinks, a deeper shame almost has me choking.

Distracting myself with something, anything, I move toward any subject I can. “Why did the beekeeper...Pan, you called him, he said something—”

Dark mist swallows his gold irises. “What did he say?”

“He said you lost your flames. And that’s why you have breath of frost. What does that mean? This place is not what I expected either.”

Thanatos groans and turns his back to me. “What did you expect? A volcano and geysers spewing lava?”

I shrug and curl my fingers to my lower back, remembering that icy touch. “Does it have something to do with me?” When Thanatos flicks his head toward me, a flicker of gold sparking in his eyes, I know I’ve touched a nerve. Breath catching in my chest, I swing my hands to my sides, open palms beseeching. “Please give me something, Natos. The one standing before me now is *not* the one I spoke to in that Tower. Is this just some mask?”

Something like a low snarl buds in Thanatos’ throat. I flinch because I do fear him. I respect him. I’m in damn awe of him. Our dynamic is completely different than mine and Neo’s. I always wanted to conquer Neo in some way, bring him to his knees. But every time I face Thanatos, I want to sink to my knees before him. I don’t need to show him everything. He’s already reaped my greatest, darkest secrets. Now, I simply want his.

Thanatos sends frost to bristle along the floor around me, creating patterns of tiny crystal spikes like...thorns. “No, Elysia,” he responds while I kneel and touch my finger to one of the thorns, pricking the tip so a trickle of gold light spills. “My twin of Destruction wears masks. I am Death. I have no

mask. I wear the souls of time, and my soul must be strong enough to house them all.”

“Even mine?” I flip my curls over my shoulders.

“No. I could never hold yours.” He sets his teeth and winces, growing the crystals so they form a frost wall around me. I cast my Halo light into them, and they react like a prism to scatter rainbow ribbons all over the room. “These brief momentary encounters are *pure* torture.”

“Why?”

“I believe you’ve exhausted your questions for now.”

The Prince of Death turns, leaving me to an inpouring of confusion and something like...grief. It’s cold, dark, and heavy. It weighs down my shoulders and makes my soul ache. And yet, I want to settle into that bed of grief and let my Halo feed on it, sample it until I understand why. Why am I so torturous to him? Is that why he never summoned me during those months Neo was gone? Why should I care?

*Because you’re an Empath, you exasperating ignoramus,* I tell myself. I prick my finger on a sharp crystal spire, wondering if Thanatos could bleed my heart more.

“It’s clear you have a blind spot with my twin, so please...” Thanatos sweeps his fingers down the length of my arm, brushing to my wrist, dipping into my palm so he may raise me from the floor. “Do you play chess, Elysia?” he purrs the question and conjures a board of white frost and black shades in the center of the room, along with two crystal chairs. He turns the black side toward me, which I appreciate, but knots twist in my belly.

Suspicious, I eye the board. “Only a little now and then with my father.”

“Was he good?”

“He was.”

“I am better.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “I’d say you have an unfair advantage over me,” I point out but still lower myself into the chair opposite of him, hinting at his centuries of experience.

“Yes, I do. And I do not like to lose.” Thanatos lifts his hand across the table to sweep his fingers across my cheek, eager to notify me, “However, I am also easily *distracted*. And I give you free license to steal whatever piece you desire should you distract me. But...” he reaches over and scrapes his nails across my cheek, startling me, drawing blood and finishing, “careful that you don’t get caught. I will not show you mercy.”



Threading my brows low at his uncharacteristic invasion, I counter and nudge out one pawn with a feral grin. “Is it truly stealing if you grant me free license?”

Thanatos sweeps into his chair, looks down, and glowers because his rook is already missing. I stare up from heady eyelashes and wag the piece. “I’ll allow that, Elysia. Even if I wasn’t sitting down at the time. And despite you going first.”

With a proud breath, I smirk, toying with the piece. “Hmm...rules are ever so bendable, aren’t they?” I sharpen my eyes on his, iron to iron. “Perhaps you should draw up a contract. Like Father, like son, Natos?”

He bristles but recovers, moves his pawn forward to combat mine, and leans forward in his chair to scrutinize me. “Speaking of which, how are you finding Father’s little surprise? From experience, I can attest that she was quite exquisite.”

I thrust out another pawn. And so does Death as I swallow and seethe with a bitter edge, “You should know since you held her soul in your Lake, didn’t you?”

At first, I curl my fingers, itching to get my hands on his king, but when I look up, Thanatos’s brows have dived low in a fatal warning. He gives me *nothing*.

I move my knight instead and sigh. “She’s like a plague but not adorable. And she looks better bald.” I offer a faint smile, recalling the first night she’d pressed Neo to bite me, and I’d burned all her hair off.

Thanatos seizes my knight, but I take his bishop. Leaning back in his chair, he raises one fist, rubbing his curved fingers together.

Smiling, I hold up his other rook that I’d managed to swipe with my Halo thread. I give it a little kiss. “Pride goes before the fall, Natos.” I love the way his frost nips at my lower lip, agitated.

“Take care, Ice Princess. There is more to her than meets the naked eye.”

“Oh, it’s not her eyes that she gets naked all the time.” I nudge my other knight toward the center of the board.

He mirrors my knight with his. “I hear a touch of envy in that lovely voice. A seven deadly sin.” Though I’m looking at the board, I can hear the slithering grin in Death’s voice.

“And justified.” I swoop my bishop in to claim that knight, a renewed stroke of pride because I am winning. At this particular game, that is. In the grand scheme of things, I somehow know Thanatos has already won the

greater game.

“If there is one thing I can do better than my brother, Elysia, it’s taking a beautiful woman to my bed,” he offers, tone beyond suggestive, and I snap my eyes to his in a deadpan.

“Not. Fucking. Possible,” I answer and haphazardly jut out my rook and lean back, crossing my arms with a perma-scowl.

I can’t tear my eyes from his. I’ve protested too much, and his knowing and triumphant smile confirms it while a deep, dark storm brews in his eyes with secrets...and lust.

Could it be layers of wild dreams within dreams? What had he said? He wears the souls of the centuries. Which one is this? Something in the way he cocks his head to the side. Something in the way he twists his lips into a shit-eating smirk. Oh, hell no. I narrow my eyes to deadly slits.

Thanatos does not move. Instead, he merely observes. Not the board. Only me. Eyes dilating and reminding me of someone all too familiar. A predatory, brutal heat tangles within my core. Frustrated, I slip my hand under my curls and rub the back of my neck, digging my fingers into the tension. Because the sexual tension between Thanatos and I is undeniable—his frost and my gold star fire locked in a mating dance.

“Hmm...” Thanatos rises from his chair and meanders around the table. His macabre eyes mark mine as targets, luring them into that perfect storm. I swallow a tight knot in my throat upon his approach. Once he arrives before me, shadow embalming me, Thanatos curves his fingers onto the table and leans over to inhale my curls. “All he’s done since his return is try to violate you. If you were mine, I would never allow you to leave my bed, nor would you ever desire to, for I would worship at your throne until you forgave me of all my sins.”

Oh, Saints! My breasts grow heavy as my core overheats. He inhales deeply, scenting me, my undeniable arousal. I’m not prepared when he jerks my head back by my curls so he may mouth my neck, causing my breath to hitch, my heartbeat to stagger, and my blood to ignite.

Still, I don’t resist. Nor do I drop my guard. All my nerve endings tingle as if lightning is about to strike. Now, I know exactly what he’s doing, what face he’s wearing. And why. I war against the persistent throbbing heat in my center as he hovers, cooing, “So much wanton desire in your blood. It reminds me of *Elysium*...”

When his mouth etches its frost lower to the gown’s neckline, I know I

should be thinking of Neo. But I can't remember his mouth trimming the edges of my body that night. I can't remember his mouth bowing prostrate to my sex and stoking ardor into my fire blossom. Instead, all I feel is Thanatos' hand slipping into my gown, dipping into my sex to inject his frost inside me and quelling my fire. I remember his hand dangerously close to my breast. And his finger icing along my spine to calm my pain and panic.

Thanatos chuckles darkly against my throat. I stiffen as he fondles my upper thigh flesh to wet his fingers with liquid gold, which yanks me back to the Soul Plane. But only because it's what I *should* do.

What I want to do is lean forward and show him how I yearn for more. But it's not him. It's not Thanatos. He's not like this. He seduces with his soul, with his words, with his hands. Not his whole body. He doesn't use seductive dominance like this. Too lost in my thoughts, I hadn't realized he'd swept part of the slit in the waterfall gown to the side so he could touch me.

"Wherever did you go just now?" He entombs his fingers into my thigh and kisses my neck down to my collarbone and the curve of my shoulder. "Somewhere lovely, dark and deep, I imagine? You settle." I cringe when he digs those fingers in further and his teeth close over the strap of my shoulder to tug it down to finish, "when you could have the loveliest, darkest, and *deepest* dream within a dream."

As soon as his dastardly fingers thrust into my sex, I shoot to my feet, upending my chair. But it's too late. Grinning, Thanatos wags my queen chess piece, his fingers holding it—gold-slicked with my fluids. I cock my head and match his grin, swinging up not his queen but his *king*! "You said a distraction," I point out. He simply believed he was distracting me.

Neo would growl. Thanatos controls himself. His dark eyes besiege mine, but he goes for the stalemate, sucks on those gold-slicked fingers, a low snarl in his throat before offering me my queen. I checkmate him by twirling my tongue around the head of the king and concluding, "You wear him well, Thanatos. But not too well."

He played Neo's mask of Destruction, his distraction. But I still recognized Death's dark humor and the depth of his seduction. All steeped in sensual truth, unlike Neo and our witty battles, our flirty chemistry.

Neo could never hope to wear Death. Not in a million lifetimes. And Thanatos only wore Neo to prove a point. Now, I understand he has *never* worn a mask with me.

"So sweet..." He slips his fingers from his mouth and nods to me,

approaching. “I look forward to our next game, Elysia. Perhaps I will take more than your queen next time.” He pushes the strap of my gown back up my shoulder and kisses my cheek, a peck of ice crystals.

“Who were you in the Tower months ago?” I inquire as the king piece disappears along with the board.

Thanatos bows his head to me, palm to his chest. “Death will keep his secrets, Elysia. But you’ve earned one today. Do you want that one most? Or Neo, the Scourge, or Lux?”

Weighing the options while chewing on my inner cheek, I sort through all the questions prowling around in my mind, how I could ask about these polar opposite twins’ history, where the Scourge is coming from, and how I can give Neo a new heart. *Your bond is the key*, I remember.

So, I open my mouth, jaw set, and say, “Neo: how can I possibly reach him, Thanatos?”

Thanatos’ mouth presses into a tight seam as if disappointed by my question, but he settles and spins his frost into an elaborate silvery ice mask before my very eyes, offering the symbolic piece to me. “You will not be able to burn his mask off this time. You must tempt him. Sometimes, if one wishes to be raised higher, first they must *kneel*.”

“Never,” I snarl, infuriated at the notion. Fingers trembling from my anger, I grip the edge of the mask, prepared to shatter it, but Thanatos stabs his head toward mine, a wraith-like sound rumbling in his throat.

“I wasn’t finished, Ice Princess.” He taps the mask so it tingles like a little bell, then traces the curve of the eye hole. “It’s not Neo’s mask you should prioritize. It’s hers.”

## CHAPTER 12

# I WAS NOT CREATED FOR ABUSE! NO ONE IS

When I stride down the staircase to the Commons, I almost trip over my skirts to make it to the base, where I discover Nita...no. That is *not* Amanita.

My breath turns shallow because I recognize the body language; it's Bryony curled into the fetal position with Neo standing over her. My heart lurches as his shadow practically strangles her body, his muscles bulging, neck veins pulsing in his umber skin. Quillion stands next to him, posture defeated, head lowered with his fingers rubbing his eyes. No sign of Lux.

I'd woken to this morning, renewed and ready for Court. Now, all I want to do is claw Neo's eyes out.

"What the fuck did you do?" I seethe at Neo, lowering myself to Nita's saddest alter—the one I'd met that day in the dungeon when she feared I was going to kill her brother. The same brother who saved her, who traded everything he could to his Father. Now, he's the cause of her pain. "Just because I broke your little spatula last night doesn't mean—"

"You brought this upon yourself, bride," Neo interrupts, voice hard as black diamonds, alerting me as he steps to the side. "Remember that."

Without touching Bryony, I form warm Halo dust to sprinkle upon her skin, then glare up at my husband and chastise him, spewing holy fire, "Does being the Prince of Destruction give you free license to be an emotionally unintelligent dick *all* the time?"

"This brings me no pleasure, Elysia. She is my sister." Neo kneels beside me, gaze sweeping to eye level. He glances down at Bryony as she whimpers, but her sobs have stopped, soothed by my stardust.

“Then, please, Neo...” I plead in a gasp, “Start acting like the brother she loves, the husband *I* love, and not the Dragon.” The word is a trigger because Bryony throws her head back in a desperate cry. Cupping her shoulders, I apologize over and over, curl up next to her, and create miniature star-fire hydras to circle her horns, little flames flickering from their throats. I warm her as much as possible with my body and Halo heat. Empath Elysia overthrows my heart.

I flinch when Neo brushes his knuckles across my cheek. There is no trust in the gesture, no familiarity of the past. It’s a cruel gesture. Because he’s holding something back. “You may return to the border later, Elysia, but I require you at Court today. Today, you will sit in the *box*.”

When I glimpse up at him to meet his eyes, Neo is gone. I heave a sigh as Quillion joins me on the floor. Together, we spend the next hour listening to Bryony while she talks of the dungeon cracking beneath her weight like an earthquake, how she’s swallowed all the pain and demon breaths of that darkness. She collected their teeth and hair and flesh—bits and pieces of their wings until it felt like they were sealed into her skin. She can never escape but swallows that and bears that death in her youth’s heart.

“For years, I wished for a handsome prince to ride in on a white horse and save me from Father’s torture,” Bryony tells me, shaking in my arms as I do my best to hold her tight, hushing away the nightmares in her mind.

Knowing she wasn’t alone in that dungeon, knowing Neo looked into the burden of her darkness and battled the Father so he could acquire a small chunk of her trauma and weigh it upon his shoulders, was the only reason she didn’t plunge headfirst into the demon spirit lake and let them drown her.

“Now, I’m losing him,” Bryony echoes, her cheeks blotchy from her tears. “What if he’s too far gone?”

“No...” I whisper and send her another little gold hydra to nudge her cheek. “If I delivered him from death, then I can deliver him from this... Scourge. And you delivered him first, Bryony. You and Nita and Kitty and *everyone*,” I remind her of her victory through her vulnerability—vulnerability she has blessed upon me. Emotion wells up into my throat when I consider the first time I saw Bryony, how the guilt of forming a dragon—of all things!—had racked me before I’d chosen the truest, the best, the right symbol for Amanita and all her alters: the Hydra.

Bryony shakes her head. “You can never deliver him from *Death*, Elysia.”

“I have to believe he is still worthy of deliverance...underneath that mask.” I shudder, clenching my eyes, yearning so much to give him a new heart. But how?

As if the word “mask” is a positive trigger, Nita snaps her head up, stabs the air with her glittery black horns, and rises like the Hydra Queen she is until she faces me and clutches my hands, hands cold as frost. “You are worthy, too...sweet Ezer. Do not forget that. Stop your fussing. Let us to breakfast and then off to Court.”

Rubbing my lips together, I decide not to question her. A cold awareness deep within me registers that she won’t share whatever Neo said that led to her trigger. Nor do I want to unleash Bryony again.

Instead, I follow her to the Commons, where Quillion praises mine and Nita’s polar opposite gown styles and reads his celebrity news gossip like always. Nita drinks an extreme portion of blood, which surprises me, given how controlled she normally is. As much as I wish it didn’t haunt me, her generous appetite prickles my spine with suspicion. She’s strengthening herself. Why? What else has Neo planned?

None of us speak of what happened in the Commons, but anyone watching could tell how different our morning is. As if melancholia laces the entire room—a deep tristful blue that I may wade into.

Finally, after multiple delays on Nita’s part, Quillion stands and offers us both arms to escort us to Court. Whatever is happening in Nita’s multi-layered mind, I understand that this will be the most harrowing of Courts I will ever attend. The Prince of Destruction has planned something. And I can’t begin to imagine what.

A few minutes later, we enter the bone box, but Nita does not bid me to sit. Instead, she folds her hand into mine and leads me to the balcony so we may await the Prince. Something pulls in the back corner of my mind. Suspicion grows to apprehension.

Stealing the breath from my lungs, the doorway of our mental bond nudges open. It lures me in with soothing, warm tendrils, welcoming me into an encroaching darkness that feels feverish—like a plague of flames and sulfur ready to strike at my heart. Today, he will wear the Dragon mask, and I find myself saying countless breath prayers even as I squeeze Nita’s hand and elevate my chin, but not higher than hers.

To my greatest surprise, Nita flinches when the Prince plummets onto the edge of his throne in full diamonded armor. Not crouching but standing with



a scarlet cape plunging to the floor where I imagine it will become my seat any moment. Surely, he will want to debase me to the floor beneath him as he did before.

For now, Neo inspects his Court, cunning eyes severe and honed as his vampire bone scythes. I'd shudder if I hadn't seen it so many times—if I was not bound to him in flesh, blood, and heart. No, not heart. I blink back tears.

The arena is packed to the brim with a majority of vampires but also humans, all of whom kneel before him; he planned for an audience. Lament engulfs me when he finally casts his gaze to us, to me—those double blades prepared to cut me a million times.

“Sit.”

His Court immediately obeys, lowering themselves in submission, but Nita does not. Nor does he force her to. I glance behind me to an un-punctual Lux sitting nearby, garbed in nothing more than white and gold body paint, a few silvery slips of fabric around her sex and breasts—and her catastrophe of stolen marks. A bride's veil shrouds her eyes. But a serpentine grin slides along her lips. She blows me a kiss right before the Prince's shades bind a strong tether around my waist—and wrench me from the platform to deposit me directly into the Inner Circle!

I double over, breathless, the wind knocked out of me.

A wave of ice shoots up my spine. A hush falls over the crowd as Neoptolemus overthrows my body with his towering shadow and targets my eyes like the perfect predator. I cannot hope to escape him. I understand why I am here: he's going to settle *my* account.

“Bride Lys Spirit!” His voice is a thundering war drum calling out my faux name—another nail he can drive into my coffin. Another way to deny me my royal heritage and prepare me for whatever debasement he has in store. I flinch but grit my teeth, narrowing my eyes when the Prince seizes my throat to collar me while he grits his teeth and barks, “You have committed a grievous transgression against the crown by withholding your flesh and blood in *my* bed. Now, you will pay the price in Court!” He retrieves a long whip of corded black leather.

Panic burns a hole right through my stomach. The serpents storm the avenues of my throat, biting, biting, biting. Pain rockets into my neck!

*No, Neo, no!* I cry out through our bond, hurling throwing stars of angel light to battle him.

In our mental link, those throwing stars soar across the drawbridge

toward his mighty Dragon flying around his fortress. He evades every one and growls deep from within his chest, his throat igniting with molten flames. Though he winces within that bond, that dark force, he roars and beats his wings, prowess remaining strong. When I try again, his horns carve every last star in half, shattering them like fire crystals.

“As this is your first offense, I will reduce your punishment to ten lashes.” He stands straight and tall, back as high as a throne, as if imparting some mercy. “Now, *kneel* before me, my bride.”

He releases my throat. I want to fall flat on my face. If only I could rise above the pain and become nothing more than a numb, lifeless statue. I’ve never managed it. Not even on my longest night of Noralice. Otherwise, it would be a betrayal of my heart—to *not* feel the pain. Instead, I created Empath Elysia, who could pity the vampires, longing to serve them with her blood. But right now, I hold her back, refusing to give her a foothold. That night was different. My relationship with Neo is different. Our *bond* is stronger.

What had Thanatos said? If I wish to be raised higher, I must learn how to kneel? Rage clouds my vision to scarlet. *HELL NO!* My breath escapes in whirlwinds of gusts, timed to my heaving chest. I refuse to believe this is what he meant. I am Ezer. I am a Princess. I am the Halo-Bearer.

I was *not* created for abuse! No one is.

I was created for a crown of stardust and gold. I was created to be a shield and a warrior of light. Sucking in deep breaths, I remember my vow as I walked down that aisle, my footsteps treading upon clouds and velvet night and starlight. I was created to be one flesh, *not* for the degradation of my flesh.

When I do not kneel, when I thrust my chin up in assurance of my identity and zero in on his eyes, the entire arena detonates. Hosts of vampires rise to their feet in protests and contemptuous jeers—many calling for harsher punishments for my defiance to the highest authority of Prince in a land with no king. Each voice is a horn of destruction, and all I want to do is to clap my hands over my ears. Tears glisten in my eyes. No mercy. No forgiveness. No love anywhere.

Neo is the worst. Nothing but wrath and ruin in the Prince’s eyes when he leers down at me. Dragon fire, blood, and shades. Rattling me deep to my bones, he seizes my shoulders and drives me to the floor.

Chest squeezing, I retreat deep into my heart to stem the tide of serpents

until they become the only sensation to rouse my salvation, my Halo. I claw deep down for that star-fire power, but I can't produce one spark to save my useless self. My shame is too great because I've failed to capture the Dragon. I've failed to capture my husband.

*Noralice!* I scream to Thanatos. Not even my greatest trauma seems to trigger him. No escape to Flight, no escape for my wretched soul. Still, I refuse to bow my head and memorize Neo's destructive eyes.

Now, I preach that trauma over myself again and again. My chest then lifts, blessed, sacred air flooding my lungs. At that moment, I recall what those names mean: truth *and* honor. These sacred brands on my soul. Their blessing is a seal upon my heart, upon my arm to overthrow all others, including the Prince's horned mark. I whisper them in my mind to grant me strength when the audience takes their seats, preparing for the Prince to deal justice.

Gasping on the floor, staring at my splayed-out hands, and hearing the deafening beat of my heart in my ears, in my head, I barely register his fingers light on my curls. He casts them over my face, hiding me, preparing me. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of his mind, he loathes this, loathes himself. In the end, he won't want to remember this. The knowledge that it will ultimately punish him as much as it will punish me—that he will seek penance once his old heart returns—is my only comfort.

The Prince touches the coiled whip to the nape of my neck, a gesture of punishment for my sickle mark. I feel the slight brush of air when he sweeps the whip upward and cracks it once, a single warning before he brings it down! I hold my breath.

“Neoptolemus, Prince of Destruction!” Nita's voice spears the entire Court, stopping the Prince's hand in one split second.

I do not look up, but the force of her body rocking the Inner Circle erupts into me, reverberating in powerful currents. Out of the corner of my eye, I detect her horns—deadly black bone weapons in and of themselves. Her voice thunders as a Hydra Monster to battle Destruction's Dragon. “I invoke the right of Substitution!”

Holy foremothers, no! Dread rips through my stomach.

*No, Nita!* I scream, I cry, I moan in her mind, my heart weeping and bleeding out love. Her sacrifice weighs down on my chest.

One dire glance at Neo assures me this is the last thing he expected, especially after this morning. Their equal eyes blaze while Neo puffs shades

and embers through his nostrils. Every muscle in his body steels, bulging, rattling, nearly shattering every diamond in his armor.

Nita rises, straight and tall, hands mighty as scepters at her sides, her voice projecting venom, “It is my *right*, Lord Prince. I. Invoke. The. Right. Of. Substitution.”

*Please, Nita...* I plead with her, unable to tear my eyes from my fingers, aching from how my Halo has abandoned me. Surely, it must be a sign, a symbol that I deserve punishment, that I need to suffer to reclaim my husband, to reclaim my worth. *This is all my—*

*Hush, sweet angel. You have done nothing wrong. I will be your Ezer today.*

Oh, Saints! Tears form a river below me. My heart quakes inside my chest, threatening to fracture my rib cage.

Neo’s eyes fall. His whole face falls, chin bowing to his chest. I nod, clenching my eyes in understanding. According to the laws of the land, he cannot refute her. I know those laws. Over the past few months at the Tenth Court, I’ve spent numerous days studying them, memorizing them. If I try to deny her claim, we will both take the punishment. She’s doing this, sacrificing herself for me.

*Nita, let me join you. I will—*

Her Hydra Queen checkmates me in one indomitable move when she falls to her knees before me. Those dark eyes are deadly, dangerous, vowing, not threatening. My chest caves in.

Cupping my forehead, I study those orbs bearing every demon soul in her dungeon lake. My hands curve, clambering with the need to stop this, to raise her up because Nita should never kneel before anyone, least of all me.

*Would you deny me my trauma, Elysia? Would you deny my rightful ownership of it?* Stunned by her invocation, I shrink before her. *Your time will come when you reserve the right to relive yours. Do. Not. Invade. Mine.*

A low growl forms in her throat, a subtle warning. My shoulders curl in on themselves in defeat as I swallow my pride in this punishment. It’s not mine to own. As she said, I’ve done nothing wrong. She is doing everything right in taking this from me, in *reaping* this from me.

*Yes, Queen Amanita...* I bow my head in surrender. Desolation and shame overwhelm me, but I cage them somewhere in the pit of my stomach.

The Prince’s shade tethers penetrate my skin like barbs as he charges me back over the balcony. Somewhere within the bond, a part of him wishes to

drop me so my body will crash against his throne, beaten and battered to death. But he would never dishonor his sister.

Upon the balcony, I kneel to witness the *strongest* woman of my life reap the punishment meant for me. Quillion slides onto the balcony next to me to share our pain and grief.

Next to us, Lux bristles, her eyes wreathed in amber fury when she gazes down at Nita and then subsequently at me. Amber...not gold, like a sudden flame has burst inside them. But as soon as our eyes lock, they return to that gold lacquer.

Nita's cry follows the first crack of the whip, trespassing on its edge. Agony trundles my stomach, and I swallow hard, hang my head, and close my eyes for a moment, but I can smell the blood from here.

Quillion steadies my shoulders so I may strengthen myself and force my eyes back to that Inner Circle, where Neo's hand trembles when he raises the whip again. And strikes! One heart murmur inside me acknowledges how he's putting on a show, sweeping the whip in such a ferocious arc—but like a master warrior, he pulls his punches so they barely scar Nita's elite flesh from where her gown back has been ripped. He picks up the pace, preparing to end it in moments. Yet, her mind roars as the Hydra—so deafening, so powerful, it reverberates in my ears, resonating deep into my blood and bones:

*Slower!*

*Nita...*I moan inside my mind. Hot, gold tears lash at my eyes when I understand why. If there is more time between each whip strike, it grants her more time to breathe and recover, but the next strike will be worse than the one before. Neo wanted to end it quickly. She's not just reliving her trauma. She's *testing* him! Her greatest reclaim, a measure of control over her own brother, of commanding his throne.

Oh, Nita! My fingers tighten, gripping the balcony so hard, they pale. Never could I possibly imagine carrying such strength.

I tuck my hands under my chin and scrape at my throat when I hear her next cry. She tips her head back, treading on a whimpering Bryony to bear the burden. I've memorized her expressions. Strike six. Still, Nita holds on to her core identity: Amanita. She is determined to bear this pain.

And I pray, I pray, I pray for peace. Oh, Goddess, grant her peace! With another crack of the whip, I pray no more Dragon breath, no demons to haunt her flesh—no teeth and no flesh and no fires of the Father's hell. Only sweet

dreams and peace as she falls to her knees!

Strike eight.

Her shriek echoes her Hydra soul. Her tears form their own network on the floor at her feet. I imagine that even teardrops have anatomy. Her tears fall like lonely children and become little avenues trying to repair themselves, stitch their heartstrings back together, and fuse gold into the cracks of her soul.

Strike ten!

On the verge of my heart giving out, I never take my eyes off Nita. She falls, she curls into the fetal position to become Bryony, to bear the weight of that Dragon on the shoulders of a teenage girl. Not one mouth in the arena whispers. Not with Neo roaring from the pain of having to punish his dear sister. He destroys the whip and pitches its ashes to the air, then arches his back and thunders his rage to the domed ceiling, causing it to fracture from that Dragon scream.

One more whimpering cry from Nita. From Bryony. From both.

In that cry, I capture the echo of Bryony's soul—undone by her beauty, her strength. Perhaps even stronger than Nita. Amanita, the girl of souls and dreams, who played games with the Prince of Destruction, is not the one who could bear the pain. Instead, Amanita was so strong that she formed these alters to bear the trauma for her—Bryony, the most.

Somehow, that alter takes shape in my mind. My imagination flies, it soars to the looming symbolic image of a silver horse with a mane of teardrops—each one a precious gemstone of a star.

So, I stand. So, I *rise*! Lifting my hands into the air, I weave my Halo into the image of that horse, that mare that was once trapped. I gift her wings so she may fly. I spin and twirl every last Halo filament into a gold Pegasus.

Finally, I set the horse free—to gallop to Bryony. She wished for the Prince to ride in and save her, but after all the pain and tribulation she has endured, Bryony deserves to mount that glory herself. She deserves those wings of gold.

My ears ring from her final cries of raw emotion when she beholds that Pegasus. It's female. It's what she needs. Feminine goddess energy. Strengthening my chest, I nod, slam my eyes shut, and concentrate. I allow that feminine presence, born of my Halo that knows all, to take shape and essence. It trots around Bryony's curled form, prancing and stomping her hoofs at the ground before she rears up and shakes her mane of golden

teardrops to land upon Bryony's head like pieces of a resplendent crown.

*You are worthy of deliverance, Bryony!* I preach the blessing Nita bestowed upon me.

Bryony slowly unfolds herself. She lifts a hand to touch the Pegasus, to stroke the teardrop mane. I understand it's a combination of her powers and mine working together. I provided the vessel, but she stands to claim it.

She stands. And climbs upon the horse's back! She mounts the Pegasus and harnesses the Creator power inside her so she may ride and fly out of the Inner Circle. On those great wings of gold with the entire Court riveted in stunned silence at the sight—including Neo with his eyes glistening diamond-flecked tears—Nita charges right up to the balcony and leaps onto the platform next to me.

Posturing to the full force of Amanita, the Hydra Creator Queen, the Destroying Angel, she boldly proclaims, "Substitution invoked. Her account is *settled!*"

## CHAPTER 13



## “IT SEEMS YOUR UNFINISHED BUSINESS IS NEVER DONE WITH HIM, PRINCESS.”

I return to the border as promised with a little parting gift of Lux’s traitorous kiss upon my lips. As if she could bestow some peace offering while Quillion and I had surrounded Nita and left the Court together. Nita had refused to allow either of us to bear her up. Nor had she allowed me to use the Halo to heal her. Now, I fulfill my vow to her, saving all my energies for the people here.

The first thing Jesula tries to do is get me to turn back. After yesterday, she has every justification. I shift my weight with a regretful knot thickening my throat.

“These people don’t need a broken Princess, Elysia,” Jesula scolds me with her newly formed braids diving to her waist like black diamond ropes. “I love your power. I love what you did yesterday. But I also love *you*, baby girl.” She cups my cheek and kisses my forehead, and my heart stumbles. “I won’t let you kill yourself trying to save everyone else just so you can placate some holy fire inside you. I’ve felt its heat, and I know it’s always going to rage. But slow burn, okay?”

With an obedient nod, I weave my arms around her, accepting her mamma bear warmth wrapping me in a strong hug. We chuckle when she adds, “Slow hot burn in your case.”

I spark my Halo light into my hands and offer her a golden spiked crown to dance upon her head. Once I approach the balcony to gaze out at the sea of people, my smile struggles. Especially from the crowds erupting into applause and cheers as soon as they behold me. I don’t linger but pick up my skirts and rush into the elevator alongside Jesula because I don’t want to be higher than them. Even now, my Halo weeps, my heart aches for their blood,

sweat, and tears.

“They’re calling you the Angel Bride,” Jesula mentions and gives me a once-over, her eyes roaming to my shoulders.

I hoist one eyebrow. “What?”

“You don’t actually have Halo wings or something, right?”

I blink and then laugh. Jesula joins me like a chuckling echo. Comforting warmth curls inside me as I shake my head to say, “No, Jes. No wings. Not that I wouldn’t object.”

“Who would have thought things would change so fast?”

“Not us.”

She agrees, swinging her eyes toward the assemblies who are clustering to meet us, to meet the Angel Bride. “Never us, Lyssi. I’ll always be here for you, Halo. I’ll be the Aaron to your Moses.” The irony. We are not here to bring a plague but to heal one.

“And Miriam...” I add because she would be the one leading the pack out of the bloody sea and rousing them with a life-giving song. Jesula grins at my reflections while the elevator rolls to a stop; she’s always had the most blessed voice.

Wishing I could delay the rising of the Blood Moon, I spend hours with her, moving to the most desperate of the tent city territories. The people do not suffocate me, do not smother me. They are the first to divide our gifts and share them with those who need them most. With Jesula’s slow burn raging in my chest, I steady and pace myself, strengthening the dam around my flood waves of tears. No, the masses do not understand I am the Princess daughter of the Phoenix Queen. All they know is Lys Spirit: Angel Bride to Destruction. I imagine many suspect I am the Everblood.

I welcome the baby when the parents place him in my arms. No more than two months old. He is gloriously unmarked by any brand, whether from farm overseers or any knights, but I understand why as soon as I peel back the blanket from his face and discover blotchy red cheeks and breath fragile from his winter blue mouth. The Scourge. My knees turn weak, but I steady myself, steady my heart, and the raw emotion choking my throat.

Snapping my head to Jesula, I pinch my eyes upon her mirrored expression as a wave of hurt engulfs me. *Holy foremothers. El Shaddai, Goddess on high, can’t you hear your people cry?*

“How many more?” I ask Jesula and rock the baby, glancing at her mother and father, at how they hold their other children—a little boy and

toddler girl who ask if their baby brother will be alright.

Jesula shrugs and jerks a finger to the encampment to the west—closer to the Spirit Realm woods where the vampires have their blood hunts. “The sick are being quarantined. They won’t let anyone in or out, except blood scientists like Quillion.”

The baby in my arms coughs blood onto his blanket. My Halo rears like a warrior of light. *You will carry healing to all the innocent who suffer from the Scourge.* I also remember the Goddess saying I would pay the ultimate price for accepting this new darkness. So, I channel the inner spirit of a Hebrew midwife, take a deep breath, and lower my lips to the babe, kissing his eyes. Releasing my breath, I sigh my prayers to all my foremothers to take this yoke of pestilence from his tiny body.

Harnessing my Halo power to radiate from my chest, I fuse the light into his flesh, into his veins, inject it into his pores, and then his veins like a blood-synthesis. My healing power breeds its force into the child’s body, flowing its energy in pure wavelengths into his flesh, his blood, his DNA, and penetrating his very cells. Dizzy bits of black hole dust swirl in my brain, but I dig my boots into the snows at my feet and take solace in the wind whipping my cheeks, relying on my senses to grant me strength.

Whispers of prayers fade upon my trembling lips as my body quivers. I open my eyes to discover the child’s lips have returned to plump, pink hearts—his skin blotch-free. His mother gasps while the father offers a whimpering moan. Laughter from the children.

“That’s my baby girl,” Jesula murmurs her approval, squeezing my shoulder as I hand the baby to his father and ask them not to say anything about my healing power yet. Something tells me that’s not likely. That first time winded me. I need to inspect this quarantine encampment before I do anything else.

For the next few hours, I make my way through the tent city, moving towards the quarantine area about a mile in the distance. Sometimes, vampire knights dive low and pluck a child from the crowd, triggering cries and screams that prod my heart with lightning. Thanks to Jesula, I’m able to temper it. Along the way, I learn the refugee stories, of how so many escaped the clutches of Court Mordere. That blood-dealing warlord of a bitten vampire has been attacking border towns—more brazen as he encroaches into the Court O’Nines.

I hear their needs—meeting whatever I can—from more food rations to

stronger shelters beyond the tents that don't offer as much protection during the winter. Jesula records them for me because even if I don't have the Prince's heart, I still hold his ear in some small way, though I'm not certain how much he will listen...especially after today. A chill shivers through me at the thought of Neo and his dark eyes in that Court.

It's close to nightfall by the time I arrive at the quarantine camp, where high iron walls divide it from the rest of the tent city. A thick plastic netting canopies it, electrified, no doubt. It reminds me of an enormous windowless and doorless warehouse, but the scent of death lingers from beyond those walls. Jesula remains about a hundred feet behind me, speaking to the last refugee family we helped. Breath hitching, I touch the wall to discern where I may enter.

"Lyssi, wait!" Jesula screams.

A sudden force rocks against me, hurling my body back and searing my gown. Dirt sprays into my mouth, and I cough, my whole body jolting. Dozens of people gather around me, but only Jesula touches my side and helps me sit up so I may recenter myself.

"I'm okay..." I pant, whirling my head to clear my vision and touching my curls that have turned into wild corkscrews—like I've just stuck a fork in a socket. Taming them with my Halo until they return to normal, I stand, wiping myself off, "Nothing like a few jolts of electricity to get my blood pumping!"

"I think you need some common sense pumped into that impulsive brain of yours," Jesula scolds me, and I nod, promising I'll work on controlling my impulsivity. We both know I probably won't.

I get to my feet and appraise the warehouse walls, the invisible fence with its telltale hum. Beyond that, I can isolate all the speech from the surrounding people while detecting the shifting of snowflakes in the wind. For the next hour or so, I'll probably hear everything like a vampire, which will be overwhelming. Touch will be another heightened sense, considering the air tickling my exposed arm hairs.

Just then, multiple vampire knights swoop down from the sky and land before me to block the entrance. I guess touching the wall was a trigger. "This building is quarantined," the one on the left barks with his copper braid draped down his chest like a fiery spiral. "Only those with permission from the Prince may enter."

I roll my sleeve up and reveal my horned mark, but the vampire knight

shakes his head. “That is not an official border seal, lady bride.”

Glaring, I ball my hands into fists and prepare to challenge them—only for Quillion to phase directly through the walls and check the knights with his bishop title. “You will let her in upon my orders.”

Immediately, the knights break ranks and allow me to pass, allowing me to accept Quillion’s extended hand. “I forgot to tell you,” I whisper and tap one of many fleur de lis motifs along the back of his jacket, “I love your waistcoat.”

Quillion winks as we pass through the wall. “Hand-embroidered from France during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But I’d give it away in a heartbeat if I could stem this tide.”

I almost pass out from the stench invading my nostrils. When I turn my eyes to the tide he’s referenced, the Halo nearly melts, injecting my heart with holy molten lava. Chest constricting, I gasp at the sight of the hundreds of figures resting, not on beds, but on floor cots without hardly a soul to attend them. No doctors. No nurses. No researchers, save for Quillion. No volunteers. *No one!* They’re living with their blood, their sweat, their own feces.

“Quillion!” I bury my head in his shoulder and nearly scream from all the sick and suffering. “Why? How can he—”

“I’ve implored him again and again, Elysia. Believe me, I have.” My friend tries to soothe me, curving his hand to the back of my head. “But the virus has not targeted the human blood farms within the Tenth Court territory. That is all that matters to the Prince. Even if it had passed into the homes of the blood masters, that would be one thing. Or if there was a cure...”

“There’s no cure?” I turn away, forcing myself to look at the children curled up and playing with their fingers because they have no possessions.

Quillion shakes his head. “I’m a blood seer, Elysia. I’ve stripped the virus down to its veins. It’s like it came from the Chasm, from hell itself. Our healers could only manage a few in a given day.”

“A few!” I cry out but lower my voice as soon as Quillion raises a hand to warn me because there are no healing vampires here. “A few is more than *none*. Where are—”

Quillion’s eyes seem to turn to frost when they focus on me, already revealing the answer before he responds, “The virus can mutate and target vampires. The Prince won’t risk—”

I drop to my knees and dig my fingers into my scalp, putting my head between my knees so I may bite back a scream. No! He can't do this. I won't let him!

"We can slow it with a treatment I designed," Quillion offers me some small assurance of hope and raises me up. "It seems your unfinished business is never done with him, Princess. If you can convince him to get the treatment into production..."

"Are you all alone in this, Quill?"

He shrugs, dropping his hands to his sides. "I've been able to smuggle stores of sedatives from the Tenth Court. It's made them comfortable. That's why they've hardly given you a second's glance since you arrived, Princess."

I rub my lips together, observing the tranquility of the room despite all the blotches on their skin, the ruptured blood sockets, the bitterness of their blue lips. Neoptolemus sent Quillion here with both arms chained behind his back. My pulse roars its rage into my ears. I can't forgive him for this. I won't.

"What happens to the dead, Quillion?" I grit my teeth, lethal ice invading my voice while my Halo grows thorns of fire along my skin.

He sighs and hangs his head, gazing out at the bodies. "Bodies are burned. The Prince's power is enough to annihilate the infection. He... destroys them."

Pure fumes of Halo hatred smoke from my ears, interlacing with the pain shooting into my blood because the blood moon is rising. Wrath burns my throat. Quillion steps back as I battle the torture inside me, stealing the last dredges I can before *he* arrives to cart me away to his room. It feels like my heart is being severed in two.

"Hasn't anyone else been delegated to help?" is my last question.

He sighs and kneads his brows.

"For the love of God, Quill, hurry!" I shriek in pain as the force launches me toward the building walls in the direction of the Prince's Tower.

"Rook Victor Idrys."

The Court O' Nines rook, I remember from the day I'd vomited all over the Father's boots. Neo destroyed his wings—a punishment not many vampires can survive. Idrys and his history of the purest bought and bred humans. And the first rook who issued a warrant for my arrest during my smuggling days.

What in all holy fuck is going on?



TO MY GREAT ASTONISHMENT, the Prince doesn't come for me. No time for the carriage. Not when the blood moon is nearing its ascent. Thankfully, Quillion carries me to the Tower through its walls until I arrive at the shadow door and step inside so the cold shades soothe my blood. Unlike so many times before, Neo doesn't catch me. Now, I realize why he didn't meet me at the border.

"Ahh, there she is! My blushing bride!" Neo proclaims...no, he slurs. Supercilious ass is blood drunk...from the four lingerie-clad harem girls that fawn over his body. Fresh holes in their necks, dripping blood. Judging from their eyes rolling around in their sockets, I know they are just as venom-intoxicated as he is on their blood. My heart slams against my chest.

"Real classy, Neo," I mutter and wrinkle my nose.

"Care to join us?" He splays his arms out and shifts his hips from side to side, member wagging, the girls giggling.

I know my husband and this side of him—another mask. A similar one when he presides over the festivities. This is just looser since it's his bedroom. A way to soothe his busted ego after Nita upstaged him, a way to soothe his guilt, *distract* him from dealing with it all. His method of Flight. He wants to play the escape game? Two can do that.

So, I approach the bed and plant my hands on the edges, causing Neo to sit upright. All I want to do is scream as he shifts one of the girls to croon, "Is it my birthday, angel?"

With an angry heat crawling through me, I lick my lips in a subtle tease, tiptoeing my hands up the sides of his legs, nails scraping toward his thighs. I thrill at the way his length twitches.

"Going to show me what those lips of an angel can do between my legs, Elysia?" he wonders, brows bobbing up and down. I nearly stiffen but manage to control myself.

Instead, I inject the full force of my Halo into my fingers, hoping it will keep until morning, pausing to tell the harem girls, "Sorry, ladies, but this prick tick's dick is closed for *maintenance!*" I pucker up and blow Neo a kiss right before I blast a Halo coating of gold paralysis between his thighs to shut

him the fuck down!

Spinning out of his arms, I cry out, *Noralice* in my mind, sing-song the chorus to “I’m a Bitch” to overlap Neo’s growling roar and welcome my body sailing through reality’s web. I forsake my physical self to those layered spider strands until I am my glowing, golden soul enthroned in a frost gown and falling into Thanatos’ arms.



## CHAPTER 14

# WHATEVER YOU DO, DO NOT LOOK AT ME...

“Expertly checked, Elysia,” Thanatos hums his approval along my curls near my ear as his fingers linger at the base of my spine. He pauses. Even if I don’t need it, even if I’m still riding a ripple of a high after my victory over Neo, I jerk my face to his and angle my chin with my curls diving to the side to urge him to continue.

Inhaling his frosted roses, inhaling this dream within a dream, I lower my head to his chest and shiver to his frost tarrying along my spine as if it’s following the scent of my emotions. “How many more Scourge souls were added to your Lake since I left, Thanatos?”

When his sigh drifts onto my face as I take in his heavy shoulders, I sink my head, pressing my cheek to his chest.

“Fifty-six.”

Death finishes its frigid journey at the nape of my neck, but I’m not ready to forsake his chest. Like always, his black robes are cold as his name, but my mouth pressed there tingles as if an *energy* beneath his robes exists—powerful and echoing from the stars. I cling to those robes, seeking that energy.

As if he understands what I’m trying to do, Thanatos gently pushes me away and alerts me, “He’s been waiting for you.”

A second later, Spitfire bats at the frost gown’s ends. With a soft smile, I kneel to greet my hellcat. A mistake since he’s the size of a full-grown cougar by now—strong enough to knock me on the floor. Thanatos’ frost catches me, forming a soft, arctic bed to contrast Spitfire’s heat. I laugh as my hellcat languidly licks my face, his tongue warm and aching for my flames.

Syn stands in the corner of the room, arms crossed over her chest, nose thrust high in the air, back braced against the wall. As soon as my eyes flick to hers, she bares rows of those razor teeth in warning, “You try humping me again, Princess, and my snakes will eat your hellcat for breakfast.”

I touch my fingers to my mouth, covering my giggle. Spitfire snorts, then cocks his head down so he may lick his chest as if reminding me his belly is empty. Thrusting my head up, I eye Thanatos, who fetches his Reaper robe, so I know he’s about to go to Court. As if he can feel my eyes on his back, Death sighs, shrugging into his tattered robe, rolling his shoulders back, and pressing his hands down on his dark shadow hair.

“You won’t be content to stay here, Elysia. Nor can I risk you running into that damned buzzing satyr,” Thanatos mentions just before he extends an arm to me in invitation.

I don’t hesitate. Not for a second. Gliding to my feet, I hasten into his arms, practically leaping with a flutter in my belly. Eager to learn more from the Scourge souls, to learn anything I can about Thanatos, about Neo, about their history, anything I might use to restore my husband’s heart, I do my best to ignore that undercurrent of heat eddying in my belly when Thanatos closes his arms around me.

After he secures his arm around the backs of my thighs to hoist me up, I curve my face into his neck, brushing my mouth to his skin, smirking at the way his silver veins awaken and sprout ice buds on his flesh. *Pure* torture? I think not.

“I’m certain my Persefoni would appreciate a visit from her son tonight, wouldn’t you say?” Thanatos distracts me while he strengthens his hand muscles right beneath my ass. I’ll allow that. The butterflies in my belly erupt and do little flips.

“But how—”

“Feed him something he can sample along the way. Be *creative*,” hums Thanatos low in my ear. “Leave a trail. Command him, and he will follow.”

Halo breadcrumbs it is, then. Except mine take the form of a giant gold eel—a steady current of heat radiating from my chest. So, when Thanatos opens his bone door and adds to Syn, “Please join us, hunter. Limbo has been stirring tonight, and I have a feeling the damned will be *restless*...” the bounty hunter presses her lips into an eager smile.

Spitfire gobbles up my undulating eel, following.

“Come, Spitfire!” I order as Thanatos crosses onto the walkway.

I throw my arms around Thanatos' neck when the inertia of him charging off the walkway spears my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. He bears all my weight with just one hand. Then again, in the Soul Plane, weight is a relative term. So is flight since he doesn't use any wings to fly through the air...unless they're invisible to me.

"*What?!*" I scream at the sight of my hellcat vaulting right off the platform and unleashing a great set of wings that match his dark hide so he may devour my Halo's eel trail. "*He gets wings?*" I thrust my head back to narrow my eyes upon Thanatos.

With a low chuckle in his throat, Thanatos responds with his fingers curling down to the panes of bare skin at the base of my spine. "You will get those wings someday, my love." He lowers his head to brush his lips along my brow.

"Don't," I warn. He doesn't get to claim that. Only Neo.

Thanatos shoots his frost right into the tail end of spine, triggering me into a sudden arch, but his other hand catches the back of my neck. "Like for like, *Elysia*." Oh, that damned Reaper!

"An eye for an eye, Death?" I reference kissing his neck just a moment ago.

He leans in and purrs low to my ear, "*A tooth for a tooth?*"

*Fuuuuuuuck.*

Weaving my arms back around his neck, I bring my forehead to bear down on his, my gold-ringed eyes blazing against his, and snarl, "Never, Death." *You will not get my tooth*, I nearly add. He would probably reap his brother's soul right in front of me if I did that.

Unlike Neo, Natos does not challenge. He doesn't need to, not when he's already won this battle. Defeating me every time. Dealing with Death is the opposite of Destruction. With Neo, I'd rise to the challenge every time. Not with Death. Certainly, I've given him my fair share, but something deep within me calls to Death...*tempting* him as much as he tempts me. He already has a piece of my soul from that Noralice night, but I carry absolutely nothing of him. *Death, Death, lost his flames to frost of breath!* Pan's words haunt me, chilling me to the bone. What great secret does Thanatos hold? And what does it all have to do with me? I should focus on Neo, on all his masks, peeling them back one by one. Our bond is the key. And yet, perhaps Thanatos, with his secrets, holds the true key to *everything*.

The Gates part before him. Like the dividing of the Red Sea, only this is

fathomless branches, trunks shifting, roots clawing at the mountain faces, so Thanatos may invade the doorway. Gasping, I clamber my hands to the back of his neck as he sweeps into their pathway. Once my fingers collide with his skin, pressing beyond his hair, pressing to something significant, I swing my face toward him, boring my eyes onto his, stupefied by what I've just unearthed.

"Thanatos..." I breathe against his mouth, tempted, too tempted. I can't believe it's real. It must be a deception. I remember that voice from the Tower, from *his* Tower. But I also remember Pan's revelation. I remember the sudden shift in Thanatos's persona and the prickling of his frost up my spine to soothe my pain and panic as if...as if only he can truly gift me with Noralice—with truth and honor. He was the one who ultimately shared my trauma, that long night of a hundred bites. And now, he has conquered his own. Or at least a fraction of its power. Upon the back of his neck, beneath his silky black hair, I trace the ruined flesh, the scorched brand, recognizing the undercurrent of a mark that once existed. A mark of Lucifer. But no longer. Thanatos burned it off.

Despite how our eyes never stray from one another, Death reveals nothing. Death offers nothing.

We arrive at the Lake of Souls.

Persefoni roars, welcoming her son, and I smile as they bond upon Thanatos' balcony. Tonight, Thanatos does not take me to his throne. No, he *creates* a new one. Of hundreds upon hundreds of crystalized roses and ice vines curling in elaborate, delicate, and skeletal patterns to seduce me, to tempt me. Skulls formed of translucent ice decorate the crest of the throne. Thanatos sets me down on the dais of ten crystal steps and bids me to ascend higher than his unworthy pedestal.

*You damned devil*, I huff through our soul bond, pinching my eyes upon him as an annoyed heat rises within me. I find it simpler to traverse into that spirit fabric of our soul-blood pathway when we are within his realm.

*Far from it, Ice Princess. Rise, Elysia!*

I stick my nose in the air, brow crinkling, then gather my frost gown and take my first step toward that ethereal throne with his hand still clutching mine. *Oh, just let it go already!*

Death cracks a grin and checkmates me, *I'll never let you go, Halo-Bearer.*

Groaning, I tip my head back before throwing my red face into my hands

because he's overthrown me again. But Thanatos summons me with one prickly touch to my spine, causing me to jerk my face back to his. "You are always *higher* than me, Elysia."

After biting my lower lip and ruminating on that, wondering if I truly am, I ascend that dais until I sit inside that illustrious rose throne so I may behold Thanatos doing Court.

His first action is to summon every Scourge soul because he comprehends how I have questions. A heaviness settles within me while emotion chokes my throat. Far more than the last time. All the souls are a network, bound together by their shared experience, their souls thirsty and craving release of burial instead of the unfinished sanctum of Destruction's ash. When the veins in Thanatos' neck swell to his muscles tensing, I understand he is working hard to hold them, to prevent them from fading to Limbo. My gut clenches with the knowledge: Death bears the burden of thousands of soul strings.

I sit up straight in my ice rose throne and address the souls, "Where is the source?"

Thanatos tugs on one string, so she is presented before me, kneeling with her soul form like a wispy glowworm. I shake my head, compelling Thanatos to allow the mother to rise. With one more tug on that tether, she does.

"What do you remember?" I bid her to speak.

In a starry ripple of a voice, she responds, "I went to hunt, my lady, in the Spirit Realm woods," her voice echoes, sparking like an ember. "A vampire cornered me in those woods and bit me, injecting their venom. It didn't last more than a moment before they disappeared. All I cared about was that I was still alive and could return to my family. But after a week, the venom didn't dilute. It spread like hellfire in my veins, my lady."

I swing my eyes to Thanatos, lift my brows in anticipation. He shakes his head, revealing nothing, bound by some otherworldly law I cannot even fathom.

So, I turn back to the mother and implore her, "What do you remember of the vampire?"

"Nothing, my lady." Her soul smolders at the edges. "Only that the vampire split into multiple. It began as one...and bred within seconds, but I don't remember how many."

I wince, remembering my hundred times bites. Thanatos curls frost along my spine, his icy tranquilizer. After nodding a thank you, I permit him to return the soul to what little peace she may have in the Lake. No other souls

experienced the multiplicitous vampire. I heave a sigh, my thoughts tripping over one another. At least, it's a start.

Hands braced on the sides of my new throne, I beseech Death, "Please... keep them, Thanatos."

Though Thanatos visibly winces, sinewy neck muscles tightening from the strain it causes him, the Prince of Death transfers the lost, restless souls back into his Lake.

Without warning, dozens of skeleton birds plunge from the sky, caped in wraith-like wings! Bone-chilling fear spikes within me. They screech like stuck pigs, circling the souls. They nip at their strings. No! My heart lurches in my chest. I rush down the dais, pausing at the last step so I don't tumble into the water. Families cry. They shriek. Brave child souls huddle together, a few screaming. Can souls be stolen? A whimper lodges in my throat.

"Carrion hell!" Thanatos growls at the birds before he alerts me with one shooting of ice crystals into my spine. A Reaper warning. "Get. On. My. Back. Elysia." A single overpowering command as he drops his tattered robe to display his inner one.

*Hold onto me, and do not let go.*

I whip my head around, eyes wide. The rattling of skeleton bird bones against one another echoes its omen deep into my soul. Like the carrion he called them, they circle the souls as if waiting to *feed*...oh, Goddess! Without another hesitation, I climb onto Thanatos's back and coil my arms around his neck.

*Whatever you do, do not look at me,* he advises in a blood-curdling warning, lips pressed into a tight grimace.

Squeezing my eyes, I anchor myself against his sovereign back, his dark house of muscles. The omen inside me grows to the birds screeching, building to screams, to the rattling of more bones. All my skin crawls. He sweeps the outer robe back on, covering my entire form, protecting me with his shades and frost. My ears nearly bleed to the carrion screams. Breath ragged and desperate, I hold on tight but wrap Halo chains around my back and weave them around his stomach to bind me to him.

A rash pretense of death brushes the air at my back. A mimicry of Thanatos' shades, cold and corpse-like. More birds fly past me. I dare to peek through a threadbare gap in the fabric of Thanatos' cape, where I spy several phantasms—skeletal specter wraiths that fly on mockeries of winged shades. Lower reapers. Great bird skulls cover their faces.

“Death! Death!” The carrion wraiths screech closer to the circle of lost souls. “Lost his flames to frosted breath!”

The same words as Pan. The destroyed mark I’d felt on his neck. Tremors shudder my whole body.

“Come to me, birdie bugaboos,” Thanatos taunts the wraiths—a familiar edge of a blade in his voice, a blade of a scythe. No, it’s a sickle. All his body tenses into a crouch. I clench my legs around his waist, around his neck, and bury my face in his crypt-like shoulder. I drown my tears in his inner robe.

“Steal his souls, pretties to reap! Hurt them, hurt them, make them weep!”

*Thanatos!* I scream inside his mind, begging him to protect the Scourged souls. Fear for them hooks my stomach, tightens my throat.

*Do not let go! Do not look!*

“I’ll take everything, bogies...” his voice descends into a deep bass like the depths of the Chasm itself. It reverberates into my chest, quivering my heart...but not the Halo. “I’ll cast you back into Limbo where you belong. Bring your pretty wings to my blades!”

The full force of his body charges into the air. There’s no way my muscles and chains will be enough. Paranoid about falling, I grow Halo spikes right from my nails, my golden claws, to burrow into his back. His roaring growl rumbles deep into my core, lacing a nightmare around my spine. Thanatos’ veins turn to hoarfrost, muscles like icebergs, body as hard and cold as a diamond.

Thanatos swings his arm, overlapping the screams of those wraiths. His magisterial force rockets into me, paralyzing me. I hear the swinging of chains, of blades, of bones splitting. His shrill Reaper howls dim my Halo light and chill my soul blood, even rouse the symbolic serpents around my heart.

Then, a sharp exhale of wraith breath drifts upon my form as Thanatos’ outer robe is flung from him. No, I choke, I whimper from the wraith discovering me.

“Death, Death! Oh, he will long to meet her!” screeches the wraith. It billows around me, hovering but not encroaching. I clench my eyes to the breath of the wraith creeping up my spine like a nightmare. “No, no, you will not cheat him, our Soul-Eater!”

All of Thanatos hardens like a fortress. With a mighty swing, he carves the wraith in two, shattering its carrion bones to matter crumbs. My eyes make the fatal mistake of lifting, of rising. Now, I will *never* forget the sight



of his Reaper! An intoxicating fear, one of awe and respect and wonder, rips through me at the sight of that impregnable Death skull of fathomless black orbs—as if he houses a million Chasms. Strips of tattered skin seal his mouth shut. Black crystals grow from his neck like macabre tree branches.

My limbs weaken. It's the first time I've ever desired to fall to my knees. It's the first time I've held my breath longer than ever. It's the first time I've prayed more than ever. And yet, even when those black Chasms devour me, threatening to destroy me for my curiosity, somehow, I still cannot look away!

## CHAPTER 15

# “RETURN TO MY BROTHER AND FULFILL YOUR TRUE PURPOSE!”

“I told you not to look,” admonishes Thanatos as he lowers me into his bed. My soul feels weaker than ever.

“I saw you,” I confess, rubbing my lips together and nestling into his bed of dark roses.

“A part of me,” Thanatos utters but does not depart from my bedside.

“I saw *them!*” I raise my hand to his face, fingers imparting a light caress. Thanatos recoils as if I’ve stung him with the reminder of the scars etched all over that Reaper skull: undeniable and incontrovertible, those scars, those *brands* were the most predominant parts of his skull. “You had flames once, Thanatos.” My skin tingles from the knowledge to raise all the fine hairs on my body.

When he stands to turn his back to me, I sit up straight and curl my knees to my chest, spreading my cheek onto them. If he senses the pangs in my chest, he doesn’t raise the subject. Without turning, Thanatos hangs his Reaper robe on the hook jutting out from the wall while his frost spreads like the roots of some great tragedy...or is it such a tragedy after all?

Back tightening, Thanatos professes, “You must return, Elysia. And you cannot come back to the Soul Plane for quite some time.”

I stiffen. *What?* “Why?”

“More wraiths will come. As my brother would state, I must thin out the population.” Thanatos sighs, clenching his hands into fists so hard, they turn ghost-white. Ice blades stab the air right between his fingers. Then, he inclines one side of his face toward me, exhibiting those strong cliff-top cheekbones. “They won’t stop hunting you.”

“Why?”

Thanatos heaves a sigh and rubs his forehead. “Because I owe a debt to the Soul Eater. And he would use you to force me to pay his price. I will never allow that to happen.”

“So, I’m just supposed to go back and deal with Destruction *all* the time?” I snap, not understanding because I should desire more time with Neo, more opportunities to reclaim his heart. Instead, I lower my hands to my stomach, which churns, nauseous at the idea of forsaking the Prince with his ice roses and Reaper skull.

“You have everything you need to win him back,” Thanatos states before turning, but his shoulders curl inward, dropping in defeat.

I clutch the halo ring at my neck where I house Neo’s soul, but I doubt Thanatos’ words. If it’s true...why can’t I sense Neo here with me? Why can’t I feel him when I touch that ring? Why doesn’t it smolder or kindle upon my soul skin as it used to? Emotion rises in my throat, but I swallow it back down, shove it deeper because I’m not ready to return to Neo, to deal with Destruction. Why does his ring feel so *frozen*?

Slowly, stepping over the frost quills gathering around the bed, I approach Thanatos from behind. More than ever, I am drawn to him, tempted to this specter of my soul. As if Neo is slipping away like that ‘Hope’ is flying away like the Poe poem Death and I share. As if Neo’s lovely, dark, and deep evanesces before the throne of Thanatos. I thread my brows low, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. What has this Prince done to me?

When I touch the robes at his back, sliding them down his spine, Thanatos tears around and seizes my wrist just like...like *Neo*! My chest hitches. All the butterflies in my belly somersault. He blinks, betraying himself before that hand retreats.

Instead, he lifts his fingers to my jawline to trace frost patterns along the skin and warns me, “Do *not* touch me.”

I arch my neck. While glaring at him, my Halo light responds to the rising heat of my anger. It careens from my chest to shoot darts right at his hand, nipping at his skin and pointing out his hypocrisy. With a shake of his head, Thanatos removes his hand, flexing his fingers. “That’s different.”

“Why? You touch me *all* the time!” I protest, curling my hand around my lower back, hiding the clenched fist.

“But never feel.”

Oh, Saints!

I gasp. Knees weakening, I close the distance between us. Golden streams

fly from my heart, forming three-stranded ropes to weave around him and draw him closer to me. Gazing up at his face, at his snow-flower skin, at his hair dark as Nevermore ravens, at his gold galaxy dream within nebulous haze dream eyes, I ever so carefully raise my hand. It trembles when I feather my fingers across his cheek, when I settle my palm there like a caress to his soul, igniting all his silver veins to the surface. Like threads of moonlight. He's consuming me with wonder. Tears glisten in my eyes.

"Death cannot *feel*?"

Thanatos captures my hand, his eyes offering me a glimmer of those stars, just a luminary...like a floating lantern hovering inside his dilated pupils. "Only when *you* touch me."

"Why?" But I already know. It was the night he bit me, the night he staked his claim to my soul and bound his Reaper to me like a dark halo.

"The oath works differently in the Soul Plane," Thanatos points out, cupping my hand and coaxing my fingers to his lips so he may frost-kiss their tips. "Whenever you cry Noralice, Elysia, it triggers the same oath power of the blood bond because Noralice is your greatest power. Just as Neo cannot touch you in any physical way in the real world, so I cannot *feel* you in the Soul Plane."

"Unless I touch you..." I stand on my tiptoes, arching my neck, lips parting, desire whetting my tongue. But I could never hope to reach his mouth without him tilting to welcome my lips.

"You brokered the oath," breathes Thanatos, skimming his brow against mine, eyes voyaging to my lips to betray his desire. I know he wants this as much as I, but he's holding back. "*You* hold the most power."

"So, I could destroy this mark like you destroyed yours?" I sweep aside my curls and tap the back of my neck. Thanatos blinks, nods, but his eyes fall as if disappointed. So, I bristle and step back, brows threading low, incensed by his hypocrisy. "I don't like being owned, Natos."

Shaking his head, Thanatos steps toward me again, eyes dilating to unleash the fury of those stars and a voice like scythe blades. "You. Are. Not. My. Property. Elysia."

Instantly, my eyes fly open wide. My hands rush to cover my mouth. He wasn't there when I pronounced those words to Neo. How does he know? How could he possibly know?

Stalking back to him, I slide my hand to the back of his neck, where I dig my fingers into the scar and the brand, and demand, "How did you do it,

Natos? How did you rid yourself of the mark? How did you have the power to do it?” I demand, needing something from him. I need a glimmer of truth from beyond the Reaper he wears.

Every last constellation awakens in his eyes. Oh, Saints! My very core ignites and burns and melts before him when he reveals, “I took yours!” Thanatos screams rosebuds of frost onto my cheeks, causing me to flinch. But his hand moors around my back until he’s stabbing his ice along my spine until I’m arched, soul form thrust firmly against him. Golden heat meeting shades and ice. “Now, you know. The crack in your Halo is because of *me*! When you first came into my Tower and stole the ghoul, when you returned and gave me your hair and Noralice, when you proclaimed your blessing of value, when I staked a claim on your soul, no matter that it was weaker than Destruction’s, I knew you were the price to pay to save my damned soul! And now—” his entire universe pins mine to the very floor, eyes rooting upon mine and paralyzing me with terror, “—you’ll damn your very soul if you give me your tooth, your tear, your flesh, and your blood. So, don’t, Elysia. Return to my brother and fulfill your true purpose!”

I slam my mouth against his in a cruel, merciless, punishing kiss. Punishing both of us because Death is the sweetest taste of all my serendipitous fantasies. Of starlight. Of a bed of dead rose petals and frost buds to cover my skin. Of a bitter web of chills patterning into my sex. And all dreams within dreams. Rapid fire spirals in my blood, igniting my pulse to race. Heartbeat raging out of control, I punish myself because I should have known better than to tempt Death as an ally.

With that last kiss cavorting through my system, Thanatos launches me back through the fabric of the Soul Plane, back into Neo’s room. It’s well after midnight, but the sun has not risen.

Neo and the harem girls have passed out in his bed with only an Elysia-shaped gap on the far side for me. I touch my lips because all I taste is Thanatos’ kiss. All I feel is the lingering echo of his frost prickling my spine. With the weight of his confession as heavy as a graveyard on my shoulders, understanding he was right all this time—that I should run from him and that he would pursue me to the very ends of the Soul Plane, to Limbo itself—I make my way toward the corner table, grip the lip of the venom-laced wine bottle, and tip all its contents back in three long draughts. I’m not strong enough to face these emotions or my whirling thoughts tonight.

Halo glitter hums along my skin, buzzing like bees. Ignoring the naked

bodies off to my right and the cold hurt pressing on my heart, I pass out face first onto that bed while Neo's shades wrap around me and soothe me to sleep.

## CHAPTER 16



## “IF YOU’D BE SO KIND...I BELIEVE I JUST SHATTERED MY SECOND WIFE’S CHART.”

**A**rrayed in splendor and glory, I arrive in the Commons. My Halo practically rattles my ribcage from my nerves. The deep heart neckline proudly exhibits my abundant cleavage and the upper slopes of my breasts, which are decorated in gold Court rose designs. The gold accents continue along the scarlet bodice to my waist but don’t detract from the rest of the gown hugging my figure and showcasing every relentless curve.

“Hot damn!” Kitty fawns over me at the staircase base, sliding her hands along the blood-red sleeves from my wrists up to where they end near my bustline, fiddling with the gold vines adorning the naked upper arm skin. At my hips, the fabric attachments curl out like multi-layered wings of fire. “Oh, I’m taking my twerk now!” Kitty unashamedly grinds against me while Quillion approaches with an unusual but understandable solemn gaze.

All I can offer him is a shake of my head. No opportunity to talk to Neo last night, not when he far preferred to escape. Even now, his and Lux’s voices plague the breakfast hall. Her soprano laughter sparkles as dancing stars.

After informing Kitty and Quillion about my little brush with Destruction, or rather my hands brushing his thighs last night, I raise my voice loud enough, “Perhaps I should be known as the Princess of Destruction since I destroyed Neo’s little love nest last night! Gives a whole new meaning to *limp dick*.”

Proud when I overhear his growl from the next room, I slide one hand along my waist to my hips and wink at Kitty. She fades, posturing to become Nita, who leans over to kiss each of my cheeks, then flutters a hand toward the breakfast hall. “Come along, sweet girl. Don’t let Neo’s moping deter you

from a wonderful breakfast. I took the liberty of ordering something more celebratory for you.”

When I enter the hall alongside my allies, I automatically bristle at the sight of Lux sitting on Neo’s lap. Her arms wrap around his neck as he coos in her ear and cups her backside, rubbing.

“Honestly, Neo...” Nita sweeps into the opposite end of the table’s chair across from him and tilts her head, moon-spun eyes targeting his to declare, “...the rest of us would prefer to eat breakfast.”

“Who says I’m not?” he hums a low growl without removing his eyes off Lux who giggles as he mouths her neck, teeth nipping, fangs slightly pricking so he may suck the drops.

I roll my eyes and scoot into my chair between Nita and Quillion. “Because referring to your significant other as a meal is the epitome of romance.” I spin my breakfast knife around like a twirling clock ticker, enjoying the way it tingles against the other instruments.

“Chomp, chomp, second-wife,” Neo retorts in his quicksilver tongue, parading the full length of his fangs at me. I stop spinning the knife so the tip points directly at the fucker.

“Nita...” I say sweetly and prop my elbows on the table, cradling my chin on the backs of my folded hands. She leans in, rolling her upper lip back to mirror my eagerness for my future emasculating check of her brother. The elite veins of her neck practically purr to the surface, bestial and predatory. Batting my lashes, I beseech her advice, “Tell me, hydras can obviously grow back certain appendages, but dragons cannot, am I right?”

Preferring to stay out of the drama as always, Quillion opens his digital newspaper and combs through the celebrity headlines.

Nita grins to one side of her mouth and pivots her head to Neo, whose dark skin pales from my implied threat, truly wondering if I could and would carry out such a threat. “No, they cannot. Nor can Neo create what another has destroyed. So, perhaps he will hold his tongue in the future instead of engaging in a battle of wits with a worthier opponent. But I have to say, if Lux was such a delicacy, I would automatically conclude: *casu marzu*.”

*Good one, Nita!* I relay through my telepathic power.

Quillion signals his approval with a mere thumbs up.

Neo’s growl rumbles in his throat before puffing out his nostrils. Lux just shrugs, ignorant regarding Nita’s reflection on the sheep-milk pecorino that is formed by cracking open the cheese, allowing a hoard of flies to eat, poop,

and lay their eggs in the cheese that later hatch, giving birth to maggots one eats along with the delicacy.

“At least I’m not a border whore, isn’t that right, Neo?” Lux whispers against his ear, but I hear it all the same. His hand travels to the space between her thighs, snarling his approval while her faux halo erupts into a circlet of stars to dance like a crown upon her lifeless, white strands. Threads of annoyance pulse inside me.

Incensed, Nita stands, growing claws, lengthening her fangs, and sending the approaching staff to scramble back into the kitchen. Quillion nudges his fedora down over his eyes, fiddling with his ascot. Lux only curls into Neo more, having the audacity to dismiss Nita, which pisses me off far more than her “whore” degradation!

“That’s fine, Nita,” I stop her before she can launch herself at Lux. Instead, I reach for my tea nearby. Inching it close to my bust so the steam curls along my cleavage between my ample bosom, I add, “If she ever works up the gumption to call me a whore to my face, my Everblood hands are aching to try out a few new hairstyles for her. Though I suppose my hand is not the only one that is *aching* this morning,” I bring the conversation back full circle to Neo’s limp dick.

Finally, Quillion cuts into the conversation by fanning himself with the fedora and interjecting with a view of the charts, “Nita, I was thinking a solid ten for the casu marzu?”

Nita lowers herself back into her chair while I lift my cup to sip my tea, grin spreading when she retorts, “Quillion, you may tally any and all my points to Elysia. Team Nelysia.” Confused, I lift a brow, but Nita winks at me, pauses to raise her blood-filled teacup, and clarifies, “I’m always first, sweet angel.”

With no debate but a lightness in my chest at our comradery, I shrug in agreement. Upon Lux descending to Neo’s chest so her tongue may stroke him, I notice a hint of black on the back of her neck. Pinching my eyes, I eye the mark inked there through her pale strands. After my last excursion at the border, I’d taken a moment or two to look up the official border seal. Why would Lux have one on the back of her neck or anywhere?

Neo sucks a breath through his teeth. “I suppose you’ll be running along to the border after breakfast?”

The servants emerge to deliver the food. Nita’s surprise is an angel cake fruit and cream trifle in all the colors of the rainbow. Exuberant, I share with

her and Quillion.

Dipping my spoon into the cream, I swirl it around and scoop up a succulent strawberry, allowing it to hover near my rubbed lips. “I’m such a whore for the people, don’t you know? Oh, that’s right, you don’t. You don’t hear the children crying when they’re ripped from their mothers.” I continue, unhindered by the muscle ticking in his cheek, the hardening of his jaw. I press my determined lips and bolster myself. “You don’t see their emaciated cheeks and the way they all band together and share what little they have.”

When Neo gets up and deposits Lux into his chair, I stand, too. I drop my spoon, grip the backs of my chair, and swing around to match his stride. Nita doesn’t interfere but merely drums her fingers on the table as Neo and I move towards one another. My pulse thrashes in my throat as I spit, “You’re too busy licking your wounds, fucking, and prioritizing your Court to care about the sufferings of babies, of children, of whole families living in their own bile and blood like animals while the highest authority in the land rules over them as the greatest animal.”

We stop inches from one another, but I don’t cow—not once within the vast tower of his shadow. I don’t lower my chin when he grips the wedding ring, fist stationing between my breasts. No, I thrust my regal chin up and deadpan. His eyes close as the Triumvirate oath burns his flesh with holy fire, reminding him that I, and I alone, am the keeper of his soul. I can rub salt in his wounds faster than he can lick them.

Finally, he lets go of the ring and collars my throat with his hand, rumbling, “You know *nothing* of my priorities. I cleared Rook Idrys, the finest blood seer in the land, to mass produce the treatment Quillion designed, but due to your insolence, I will clear the order and spread the word that it was the fault of the Angel Bride.”

A squeak of a moan escapes my throat. “Neo, no!”

Nita rushes to her feet, Quillion stands, and Lux drapes herself across the edge of the chair, languidly spreading her legs, a glimmer of a smile on her manipulative, hussy lips.

With a storm raging in my veins, I clutch my stomach to stem the nausea while pitting my eyes against Neo. He doesn’t give way, squeezing my throat and causing it to constrict. “You think they love you? They will bring you to your knees. And it will be my pleasure to lift you *higher* before taking you to my bed. Quillion, if you’d be so kind...I believe I just shattered my second wife’s chart.”

Quillion bows his head low, but not even he can remain out of the conflict this time. “My Lord Prince...” he still brings his respect, his honor in the face of Neo’s debasement, “you are my oldest and greatest friend. Please do not punish the people. More importantly, please do not punish Elysia. You should know better than to try and punish her and of the *substitutionary* measures that may arise.”

Neo bares his fangs from his friend’s sting as if he’s hurling some object at Quillion’s head. Except this time, it’s worse...so much worse.

Neo drags his gaze back to mine. *A mask, a mask, a mask*, I repeat with my spine prickling. This is not my Neo. This is not his new heart. If this were truly Neo, I wouldn’t have a second’s hesitation about running from him. I would climb down the Tower all over again and live inside that border every day until I became one of them. But I put my trust in the Goddess, in the prophecy, and I put my trust in how I burned away his mask, formed a new heart for him, and tore his soul from Death. I trust that our bond is the key.

*Our bond...*I slip into his mind, discovering the chinks in his fortress. I tiptoe inside, creeping into his shades. Those old friends surround me. His flames seductively twirl around my body. I remind him of the silver keys, of that night he sought me out, knocked on the windows of my soul, and vowed to understand my trauma.

I show him that night, presenting *Noralice* like an offering when he cocooned my whole form within the shelter of his vampire wings, so I felt safe. That night, I bared my body and mind and spirit to him before he tucked me into his bed, told me I wore the first piece of the Grail, and then bowed as my prostrate servant to lick my fire blossom into blind rapture.

As soon as I’ve imparted the last of my vision, Neo’s destructive Dragon claws dive into my flesh inside our bond. An echo of the pain surges within me because it’s all a mental struggle. Still, I feel my chest pitch as he raises me higher and higher before chucking me out of the tallest tower of his mind. I scream inside our bond after he catapults me from his mind. He reinforces his fortress, raises the drawbridge. The next moment, he shoves my body hard to the floor.

“You will regret that lie, second wife.” He flares his nostrils but then casts his gaze to his blood bishop. Tears shimmer in my eyes as I gaze at him through my curls eclipsing my face. He stabs a finger at Quillion. “Out of respect for our friendship, I will grant you the staff you desire to administer care to the sick. But not the treatment. Find a cure, Quillion. You’ve got till

Valentine's Day.”

Two weeks. So little time.

Neo storms out of the breakfast hall, and I tremble in his wake. Nita and Quillion don't move toward me, but Lux does. As if she's gone from ice to flames, her hands settle on the backs of mine. I flinch, but she closes her palms around my wrists, raises me from the floor, and touches her lips to mine, solidifying a promise, “I am sorry, Elysia. I truly don't wish things to be like this. After Court today, I will try and convince him to administer the treatment. I vow to you that.”

“Don't make vows when you are but a fly in her ointment,” Nita defends me, wrinkling her nose and hissing.

Sighing, I decide to offer Lux a kernel of faith. It doesn't mean she deserves my trust. Faith is all I have when I'm getting nowhere in this temptation game with Neo. Whatever power Lux holds over him rivals mine, as if her claim on his heart is greater than mine on his soul. I clutch my wedding ring as she departs in a flurry of silver stardust and white tresses.

Then, I collapse onto Nita's chest and weep.



WHEN I ARRIVE at the border, prepared to stay until nightfall as usual, I encounter my first resistance from Rook Idrys, who blocks my path with his knights as soon as Quillion and I emerge from the carriage. The demon mares huff and puff embers behind us, flicking their fiery manes.

Rook Idrys is much the same as he was in Court the day Neo took his wings. A dark, abrasive beard matches his thick, heavy brows, deep midnight blue robes, and ostentatious feathered cap—far poorer tastes compared to Quillion and his sharp embroidered waistcoat, ascot, and fedora. Only, Idrys' flesh also bears thousands of scarred lacerations all over his body. That must have been something else Neo added—hundreds of scythe cuts. No, thousands, perhaps even a million. Strange, considering a vampire could easily arrange for their healing...unless that is forbidden. As if he is proud to wear the Prince's near death by a million cuts compared to Quillion, who does not share his trauma, does not use it as a weapon.

Approaching me in a strutting sort of saunter, Idrys extends his cold and clammy hand that feels when he welcomes me from the carriage, brushes his lips across my knuckles, and tilts his chin so low, his cap feather pitches against my face, reminding me of that abrasive beard. “Good morning, Princess. The last time I saw you, Father’s hand roamed your body without any interference from his son.”

Hmm...so that is how the rook cares to play. Undoubtedly, word has spread of Neo’s discontent with me. I know the laws of the land. If any vampire survives the Prince’s punishment as Rook Idrys has, that vampire is granted immunity and means to do whatever he pleases. And with the Prince’s newly granted authority, it’s little wonder the vampire pleasures in baiting Destruction’s bride.

The heat of contempt churns in my belly, but I wave my hand in dismissal and scoff in a formal but sovereign and sparkly voice, “Good morning, Rook Idrys. The last time I saw you, you were screaming before the entire Court with your bloodied wings’ stumps bared.” Idrys snarls, tugging on my knuckles, eyes drifting lower to ogle the high slopes of my breasts. Someday, I intend on feeding him those eyeballs. And I’d need only one cut. Okay, maybe two.

Despite my worthy quip, Quillion slides a protective hand along my back and smiles pleasantly up at the dastardly rook. “Good morning, Rook Idrys. Though the morning’s adjective can be debated, now that greetings are dispensed with, may I ask what the meaning of this is, *Rook*?” he concludes with the word as if keenly aware that Idrys’ authority is higher than his on an official level but not a personal one.

“The Prince gave strict orders that his *second wife* may not be permitted beyond the Iron Walls,” responds Idrys, clutching his elbows.

The fuck?

“Surely with my permission as her escort—” begins Quillion, his fingers curling at my back, indicating his attempt to try.

“It is far too dangerous for a young woman to mingle with the stock...” Idrys croons down at me, that licentious gaze roaming to add, “...not when her first duty is to attend the Prince in his quarters. And to warm his bed.”

“As opposed to *wetting* it each night like he did the floor the last time at Court,” I taunt Idrys with a hiss but also know when Neo has checked me. Even now, his presence prods my mind, poking my barriers as if to give himself an arrogant mark.

*Supercilious ass*, I hurl the insult at him before slamming all my mental borders, overhearing his fading maniacal laughter.

After Idrys gripes at my affront, he gestures to Quillion. “My knights will escort you to the quarantined zone so you may continue your studies on determining a cure. On the Prince’s orders, half a dozen nurses and two doctors will join you.”

I huff because it’s less than a tenth of the staff necessary to attend that many people, all those families. Idrys’ eyes slither across my body in full intention of what he has in mind when he informs Quillion, “I will be more than happy to escort the Prince’s *second*-wife back to the Court if she so desires,” he hints, eyes wolfish and eager for plunder.

“Pass,” I say without equivocation and kiss Quillion’s cheek, reassuring him I’d be fine. He balks a little, but I ruffle his ascot and tap his nose, “Stop your fussing, you flouncy old fossil. Give my best to Jes. Bride Lys *Spirit* will be just fine,” I hint with my faux title and hope he picks up on it.

As I climb into the carriage and direct the driver to take the high route just as Neo once did with me, I ruminate on the Prince’s orders. He said I was not permitted beyond the Iron Walls. He never said anything about going *under* them. I take a deep breath, proud of myself before I consider the underground grotto, Neo’s Soul Pool.

If I can’t help the people afflicted by the Scourge, I’ll go to the Spirit Realm and determine if I may find the host: this multiplicitous vampire. Neo’s grotto is the perfect doorway.

I grip onto the side of the coach, my determined muscles preparing themselves. I’ll have to concentrate more than ever on phasing there. Thanks to some additional preparation, I change out of my fire gown and into a battle outfit of thick leather-armored leggings, a corset-bodice tunic, and sturdy boots. A knotted bun completes my ensemble.

Upon exiting the carriage to the path flanked by iron trees, I dismiss the coach and travel to the scenic overlook. My flaming gown skirts stir the blanket of ash. Despite the cinders, my blood warms from a little adrenaline rush. The overlook offers a sweeping expanse of the Tenth Court with its three mega-towers and nine surrounding castles with their accompanying towns, the highways that pass blood pawn manors and countless human blood farms, and the causeways leading to the Iron Walls.

Hands fisted at my sides, I suck in breath after breath. I remember what lies in that Spirit Realm: the playground of Chasm monsters swarming with



gruesome tree portals of teeth, bones, and hair clinging to the black bark. Hordes of ghouls, the Fallen, demons, the forest playing tricks upon me, and if I'm lucky...a multiplicitous vampire who may just be the host key to this Scourge.

After a moment's pause to close my eyes, I squint, facing the Iron Walls. I hone my vampire vision and scan the recesses of those mountains, beckoning to my phasing Halo power. For a few minutes, I concentrate and practice because I can't afford to make mistakes. Can't afford to end up inside the mountain rock instead of the grotto.

Channeling my power, I recall the emotions of those moments when Neo brought me to his lovely, dark, and deep. The elation from finding the Altar, from his Dragon saving me, but the inner turmoil of deep anguish from a little girl's boy until he restored what he'd destroyed before my very eyes. More elation followed. Reverence soon after when I restored her captured soul to their windows. It was the first time I knew I truly loved him...after I'd gifted him a brand-new heart.

Halo fluttering in my chest and branching its essence through the veil of reality and matter, I seek the energy of those souls. I seek the bond Neo and I shared of our single night as one flesh, though I can't imagine our one flesh uniting now. Despite this faux heart, despite his missing memories, he doesn't deserve my bed flesh. He doesn't deserve my heart. He doesn't deserve anything for adopting this patriarchal, monarchial mask that he's sealed onto his face. Can we ever hope to restore our bond?

Once I sense the brush of that energy, like a live wire to feed my arteries and slingshot right into my Halo, I clutch onto it as if it's a tether. I cinch my power tight around it and teleport through that tether like it's a trail of stardust.

Within moments, I'm panting and gasping, hearing the rushing of my breath loud enough to overlap the steady flow of all the waterfalls around me. Slowing my breath and the rapid beat of my heart, I turn to behold all those lonely souls in the grotto pool. Woken for the first time in months, the wispy souls float to the surface.

And all I can think to say is, "I'm sorry..."

## CHAPTER 17

**“TO THE SCOURGE’S LAIR, YOU  
ASKED TO GO...CAREFUL,  
HONEY SWEET, AND DON’T LET  
IT INFECT YOUR SOUL!”**

**M**y lungs grow thin as the air grows thick with the presence of the dead. A deathly shiver crawls along my skin from Jack Frost as I embark into the playground for Chasm escapees. Can Thanatos sense me here where the boundaries between worlds are looser, the fabric of reality shredded? One thing is certain: he won’t summon me any time soon, nor will I invoke my Noralice. As soon as he revealed his secret, he burned whatever bridge between us that was still in construction.

I am on my own.

With my boots crunching on bone smithereens, I press on, senses heightened to every cracking twig, to how the wind batters my flesh, numbing me to the core. Beneath my skin, frost shards breed while cold ash swirls in my stomach. My chest is a dark hollow of heartbreak and pandemonium to mirror these woods and all recent events. Off to the west is the miles-long iron anaconda wall.

I head toward the tent city but take it slow at first, testing this cursed territory, picking my way through the occasional ribcage of a ghoul, piles of bones picked clean, shreds of vampire wings, and even Fallen blood. Bone-deep shivers curdle in my body at the sight of teeth lodged in the trees. Whenever I find Fallen blood, I make a hasty retreat. Just as I do with the Underground, I cover myself in bone powder to help shroud my scent, though I suppose it won’t do much good in this case.

The monsters always sniff my blood.

In the distance, a shrill scream invades the air, followed by a gurgle. Death gnaws on the back of my neck as everything screams inside me: *run and hide and never look back*. I enter a small clearing with nothing but moss

and a few boulders around me. Severe Déjà vu triggers my spine, reminding me of...no, I refuse to think of Neo and the time he saved me from the Fallen.

How am I supposed to find one demon vampire in these woods that are hundreds of acres in mass, especially when the fabric of reality is thinner here? Just as it is in the Chasm—which is why the Soul Plane holds a mirrored Chasm. I imagine that if he desired, Thanatos could speak to me here just as inside the portal, but I won't give him another moment of my time. Not when he was playing the long game all along, tempting me for my tooth, my tear, my flesh, my...blood. I rub my chilled arms, refusing to shed a tear on behalf of him, either of them. Neo is a whole other battlefield, but at least I am well-equipped to handle his terrain with Nita and Quillion as my allies. I can't count on Thanatos anymore.

Behind me, the flapping of wings alerts me, triggering my Halo light. When I strike, it's a holy fire stake that I ram straight into the ghoul's chest, silencing its howl to a gurgle. Flicking my wrist up, I shred that fiery stake through its decrepit rib cage all the way down to its pelvis. Blood splatters me as I kick its deformed corpse to the ground. I say no prayers.

Not even when a dozen ghouls swoop into the clearing, knocking against tree branches, some plummeting to the ground, rolling inches to my feet. Adrenaline rocketing into my blood, I shoot stakes at any that fly too close, piling their festering corpses like a mushroom circle around me. Now, the remaining few get wise. They hover in the air, huddling together, crouching. Their shrunken heads remind me of volcanic scars, wings thinner than tattered tissue paper.

Smirking to one side, I delve deep into my heart and acquire several more gold stakes, lethal points sparking. "Bring your pretty wings to me, bogies!" I sing-song, imitating both brothers.

Wicked grin parading in the night, I spin around, dancing into a low, savage crouch when all the ghouls attack. Waiting until the last second to behold the cavernous depths of their missing windowed eyes, I launch the stakes and arrow them into the ghouls' hearts. Blood spurts. Shrieks pierce the air combining with the sound of their collective bodies toppling back to earth.

I dive into a roll to escape. But I collide with another ghoul that has advanced from deeper into the woods. My chest hitches, heart, skipping whole beats. It opens its mouth in a shrill, raucous scream to bleed my ears—

then lunges to sink its gory, chipped teeth into my flesh. With both hands, I rear the stake I've gripped up and up until I drive it right into its mouth. Black blood spews onto my chest as I thrash, gnashing my teeth at its screams. Burrowing the stake in, I thrust my righteous fire to travel in a tributary until I sever the brain stem. The ghoul twitches and falls.

Ugh, almost worse than the time I had to drain the ghoul's canal in Neo's suite.

"Little angel birthed from heaven...sweet Halo in need of protection."

Shiiiiit.

Definitely worse. I groan, throwing my head back to mark the upside-down demon/vampire/satyr and his buzzing swarm of bees while I shove the ghoul carcass off of me. "Oh, holy foremothers, not you again!"

Scrambling to my feet, I brandish more Halo stakes. But countless more ghouls gather closer to the clearing. I swing my head between them all, prepared to unleash a mighty storm of stakes, whips, chains, and even scythes. Except...the ghouls skirt the edges of the trees. They hover. They don't cross into the mossy territory.

"Oh, hell." My heart rams against my rib cage when I realize why. I throw my gaze back to Pan, who slowly tilts his diamond-shaped face to the side, bees buzzing around his trinity-set of horns. The ghouls won't come anywhere near him.

"Soul Eater hunting this pure-soul delight...we could easily carry her to his never-ending bite."

Sharp fear slashes into me. I stiffen. Curling my lip back, I summon my flaming whips, daring him to try.

Instead, Pan's hoodless eyes shimmer like meteor fire, his lips pulling into a grinning, crooked seam—his long, keen fangs whetted when he snickers, "But we owe this little angel a boon...after she took our kiss and carried to Death our *honeymoon*." Oh! So, that is why he's not overwhelming me with a hint of that violent emotion as he did inside the Gates.

His bees frolic closer to my body, causing me to cringe. At the moment, fur covers his nether regions, but I know it wouldn't take him long, so I jerk back when he approaches me. And cringe from him flexing the brawn of his naked blackwood, iron-like chest. "Have no fear from me, star-blessed child...tempting the demons in the dark, so wild. I will lead you out of the Spirit kingdom...and see you safely to the Court of Destruction."

I shake my head but eye the surrounding area, more ghouls collecting,

seeming to breed. In the distance, a few of the Fallen stray closer. “I don’t need to be led out. I need to go further *in*.”

“Hum, hum, glowing girl of heart and soul...what could she possibly want in the Spirit Realm’s hole?” A couple of bees settle on my cheeks, wings teasing my skin, stingers poised but not sinking.

I smile, raising my chin, understanding why he is here. Might as well not waste the moment, so while answering, I vault my stakes into several ghoulish hearts and hear their bodies crunching behind me. “I seek a vampire with the power of multiplicity. A Scourge upon the innocent humans outside the Iron Walls.” I chuck a few more haloed stakes, thrilling at the sound of more gurgling. The bodies begin to stack like bloodied dominoes: my little dumping ground.

“To lead you to the Scourge’s lair will cost a price...but are you willing to pay, my little golden bird of paradise?” His member slowly prods from his furs, hinting at what he will do.

I bite my lower lip and grin. With my Halo glowing proud heat in my chest, I quip, “In your words, a riddle will suffice.”

He spreads his lips into a toothy grin. But I don’t drop my guard. I remember Pan’s tricks. How he cannot read my mind—except for that mere moment when I agree to his bargain and how he frames his riddles around whatever thought he’s read. All I consider is the direction I need to go. The Scourge’s lair.

*“I have cities but no houses*

*I have mountains, but no trees.*

*I have water, but no fish.”*

Unlike before, I don’t come to a split-second conclusion. It’s so simple, it shouldn’t be this difficult, but I blame it on these damned Spirit woods, on the demons of this forest inching closer to the circle, on the bees buzzing and interfering with my senses—even on Pan who scents my fear and moves closer to me. My father loved riddles, shared countless, but my human brain can’t be expected to remember *all* of them! My flesh is too weak after using so much power to defy the ghouls. My heart short-circuits. Pitch-black thunderclouds swirl in my mind. And I gasp, clutching my arms to my ailing stomach.

“Time’s up, little saint...but before you do faint...” Pan coos in my ear, rubbing his nose against my cheek, prodding me with his member and triggering a fresh burst of trauma pain at the back of my neck, but he

continues, “a kiss from your angel lips is all I desire...and to the demon’s lair I’ll take your Halo-fire.”

Fully prepared to swallow my pride, I lean in to turn my lips to Pan’s cheek. I swallow hard at the sight of those strong blackwood peaks. At the last second, his searing mouth crushes mine. I whimper as he forces my lips to open so he may taste me. His strong hand at my back bears the strength of an oak tree. I have no choice but to arch beneath his aged superiority. His fangs scrape my teeth, the inside of my lower lip, tongue swiping against mine. He tastes of a paradox of lust and panic, of lechery and hysteria. Of honey and madness.

I bite back a moan as his bees swarm around my head. A few sting my neck in tiny fang kisses. The kiss lasts all of a few seconds, but when he’s done, all my flesh feels swollen. Thankfully, no liquid gold drips down my thighs.

Pan touches his index finger to my lips, shushing me, “Sweet, sweet, sweet, honey Halo-Bearer...don’t fear, we shan’t ensnare her. Come into our arms, little saint...and to the vampire’s lair, we’ll carry you without complaint!”

Heaving a deep, gusting breath, I follow Pan’s voice. Inhaling deeply, I enter his arms and hold my air once his taloned fingers encircle my waist. Why am I not surprised that he shadow-wraiths us through the dark haze of the Spirit realm? No doubt, the fabric of the worlds does not confine him. Does time? I try not to breathe in his scent of sweet honey dripping from the hive, contrasting the violent iron of blood.

In that shadowy haze, held within Pan’s dark force with his lower furs nudging my legs, I ask, “He sent you, didn’t he?”

“Death, Death, we love him owing to our favor...though would have loved this angel to savor...” His tongue snakes into my ear, hissing what he would have done to me beyond just that steamy kiss. I bested him last time. After just a few stakes, am I already so weak? My pure blood seems thinner, gushing through my veins.

So, now I owe Thanatos another debt.

After another blink, Pan deposits me before a deep pit worn right into the very ground close to the Iron Walls. A raking wind, not cold but sulfuric, rakes against my face as I loom closer to stare inside the depths.

“To the Scourge’s lair, you asked to go...careful, honey sweet, and don’t let it infect your soul!”

Without another word, Pan shoves me inside, and I scream, I scream, I scream!



AFTER A FREEFALL OF A FEW SECONDS, I open my eyes to the ground approaching. A fate of broken bones awaits me. I slam my eyes shut. Imagining a hammock, a net, a cocoon, I unleash my Halo and catch myself inches from the ground. Warmth surrounds me. When I open my eyes, I discover my boy hovering inside a golden orb.

“Well!” I gasp, a little breathless. “That’s a new one.”

As soon as I diffuse the net, I drop into a pile of bones.

On all sides of me, the pit branches off into dozens of directions as if I’m in the hub of a wheel with many spoked paths. Containing any gasps that wish to arise because I should be used to dumping grounds by now, I swallow hard and form a fire lantern. I create a steady flaming candle burning inside to grant me direction. I kneel before each spoke path and grunt from the boot prints marking each territory, along with splotches of dried blood and bone powder.

Taking a shot in the proverbial dark, I commence down one of the paths to my right. Whatever Scourge vampire this is, it must be taking whatever it possibly can into its lair and devouring them; I discover trophies of ghoulish bones and portions of their shrunken heads, teeth, skull hair, nails, and bits of skin. The stench of the dead clots the air. When this path leads to nothing but an empty room no bigger than a closet of more bone spoils, I double back, not wanting to be stuck in this dead-end space.

I voyage down another path—only for this one to descend deeper into a lower pit. This time, I find a live trophy! I freeze in my tracks. It’s a widow demon. Demoness.

Wounded, near death—on her knees, pierced right through the chest. A chest that parades the skulls of her kills, the skulls of her past husbands—hence the name widow. A mass of Scourge venom forks out in a network to infect her once formidable chest and horns. Something twinges inside me. The venom gleams amber into the stitches lining her face. Widow demons are



notorious for peeling scaly skin and threading it to their faces. More organic trophies. When the demoness lifts clawed bony fingers toward me, her fiery eyes like kindled topaz blinking in a silent plea, pity wells up inside my heart. I purse my lips and chew on my inner cheek, conflicted.

Despite knowing how this may set me back and how dangerous widow demons are, something about her lures my Halo. And perhaps she may tell me more about this Scourge vampire. Perhaps enough that I may find the host, bind it with my tethers, drag it back to the Tenth Tower, and bring it to Quillion to deduce a cure. No more delays. Pitching my chest forward, I unleash my Halo currents, coursing them into her body to cleanse her of the amber venom. Unfortunately, my action also melts the skulls inside her chest chamber.

With no reservations, the widow-demoness crouches, opening her mouth to hiss a full mouth of fanged teeth at me. Startled, I leap back, flinching, preparing a Halo shield.

Her guttural voice announces, “You destroyed my skulls, shiny. But you help me live, so I will let you live.”

She rises to her full stance, a head taller than me, shoulders squaring. But I still mark her as she begins to pass.

“Where is the entrance to the Scourge?” I muster up the courage to ask before she can depart from the hollow room.

Again, she hisses, pausing. At first, I don’t believe she will tell me, but her topaz eyes blink again. They widen a moment later. “Follow the path back to the hub. It is there. Goodbye, shiny. I hope we don’t meet again.”

Without a thank you, the widow-demoness leaps onto all fours and hurdles away. Groaning because I’ve passed through the hub several times, I return and take a closer gander—even feel along the walls. But there’s nothing but the other paths, which all lead to dead ends bearing more skeletal remains.

Cursing that succubus of a widow-demoness, I project my Halo light, hoping to determine where on earth the Scourge’s innermost lair is. As soon as those shafts of light curve, as soon as my Halo dust seeps into the ground, prodding through the soil, I understand: I’ve been standing on top of it this whole time!

I stomp on the ground, on the bones. Shove them so deep in the ground. The thin soil gives way and takes my weight with it. Again, I reach for my Halo net while plummeting deeper than before. Bones clatter from my body,

scattering upon the stone floor around me like disruptive musical notes.

Once I raise my head, I smell it before I see *them*. Holy foremothers! *Oh, Goddess high, can't you hear your people cry?*

I stand and hurry toward the first body encased in amber: a teenage girl. Wreathed by black capillaries, humming with energy, the amber itself is warm, viscous, and thick to the touch, syrupy. It lashes a scorching, venomous warning: if I invade its territory, it will inject its Scourge inside me. I jerk my hand back, using my flames to erase the amber dripping on my skin.

Over a dozen bodies must be encased here: mothers, fathers, children. The whole area reminds me of a small courtroom with amber pillars and a great amber throne of spikes at its far end. Chills grip my spine. Who knows how much time I have left before the demon vampire returns?

Pursing my lips, I flick my gaze back to the amber-encased girl. Head bowed, her eyes are closed in sleep. Other than her unconsciousness, she is untouched...neck bereft of any marks. The Scourge vampire has preserved these for later ravenous feeding.

I'll be damned if I leave this lair without freeing them!

My palms turn cold and clammy with what I need to do. Without another thought, I plunge my hand into that sticky amber, careless of the black veins that rear up, threatened, closing in, prepared to needle into my skin, into my flesh, into my pure blood to protect its claim.

My claim is greater. Gritting my teeth, I declare, "They are not your *property!*"

Projecting my holy flames, pressing my determined lips together, and reinforcing all my muscles, I battle the Scourge capillaries. I force them to shrink before my light. The amber melts until its layers peel back like a flower to reveal the teenage girl's face. Breath heaving and cleaving, I reach deep within my heart, set my jaw, and shoot my heavenly beams into the encasement. Finally, it withers to an amber pool around my feet. Released, the girl falls right into my arms. A deep sigh releases from my throat.

She doesn't wake, so I lay her gently down, face the other amber-encased souls, roll up my sleeves, and get the fuck to work!



BY THE TIME I truly get winded, I've released all but one last soul. But unlike last time in the Father's Tower, I refuse to allow one child to escape my clutches. Sweat oozes off my body while gold blood careens from my eyes. My skin is flushed and reddened from my task. I'm sweating from head to toe. My worn limbs howl for me to stop. It's about an hour till nightfall, but I press on to free this final human.

A few others begin to wake, rousing the rest. I don't blame them for taking my exit: the golden ladder I'd embedded into the upper walls of the pit, leading to that spoked wheel hub. My inside joke of Jacob's ladder, even if it's a far cry from a stairway to heaven.

Now, my Halo dims, but I chant a thousand ragged breath-prayers. I clench my hand into a fist and punch it right into the amber. Black capillaries descend into my very flesh, seeking my pure blood. I cry out. It's needles splitting me open, sucking on my blood.

I scream, hissing wind through my nostrils at the burning, at the evil plague invading my nerves. Sucking courage through my teeth, I focus on the little angel inside—the boy who is no more than ten years old. The holy device in my heart short-circuits, waning. Now, I summon the host of heaven, charging starry constellations to grant me strength to finish this battle.

Combatting the monstrous pestilence that threatens to undo my Halo, I lurch through my clenched teeth, curls sweat-soaked to my skin, and scream, "Let him go!" But my power fades to nothing more than an ember spark. No!

A familiar hand lands on mine. It joins with mine, projecting deep inside that amber. Dumbfounded, I widen my eyes. Heartbeat hammering in my ears, I gaze up into the bewitching and lethal face of—

"Syn!" I gasp.

"Sometimes, one must fight venom with more venom, Princess." She winks and launches several spike serpents into the amber, nudging her bald head against my curls. "Sorry, I'm late. Harder for us lower demons to breach the Chasm borders into the Spirit Realm."

Backing up, I exhale, relieved to accept her aid. I marvel at her serpents attacking the black capillaries, biting down and devouring, causing more

amber casing to disintegrate and free the little boy inside. I catch him while Syn retrieves her serpents, rubbing their heads while they return to her shoulders and chest.

“Lower demoness, my ass!” I exclaim, causing her to grin accordingly. She’s the highest, in my opinion.

Spent, I collapse with the little, unconscious boy in my arms, cradling him like a precious treasure. A treasure! Ugh, I’m so stupid! X marks the spot. All along, I was seeking direction. The answer to Pan’s riddle: a map!

That buzzing bastard! I’ve seen plenty of trees on maps. Okay, forests, but what does it matter? I surrendered my kiss all due to a bloody *map*!

Syn reprieves me by gathering not just the little boy with her immeasurable strength but me into her arms. All the humans have already fled up my ladder. Now, it’s our turn.

Too astonished that we haven’t encountered the Scourge vampire, I lean into Syn’s considerable muscles, clenching my legs around her frame. She hauls us to the surface—out of that throne room, out of that pit, out of that darkness until all I can make out is the blood moon’s near half-circle.

As soon as we surface, and I hit the solid earth of the Spirit Realm, the dark woods might as well be heaven’s embrace compared to that desolate, amber pit. I mutter to Syn, “I seriously need a shower!”

## CHAPTER 18

# “NEO SET YOU UP, I KNOW. WHY DO YOU THINK I’M HERE?”

“C areful, my love.”

Startled, I shriek, jump, and crash against the back of the waterfall shower at Neo’s voice. Supercilious ass.

“You’ll rob everyone else in the Court O’ Nines of their hot water,” he adds while I groan and rinse the shampoo from my face. “If you love steam so much, I can help with that,” he hints, a wry smile in his voice.

I roll my eyes and comb my fingers through my hair. The shower is more than large enough for multiple people. Over the past few months of his absence, I’ve grown more comfortable with all the amenities of his private domain, including the accompanying bathroom—the size of a small suite with an arched walk-in shower lined with gold and crystal drop chandeliers and a balcony Jacuzzi that spills to midair, offering a scenic view of the Court O’ Nines castles.

“How long have you been standing there?” I snipe, not bothering to cut my shower short. Not when the stench of ghoulish blood, bone powder, and that reeking, stinking pit of Scourge venom and amber still infects my skin.

Through the transparent shower glass, a muscle ticks in Neo’s cheek as he cocks his head to the side and answers, “Long enough for my hand to get itchy.” His shades slip through the shower cracks and twirl around my legs.

“Perhaps I’ll stay in till it gets good and sore.”

With my own sly smirk, I turn to give him a splendid view of my front while reflecting on how women don’t magically turn into sex goddesses in the shower. Most days, we’re still preoccupied with scrubbing the same ass crack. But for once, I grab the soap bar to my left, channel my inner Aphrodite, and wash myself in soft, circular motions, beginning with my

neck and downward. My nipples harden as I rub the soap bar across the tender flesh of my belly, upon my mound recently waxed of its usual thick nest of dark curls. All my nerve endings overheat, but it's worth it to torture my *husband*. So, when I part my lips and dip that bar into my swollen folds, I thrill in the sight of Neo's elite veins igniting, his muscles tensing, and his pupils dilating upon me.

"I see your red sun has finished its final descent, Princess. Perhaps you could use some company."

As soon as he removes his robe, but thankfully not his breeches, though his substantial bulge is obvious, I stare him down with the steamy water streaming across my face.

"What's the matter, love?" Neo hugs his arms, stepping toward the shower, biceps rigid, hard as dark marble. "Cat got your tongue?"

Sardonic, I grin and swing my head to the side to retort. "No, but mine's about to get your ass. Love bite, Spitfire," I command.

Up till now, my hellcat's hidden under the settee, his tail subtly swinging back and forth, awaiting any order. After my order, he charges in one graceful pounce to sink his teeth right into Neo's rear breeches. The diversion grants me enough time to snatch my robe from the hook and shrug into it. Neo's rumbling howl behind me is so worth it. A flicker of a thrill twirls up my spine.

After tying the sash, I press my lips to a tight seam and turn to face him. "You think I would have been ignorant enough to come here without protec—"

I pause in mid-speech while flinging my wet curls from my neck and onto the back of the robe. Because Neo is wrestling with my hellcat, his full lips parted in an approving chuckle.

"I'll show you what's new, pussycat," Neo taunts, goading Spitfire till my hellcat charges, pounding his head into the Prince's chest.

At first, I step in to interfere until pausing because while Spitfire bats with his mighty paws, he's retracted much of his claws. Neo flexes his muscles as he battles my hellcat, working to pin the feline to the ground. Heat sparks in my chest, and I pinch my eyes, observing as Neo's chuckle turns to rumbling laughter to mingle with Spitfire's yipping growls. Huh, they're just tousling. That's...adorable.

I glide toward the trinity-pane mirror on the other side of the room, leaving the boys to play. Easing onto the gilded chair before the mirrors, I

reach for the diamonded brush and drag it through my sodden curls.

In the reflection, Neo scratches the top of Spitfire's head, then the underside of his neck, before he rises and approaches me from behind. I don't move but resume brushing my curls, eyeing his reflection—all too aware of that familiar, come-hither smolder, that seductive gait.

I flinch when he settles a hand on the back of my mine in a gentle offer to brush my hair. At first, my stomach churns with anxiety. But I heave a sigh and purse my lips, surrendering the item.

When his hand brushes one side, achingly tender, while he fingers the strands on the other, I suck in a deep breath and hold it. I hold back tears. He's combing it just like he used to when I took a rose bath. I try to shove down the warmth growing inside me, but the gold dust budding on my skin betrays me. If he keeps this up, the dust will turn to butterflies, especially with him half naked, displaying the grandeur of his muscular powerhouse, that dark tower of a neck primed with aroused silver veins. Not to mention his shades flirting with my body beneath the robe as they always do.

Oh, Saints! His eyes are dark, cool, and sensual—the same eyes when I shared Noralice with him.

“Where's Lux?” I wonder, flicking my gaze to his, noting his winter mist eyes don't stray from mine.

Neo's hands do not forsake my hair when he leans in and purrs close to my left ear, tempting, “Would it astound you to learn that perhaps I'd rather be fighting with you than fucking her?”

Oh, Goddess!

A few butterflies flutter along my skin, but I wince and scold my insides, evaporating them to gold vapors. *Don't melt, don't swoon, Elysia.* I force myself to breathe as the Prince chuckles and kisses my cheek, nose skimming my jaw close to my ear, scenting me. At least he doesn't tease or taunt me despite my responses.

“I heard a rumor about twenty missing humans from the border suddenly showing up.” He props his chin on my head, parting my curls from the back of my neck. “They shared a wild story about some demon locking them in a pit. But an angel warrior set them free so they could climb a ladder of light back to the land of the living.” Neo appraises my eyes in the mirror's reflection.

Tipping my head back, I flick my eyes to their ceilings to meet his stare. My chest hitches, heart murmuring at the sight of him. I chew on my lower



lip when his pupils dilate, and his nostrils flare.

“I thought you didn’t care about the border,” I test him and stand, crossing my arms over my chest to scrutinize him. Anything to get a barrier between us, to cage the Halo that’s on the verge of pouncing.

Neo shrugs and sets the brush down on the bathroom sink, leaning closer and planting one hand on the counter next to my body. More heat spreads lower from his tempting dominance. “Quillion and Nita can be quite persuasive when they launch an intervention. And after my sister’s right of substitution act, I decided it would be prudent to be *reasonable*.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I have dispatched a full crew of vampire health workers to the quarantined zone, officiated the mass production of Quillion’s treatment, and increased the tent city rations.”

“Neo!” I practically leap onto his body, throwing my arms around his chest, feeling him stiffen in surprise.

“Well, now!” His arms surround me a moment later, cradling me against his chest, words humming, appreciative, “I suppose I’ll have to be reasonable more often.”

*Wait...*a second later, I jerk myself from him, my eyes smoldering when I snap, brandishing a finger, “Wait, no, you don’t deserve special treatment when you should have done the right thing in the first place.” I lower my accusatory brows, tightening my body. “Any decent human being, especially a monarch, would have and should have done all that and more!”

Neo seizes my finger, jerking me forward and slipping a hand around my waist. My breath stalls as he proceeds to dip my finger into his mouth to suck. I hate the longing ache growing inside me when he nips the tip of my finger and informs me, “We both know I am no decent human being, Elysia. I am the Prince of Destruction. No better than a damned devil. The Dragon.” His hand strays from my finger to my wrist, thumbing his horned mark with the reminder.

My pulse flagellates my throat, and I shake my head in denial, even when he thrusts my wrist up, causing the robe sleeve to fall. “That’s not true, Neo. I’ve seen you without your masks. They’re your addictions. I know why you were forced to wear them in the first place.”

“Yes, Nita informed me of your interlude in her dungeon. Quite impressive. It’s no wonder she’s bonded with you to the extreme.” He rubs his lips across the inset of my wrist. My pulse flutters in response.

“I love—”

“Me too,” Neo agrees, and I cage a gasp at the repeat of our past that he does not remember. I’d swear a shooting star erupts inside my chest at the connection.

“You could have destroyed the whip, Neo,” I distract myself, pressuring him, reminding him of that day in Court. “You could have stopped everything. You have the highest power in all the land next to him.”

Neo groans, drops my wrists, and kneads his eyes. “When I made the blood oath with my Father, there were certain provisions in the contract. I had to rule according to the laws of the land, laws he transcribed. I have the power to *bend* such laws, which is why I added the Rite of Substitution. But if I *break* one of them, Nita returns to my Father. And he would have whipped her until there was nothing left, Elysia. He has even more reason to hurt me now.”

“Why?” I thread my suspicious fingers together. He releases his hand from my waist, picks up the decanter on the nearby table, and pours us each a glass.

“Because I married the Everblood and kept it a secret from him. Triumvirate or no.”

I lick my lips and nod, accepting the drink, sipping the traitorous wine so it lulls my body. Triggered, the Halo casts an ethereal glow about my form. More butterflies flutter to the surface of my flesh. Still, I test Neo more than I tempt him. “But can we agree that it never should have happened in the first place? That you shouldn’t have brought me into the Inner Circle?”

At first, I believe he’s going to object when he opens his mouth, neck muscles flexing, jaw steeling. But he doesn’t. Neo lowers his head, almost to where his chin touches his throat, swallowing. His anti-Adam’s apple rolls. In a deep, velvety voice, the Prince of Destruction tells me, “Yes, Elysia. We agree on that.”

It’s more than I hoped for. And I’ll settle for it...for now.

“But I am cashing in on our other bargain tonight...” Neo indicates, thumbing my robe.

I heave a sigh and cringe. “What will it be tonight, Neo? Leathers? Gold wings? Nipple clamps?” Um...why the fuck am I giving him ideas?

He cocks his head to the side with a deep, throaty chuckle. “We’ll get to that later. First...” He juts his thumb to the corner table, gesturing to the present he’d given me months ago. The camera.

“Hmm...sure you want to risk it?” I beam and move toward the table, cinching my hands around the device. “Your giant ego might break my lens.”

“Oh, you will not be shooting just me tonight, my love.”

I turn to the side, raising a brow, but all Neo offers is a feral grin like the cat Prince that ate the canary Princess.



“YOU’VE GOT to be kidding me!” are my first words when the elevator jolts to a stop right in front of Neo’s harem.

“Come...” Neo coaxes, practically humming in my ear with his hand draping across my nude back thanks to the dress I’d chosen: a more casual evening dress—far similar to a dressing gown, except with a heart-shaped neckline, capped sleeves, and royal amaranthine ruffles. “I’m most eager for your opinion on the theme.”

I roll my eyes but follow him out of the elevator with my camera tucked in my hands. “Let me guess...Season: *Seven Minutes In Heaven?*”

Neo brushes his lips across the side of my forehead in a feather-light kiss. Dammit. Gold dust breeds between my thighs, and I clench them tight, commanding my insides not to trickle liquid gold from his stamp of approval over my deduction, though it wasn’t that hard.

There is the backdrop of silver blood tech that projects a planetarium-like scene into the whole room; it reminds me of a throne room but more rotund with several pillars. On the left side, floor-to-ceiling-sized glass doors open to reveal a dais descending to a colossal bathing pool. In the center of the room, amid all the stars, hovers a glowing, silvery moon surrounded by mounds of fluffy clouds—all of which hold Neo’s harem girls in varying positions, posing for the camera crew.

As soon as he sweeps around the corner into the room, already dressed for the episode filming, and announces with arms spread wide, “Prince in the house, ladies!”, all the girls scream—shriller than banshees crossed with swallows.

I startle, eyes skyrocketing wide. They trip over themselves, shaking the cloud set, scattering glitter everywhere while scrambling for Neo, competing

in their launch to tackle him. Like they're Barbie teens at a Berberians show runway. But dressed in nothing but crystal lingerie and white angel wings.

Oh, for the love of the Goddess, I roll my eyes but decide to rein back my sighs. My ears, the back of my neck, and my cheeks all flush. I wish I could deny my skin tingling, especially my fingertips.

Remaining behind the pillar, I peek my head around the side to take a few candid shots as four sets of legs wrap around Neo. They send him sprawling to the floor, where he throws his head back, laughing. He cranes his neck to me, catches me photographing them, and puckers up his lips to blow me a kiss with a wink.

Under his gaze, I blush but don't know what heats me more: his response or the multiple girls showering him with kisses and even love bites. He settles his hand on a few of them, cupping at their waists, shoulders, hair, necks, and back, but never anywhere private. Holy foremothers, why am I acting like a jealous, love-starved teenager?

Pursing my lips, I study their ardor for him, how he rises to stand with two attaching themselves to each side of his hips, one tangling around his front, and another curving on his back.

"You've been gone so long, my Prince!" whines the one in front of him with long, blonde ringlets. She kisses both his cheeks.

"I'm quite sorry, Charity. As you know, I have two brides now." He inclines his head to me before facing her again, dipping his head toward her to reassure her, "But I will do better to make time for all my honey girls now that we'll be filming for the next two weeks."

Around them, the film crew shakes their heads and kneads their brows. The producer, a tall, lithe vampire with a dark chocolate braided crown, tips her head back with a groan. "My Lord Prince, how many times have I told you...*call first!* Look what you've done to my set!" The producer jabs a finger at the damaged clouds and the glitter shimmering like stardust all over the floor. I can't resist biting my lower lip around a soft giggle.

"My deepest apologies, Sarai. As I was the cause, let us see if I may repair it." Neo strays to the set with the four girls still coupled to him like spangled ticks while the rest cluster around him, begging for a turn. Even the girls from the Deep North, the Rosa Nix Court, seem to have settled in nicely. One even holds tight to Neo's back.

A spark of flames erupts between my thighs while the flush in my cheeks turns to a burn. It ebbs once someone taps on my shoulder, startling me.

“You’re the Angel Bride, aren’t you?”

I spin to the harem girl, instantly recognizing her. No, I may not have binge-watched episodes, unlike Mom, but Piper the Viper is an impossible harem girl to forget. A name she earned when she up and bit Hadley’s finger off after Hadley had the nerve to steal the necklace that belonged to Piper’s mother. Though all I saw was the clip, I had mad respect for her since it was the only possession she had from home after Court Mordere killed her whole family. She was also a harem girl Neo had brought to his room the night after he’d whipped Nita, the night I caused his limp dick.

“I need these to take pictures,” I alert her, fidgeting too much, swallowing even more. But I gesture to the camera. “I need my fingers for them.”

Piper laughs, tossing back her cinnamon brown waves and stalking toward me. The teardrop crystals dripping from the center of her bustier draw attention to her navel. “Don’t worry, Princess. As succulent as your fingers look, I’ll resist eating those particular delicacies. But it was the best moment of the whole damn show. Keeps all the other girls out of my hair. But you didn’t answer my question.” She hisses with a little lurch.

I smirk to one side and oblige her by stepping back against the pillar. “How do you know I’m not the other one?”

Piper slides her hands down her golden-brown skin, stationing one on her hips to deadpan, “Cause you’re not a slutty bitch.”

Oh, Saints, I like her!

Still, I feign innocence. “Um...?”

“You never show up in any of the celebrity news, but she’s always there, flaunting all her “woe is me, I’m a victim” scars.” Piper shrugs and gestures toward me, explaining, “Not to mention she comes down here to slum it with all us bitches. Like we need her charity or something.”

“I’m only here because—”

“Neo set you up, I know. Why do you think I’m here?” A sharp intake of breath flees my lungs. My thoughts scramble. Piper opens both her palms, then starts to fiddle with her crystal bustier, dipping her hand into the cup to adjust it. “Ugh...stupid, fucking bra. At least we get to keep it after filming. He’s sweet like that...even with all his pranks.”

Knowing the joke is lost on me, I lift one brow and swallow the jealous knot in my throat, questioning, “What pranks?”

“They film the episodes at a rapid breakneck speed. Something to do with Father’s demand. It gets damn exhausting. So, between supplementing us

with his venom, Neo pulls pranks. Totally harmless ones,” she assures me, flicking her gaze to me, “but it helps break up all the tension and brings us girls together. We got him once at the end of filming. Doused him in tomato juice, it was fucking epic! This time, we’re planning on stuffing his private screen room with a bunch of bearded dragons. But shh...” She winks at me.

Slowly leaning my head back until I’m far enough beyond the pillar to spy him, I discover filming has begun. On an erected platform draped in soft caresses of fog, Neo lies flat on his back while multiple harem girls dress his naked chest in golden feathers before showering him with kisses and love bites. He clutches a rose stem between his teeth, turns his head as if sensing my gaze, and flexes his muscles with a wink. I blush again and snap my head back up until I’m behind the pillar.

“Okay, you’ve got five minutes till I’m up. Make it count, Princess,” Piper acknowledges, crosses her arms over her chest, and taps her glass-slipped foot on the floor.

“Um...?” I choke, not quite understanding, and raise my camera instead to get a snapshot of her.

“Questions, Princess, questions.” Piper puts her hand on the top of my camera, rolling her eyes and smiling. “Neo said you’d have some questions. I’ll give you the *Gospel* truth, Angel Bride,” quips Piper, tapping her foot again.

At first, I swallow a lump in my throat, my mouth turning dry when she adjusts her bustier again. Oh, screw it, I’ll just roll with it. Shaking off my apprehension like glitter, I permit my eyes to roam across her, appreciating her curves and even the way she dips a finger back into her thong to lift it out of her crack, careless. Finally, I center my eyes on her smoky gray ones and ask, “Who’s the youngest girl here?”

“Charity. Fifteen, and no, Neo hasn’t slept with her.”

“Who has he slept with?” I shiver a little.

“During shooting? Any of us who are eighteen or older get some sensual touching. No full-blown sex, except for acting performance. Off shooting? Just what you saw here today with the girls gone wild for him. No sex.”

“Wait, what?” I recall the limp dick night, threading my brows low in suspicion.

Piper nudges her hip toward me. “He’ll get all blood drunk, Princess. But off shooting, he doesn’t sleep with us. Other than what you saw here, he doesn’t touch us...even if we want him to. And most of us *really* want him

to. That one night where you walked in on us...another setup.”

I lick my lips. “So, I gave him limp dick for nothing?”

“Oh, *nooooo* way, Princess. You set him straight in more ways than one. He was really low that night, but after you pulled your stunt, he ordered us a whole banquet with venom-spiced wine and told us to get some sleep. We never get to sleep in his bed, so that was pretty spectacular.” Piper glances around the pillar to check the time. “Two minutes.”

“Do any of you dislike the *Harem of Hades* show?”

Piper blinks. “Only when the episodes are rushed. But Neo takes care of us. And the show is a lot bigger than us.”

“You mean because of...?” I clamp my mouth shut before I can spill anything about Nita.

“The Father, yes,” confirms Piper, double-checking the time. “We know what happens if he comes back to Court. As long as we put on a really good *show* for him on screen and at the Court parties, he’s more likely to stay away and not do his whole reaping thing.”

“It’s still exploitation,” I say softly, my gaze dropping to my camera clutched in my hands.

“Well, excuse *you*, Miss. High and Mighty.” Piper snaps her fingers right in front of me to get my attention, and I immediately bend beneath her sharp eyes. “I’d rather take Lux and her dinky little gifts over your moral superiority. FYI: we get paid, we get protection to come and go as we please, we’re the talk of all the Court O’ Nines, and we get to be undercover sex workers to fool Neo’s bitch-ass dad. So, don’t you go sticking your nose down at us and thinking we’re all blood whores. We’re Harem bitches, and we run this mutha. Piper the Viper out!” She turns her back, smacking her ass behind her.

My jaw drops. “Piper!” I exclaim beyond the thickening in my throat—beyond humbled by her words. Before she can walk away, I offer her my apology...in the form of a challenge, “Who are we?” She pauses in mid-step and tilts her head over her shoulder to my words. I cover my grinning mouth with my fingertips to say, “Hope you still like me.”

Tossing her waves back, Piper chirps, giving me the finger, daring me on with a wave. “Beyonce. Thy game is weak.”

““If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.”,” I quote and lurch a little, touching my pinky to my lower lip in a goading gesture.

“Thatcher!” Piper responds with the feminist who penned the quote, raises her head high, and clenches her hands. ““I’m tough, ambitious, and I know exactly what I want. If that makes me a bitch, okay.”.” She saddles me with another empowering quote.

“Madonna, because I know how to bring my A-game.” I blow her a kiss and spin so my ruffled dress twirls.

Piper makes a motion of rolling up her sleeves, and as she does, the other harem girls gather around us. Piper dishes out her next quote, ““Words have power. TV has power. My pen has power.”” She pretends to give me a mic drop. “Perhaps you should try musical chairs, Princess.”

I laugh and squeeze my shoulders together, “Bitch please! Shonda Rimes. And I prefer cat and mouse. Because, after all, “women must learn to play the game as men do”, though I prefer to play a better one. Oh!” I mouth the word, “boom” and clap my hands, rubbing my palms together. A proud and playful heat stirs within me.

For the next few minutes, the camera crew turns the screens to Piper and me as we dance around each other, swapping feminist quotes. A couple times when I hesitate, she ups the ante by sucking on my fingers in a little warning threat while I launch a golden halo of stars over her head on my turn.

““Women, if the soul of the nation is to be saved, I believe you must become its soul.”,” taunts Piper with Corella Scott King, swinging her hair so it thwacks my cheek.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Neo hugging his elbows, appraising me as Piper waits for my retort. I decide to go back to an old standby, a very old standby. ““At her feet, he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet, he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.”

Reveling when Piper finally pauses and sighs, dropping her hands to the sides, I do a little twirl and let *my* hair thwack her this time before snatching up her fingers. Only to give her a fist bump and reveal, “Deborah. Badass Judge over a bunch of men who royally fucked up a whole country. She was celebrating the triumph of another badass woman who drove a tent peg through a general’s head and served him up like a piece of meat. Cause...” I shrug and lean in to kiss her cheek, finalizing, “...empowered women empower women.”

Neo begins a slow clap. All the other girls join in and flock around me, singing my praises. Piper salutes me and jabs her chin at Neo to say, “Prince, you bring this badass bitch back anytime.”



He offers a nod and moves toward me, claiming my waist and causing the other girls to back away. “Perhaps tomorrow...*after* I escort her to the border.”

Halo radiating from my chest, I turn to him and beam.

## CHAPTER 19

# “LOOKS LIKE WE WILL NEED TO CHOOSE A SAFE WORD. SHALL WE START TONIGHT?”

“You’ll really take me to the border tomorrow?” I muse softly, making my way toward the window so I may study the blood moon, a half moon. How strong is its cycle? How much does it impact Neo? I glance back at him, aware of the pang in my chest, the Halo twinkling upon my skin, and my walls splintering. In all these weeks, we’ve never been closer.

He remains closer to the bed, removing his filming garb and using his shades to erase the gold body paint and to heal the little love bite bruises from the harem girls. “I plan to take the morning off Court and join you. Quillion showed me the record of requests that you passed on to him. It was *revealing*. Rest assured, no more children will be removed from their parents. And I am taking due steps to ensure whatever families have been separated will be reunited.

“And despite my destroying the ones near death to put them out of their misery and prevent the spread of more infection, I have collected and separated each one’s ashes for potential restoration should you convince my damned brother to release their souls.”

Oh, Saints!

Every nerve ending in my body pulses with affection for the Prince I love. Spitfire nudges my palm, distracting me, so I take a moment to scratch my hellcat behind his pointed ears before offering him a few large slabs of fire-fish. I send him scrambling into my suite to follow his meal: a reward for his earlier obedient bite of Neo.

“Do you understand now, Elysia?” Neo advances toward me, cupping my shoulders from behind and murmuring against my curls. My breath hitches.

My heartbeat catapults inside my chest. “If I treat my harem girls with such care and attention, though they are a tool in my Father’s belt that I never desired to have thrust upon me, can you trust that I will treat you with even more regard and devotion as my *wife*?” The Prince’s fingers slip onto my neck to trail along my collarbone, where tendrils of star fire twist and twirl to meet those fingers.

I melt back into him, remembering the night I first shared my trauma... when his strong arms pinned my thrashing body down. When I’d panicked, he’d locked his leg around mine and held me until my tremors stopped. My dark fortress, not a war-hammer.

“Second wife,” I correct, using his own words against him but smiling fondly at his shades knitting around my dress. Just like they used to, they slip beneath the ruffled skirts to tempt me.

With a sigh, Neo forsakes my side and wanders to the corner table. At once, I feel the hollow invading my chest from his absence, prompting my Halo to dim at first before it strains against my rib cage. But I’m not strong enough to move toward him yet. He grips a bottle of venom-laced wine and pours each of us a goblet.

“Yes, Lux is my first wife,” he mentions. “If it eases your jealousy or greed or whatever violent emotions stir inside you, consider it a mere historical repercussion rather than a positional one. She is first because I married her in 1220.” He returns to my side and offers me a goblet.

My fingers brush along the chalice, clutching its familiar, warm heat. Neo coils his arm around mine, circling, and I hesitate before mirroring his action so we may both share a drink—as if it’s our first bridal taste. Neo’s pupils swell with the taste, eyes roaming down to my neck, no doubt imagining my blood in its place. Hope flutters in my stomach, competing with the tingling butterflies. Still, I test him.

“You were going to whip me, Neo,” I bring up the memory, shuddering, assessing his reaction as his arm rubs against mine. “Before your whole Court. Before Quillion and Nita.” No, I refuse to let it go. His regret is not enough for me.

Neo grits his teeth and downs the last of his wine, eyes burning to flaming blades. “I was a damned fool. And I am...eternally remorseful. I won’t ask for your forgiveness, my bride, but I will vow to you never again. I vow to you, Elysia: I will never raise my hand or a whip to you again in public or in private.”

To drive the matter home, Neo drags a fang against his palm, weeping his silver blood to me, offering me a new blood oath. A whimper loosens from my mouth. I take that vow without equivocation. But as he presses his hand to mine, as he folds his fingers down, Neo is quick to add with that beguiling smirk I love, “Never in punishment, Elysia. Only ever for pleasure, according to your desire. Tit for tat, angel.” He winks, and I remember the one night we spent together when I’d first trussed him up with my Halo whips.

“Perhaps.” I flush at the indication. A fleeting image passes through my mind—of his hand on my ample bottom, swathed in his flames to impart a burning pain before stroking it with his shades for a cooling pleasure. My fingers close around his just as he thrusts my arm to the side, brows bobbing up and down to my words. “Or perhaps, dear Prince, I’ll have you on your knees so hard until you beg to spread my legs and plant your masterful tongue between them.”

“There’s that whip-smart mouth I love.” Neo rubs a finger across my lower lip. Devious, I snap my teeth, just missing it while giving him an angelic beam as he retorts, “Rest assured, I’d give as well as I got and have you walking bow-legged for a week.”

I blush but measure his eyes for any manipulation. “Are you doing all this just to get in my pants?”

Those pupils dilate, steadfast upon mine, muscle in his cheek ticking in betrayal. “I won’t deny my desire to take you to bed, Elysia. But I made a promise to my sister. I could not deny what I saw that day in Court, what she did for you *and* what you did for *her*.”

“I didn’t—”

Neo touches his fingers to my mouth, cuts off my words, and lowers his voice to a deep, sultry warning, “*Elysia...*” He closes the distance between us until I’m pressed to his bare chest, his shadow enveloping me. Warm streams of Halo light consume me, triggering my heat to whet my orgasmic appetite.

But I can’t help but wonder, “Where is Lux, Neo?”

“If you must know, Lux has fallen ill. It’s nothing extreme, but I’m allowing her to rest and take her strength in anticipation of Valentine’s Day.”

I chew on my lower lip. “So, I’m just backup then.”

Neo rolls his eyes and captures my chin in his hand. “If I wanted backup, Elysia, I’d hire a troop of minstrels. I wanted you the moment you returned to my suite after your untimely disappearance and your tampering with my mind. I was far too furious with you, so I needed the retreat with Lux to settle

down.” He thumbs the front of my chin before tracing my mouth. “Whenever I would look upon you, I could not seem to rid myself of a paradox of *violent emotions*.”

I pin my eyes to his, but I don’t latch onto his words, especially when he narrows his eyes, blinking and shaking his head out to add, “But with the blood harvest moon approaching and due to your bond with my sister and Quillion, I am willing to put aside my anger and hurt as I hope you may.”

“What is the significance of the blood harvest moon?” I ask, noting how he raises the goblet with his other hand.

After finishing the wine, Neo lowers the goblet to the edge of his lower mouth to state, “It increases my appetite.”

Somehow, I manage to breathe while asking, “For blood?”

“For everything.” His eyes descend, voyaging across my throat and lower to my breasts.

“So, Lux has fallen ill...” I muse, earning Neo’s nod, and he pours another goblet of wine. “And the blood moon...” my voice is raspy when I probe, “How much?” I thumb the lip of the goblet, raising one brow, anticipating, my lungs shriveling.

“*Much*.” Neo grunts, and I tremble. “Come the harvest moon on Valentine’s Day, my full blood-thirst will be unleashed...along with every other craving. Every night leading up to it will build to that mania.” He downs his third glass, hardening his jaw before thrusting his hands around my waist and causing me to crash against his frame, upsetting my wine so it spills onto my front. I shriek to his hot tongue pillaging my skin, lapping up the wine as if it’s a precursor symbol to his true desire.

“Stop!” I shove his face from me and wipe the remaining splatter with my robe. I deny the heat swirling through me. Neo cocks his head to the side, brows lowering as if confused. Backing away, I point a finger at him to challenge, “I don’t care if you’ve got some raging hormonal vampire cycle. It doesn’t give you an excuse to act like an animal.”

“What would you prefer, Princess? Roses and candles? Romance and rapture? I can provide all that.” He chuckles darkly, brows lowering to a smolder.

“Contrary to popular opinion, not every woman needs or wants roses and romance...” I chastise myself for my hypocrisy of loving Thanatos’ dead roses. But as Neo’s silver eyes turn to hot flames when he positions himself before me, I continue with my hands along his chest, on that halo brand. “I

don't need your jewels or your protection or your finery, Neo. I want *you*. I want the warrior you truly are behind all the masks. I want your solemn oath to understand my darkness as I seek to understand yours. I want to know you'll fight beside me, with me, and *for* me."

The Prince cups my face, rubbing away the gold-flecked tears plundering my cheeks as I strain to go on. "I want to know you'll honor me when it's time for me to be your shield and protect you from danger. And the only gift that I'll accept is your flesh, your blood, your *heart*." I tap that brand with a smile.

Bristling, Neo's eyes dart back and forth between mine. "You hold my soul already, Elysia." He slides one hand down to the halo ring, shifting aside the neckline of my dress ever so little. A feverish chill class my skin at his touch. "What will ever be enough for you?"

I tip my head up, inches from his mouth to whisper my Halo butterflies, so they titillate on his cheeks to my word, "*Everything*."

Sighing, Neo swipes at the kissing butterflies and drags a hand through his hair, blowing out frustration, "What the fuck am I going to do with you?" He takes the decanter in his hands once again.

I lick my lips, remembering a similar night. Perhaps it's time for a leap of faith. My heart squeezes. "Valentine's Day is not for another two weeks. That's when the blood moon comes to full harvest. What if we tried something a little more...*exploratory* until then?" I bite my lower lip, remembering the night he proposed it while I bathed in layers of roses.

"Hmm, I do believe I like where you're headed, Princess." Neo sets down the decanter and approaches me again with his shades gathering into my hair. "Instead of rushing, you intend to *savor*, do you? I suppose marriage is built on compromise."

I lick my lips and consider to myself, consider what Thanatos said about *tempting* Destruction. I can't give myself to him in full, not when he's still bound to Lux. But I'd be a fool to say all compromise is evil. No, I won't deny myself some hope of tempting that heart, nor will I deny my body. For months, I've spent every night in his bed, imagining him there with me, imagining his body backed up to mine, lips kissing my brow, mouth rubbing all the curves of my body.

We had one night, one blindingly beautiful night together, and my heart still shudders, my sex still glows at the thought of the memory. It can't be like that yet, but maybe it doesn't have to be.

So, I plant my hand on his stalwart chest, fingers curling into his brand, staking my future claim on that heart while murmuring, “Let’s just say I’m willing to be *reasonable*.”

Neo curves a strong hand at the back of my neck. I inhale deeply as he secures his fortress around me while he brings his mouth to mine in a seal of approval. Just one plundering kiss to knock the wind from me before he concludes, “Looks like we will need to choose a safe word. Shall we start tonight?”

“Only if we make it a challenge.” I smile from ear to ear, already getting a fox-like idea.

“Color me intrigued, Princess.”

“No touchies...with our hands.”

Neo grins.



“ARE YOU READY?” Neo questions me from the opposite side of the room as I stand before his bed in nothing but my robe from earlier. His shades tickle the back of my neck and unbind the robe ties at my waist. Sweat swarms my skin, bred from my fear, my vulnerability.

Taking a deep breath because I’d requested him to go first, wanting to save my plan for the end, I slowly exhale my simple word, “Yes.”

He turns off the lights. His shades relieve me of my robe. We wouldn’t need any candles. My whole body is a candle. Gold dust besprinkles all my flesh with the highlight strands of my hair like halcyon veins of frost. Nothing but Neo’s shades and the shafts of a half-blood moon bathe my figure. And the halo wedding ring—a kiss of cold silver to the rest of my star-dusted figure.

“Lie down on the coverlet, Elysia,” Neo directs me without moving. I smirk because he didn’t say which way. I voice as such when a low growl issues from his throat after I’ve laid upon my belly. “Touché, Princess. But I’m flexible. Close your eyes.”

As soon as I do, Neo’s mouth rubs the back of my head, brushing aside my curls because his hands are forbidden tonight. Upon exposing my neck,



he inhales, sharply and deeply, tracing the sickle mark with something...soft and airy. It titillates my skin. He trails it to my shoulder blades, and I shiver and squeeze the muscles in my back.

“Would you like to guess?” Neo hums and continues that wispy caress light as a glitter fleck down my spine.

I whimper a little when he drags whatever it is toward the side of my body, tickling the outer swell of my breast. The heat of desire rises within me. “Oh!” I moan when he caresses the skin between my thighs, startling me with that airy tickle. I tread on the protection of the safe word, but instead, I hone it like a power, like a scythe blade. That familiar warmth whirlpools in my belly, that thrill of liquid gold dripping down my thighs.

“I’ll give you a clue...” Neo rubs his mouth along my shoulder blades, a hinting kiss, “It’s quite fitting, *Halo*-bearer. Do not open your eyes,” he warns.

“Your hair?” I wonder, considering what is bound around my wedding ring.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk...I’ll have to punish you for that, Elysia,” promises Neo in a predatory voice. I clench my eyes and thighs as he continues, “And I’m afraid I’ll be breaking a little rule to do so, fully anticipating your punishment in return.”

Neo brings his palm down in a strike upon my bottom. Not like fire but like an...ember. I flinch but find myself appreciating how the heat blooms across my skin.

Then, he leans in and purrs, “This is how I should have spanked you from the beginning, Elysia...”

I open my mouth with a silent gasp.

“I didn’t hear your safe word, my love,” he hints while rubbing the site where he spanked.

“I-I didn’t give it.”

*Crack!* Another strike, a harder one more like a fresh burst of flame, lands on my backside. He massages his shades into the site, spreading a chill over the burning flesh. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him. How he roots his eyes to my ass, approving, admiring, capturing. Molten heat slicks my insides, pooling between my legs at his undivided attention.

So, I lean into it, lifting my hips ever so subtly to accept...and welcome.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Elysia. Is this too much?” He slams his hand down on my left globe. Harder than before.

I tremble but take a deep breath and shake my head, whimpering, “N-no, not too much.”

“Hmm...do you want more?”

As he rubs his cool shades into the smoldering skin, I waver. “Maybe.”

*Crack!* I dig my fingers into the bedsheets at the searing strike.

“Yes or no, my love.”

“Yes, but...Neo?” I gaze back at him with my cheeks burning as all of me is ready to melt. “Please...” I trail off because I want it to mean something. He said as much ‘regard and devotion’ as his harem girls.

Everything in me stills when he brushes his lips along the back of my hair, descending to my neck. “It’s under your control, Elysia. If you want me to stop, simply speak the word, “feather”. You hold more power. Power in your authority to stop me. And power in your surrender, trusting no harm will come to you by my hand, unless it is according to your pleasure. Know this is my ultimate desire—to give you pleasure.”

And none are better at giving pleasure than he.

“Yes, Neo.”

No sooner do I speak than he brings his hand down again. He applies more force until his slaps echo through the room. Each time he slaps one, he lures his shades to stroke the inflamed skin. It stirs more need, more hunger to pulse inside me until I’m nearly rocking my hips, my glutes twitching at each touch.

“Mmm...when you give me your trust, it strengthens our bond and forms a level of understanding, a deeper foundation. Is this what you desire, Princess?”

He sears my ass again. Tears stream down my cheeks to mirror the liquid gold I know is gushing from my center. I love his brand of dominance, how he possesses me with his whole body and these beautiful mind-fucks, ones laced with consent. All my muscles loosen. It’s not long before I’m rubbing my sex against the sheets, striving for fulfillment.

“Turn over,” he commands in a low, silken growl.

Again, I lean into that safe word, but I don’t voice it. Instead, I suck in a deep breath, close my eyes, and slowly ease over until I’m on my back. The blankets chafe my burning ass, but his shades swathe any pain.

With one smoldering deadpan that’s erotic enough to send me convulsing, Neo wrenches my arms above my head so my wrists crash together. Still, I do not unleash the safe word, thrilling in this new, dangerous territory.

Adrenaline swells in my veins. I do not open my eyes.

All of me ruptures like a shooting star when he tickles my breasts with two wisps at the same time, circling in tight, slow lines around my areolas, spiraling closer and closer. My arousal heightens, nerve endings on fire. I imagine gold ripples riding off my skin and dancing in the air to form dozens of little carousels. Our combustive energies gather around us. Those intense gravitational pulls: this black hole life force.

I'm certain if I could use my hands, if I could touch his chest, I would feel the echo of that new heartbeat pulse that is all *mine*. I could time its beat to the rhythm of Scheherazade.

Affectionate and possessive, Neo uses his knee to coax my thighs to divide. Arching my back to grant him more of my breasts, I spread myself.

Tortuously slow, he spirals the soft tickling around and around my breasts, denying me the touch I most desire until I cry out, "Feather!" With a congratulatory growl, Neo pirouettes that feather in a full circle to my peaked nipples. My body rises, back arching while more gold sheds from my fire blossom, from that sunset and sunrise center.

Neo hovers above my mouth. Despite the darkness of my lids, I feel his warm breath before he opens my mouth beneath his to impart his familiar scent of vetiver seduction, of incense, of deep water. Then, he devours me, tongue tasting my honey halo and sharp spice, rewarding me for my correct guess while sweeping that feather along my sex. I buck and moan into his mouth.

"There are those sweet refrains!" he rejoices, and I gasp because that was an *after*-memory! My first sign of hope! I grasp it like a tether to his soul, to his heart.

When Neo joins the second feather to the first, stirring my fire blossom, I clench my calves tight and breathe deep. I utter *Noralice* as a breath prayer in my head. I preach *truth* and *honor* upon myself, that I am worthy of this. That I am safe here with my husband. That he is honoring my body, which is a form of truth in and of itself. *My truth*. If he's willing to lower his drawbridge, so can I.

Tonight, we aren't paradoxical mates. We are simply a husband and wife *exploring* and *learning*.

Neo kisses my mouth, tilting the angle of his neck to deepen it. One last swipe of his tongue before he travels lower, lower, lower so he may mouth my throat. Not once do his fangs unleash. Retracted the whole time with

unfathomable control, he suckles the skin above my jugular and continues down while those feathers stroke my sex, stirring more liquid gold to weep from my sunset center. His tongue follows a path along my chest.

“Neo!” I sob his name in a petition, begging him to where I desire him most. He kisses each of my erect nipples and tastes them, slow and agonizing, feathers teetering on my sex to drag out the delirious foreplay. All my body has turned feverish, the hairs on the nape of my neck and arms prickle the air.

Finally, his tongue dances off the edge of an eternity of moments so he may finally kiss the topaz panes of my stomach. He flicks his tongue into my navel. I arch my back in a beseeching gesture.

My body has become a meadow of gold wheat, ready for the wind to scatter its chaff at any moment. But Neo rises. He does not bow prostrate. No, he seeks my mouth again and robs my breath.

His shades join with the feathers, injecting their dark lullaby deep inside my core, causing me to lurch, convulse, and grapple with the shades around my wrists.

Once he touches his thumb to my clitoris, dozens of my sobs and moans split into screams as I climax with shooting stars gushing into my bloodstream, into my muscles, into my flesh. They rush up my spine to splatter gold, flushed paint into my face. My eyelashes themselves have turned into halcyon feathers to tickle my upper cheeks.

With the final rolling waves of my climax ebbing, Neo releases me from his shade bindings so I may curl against his chest. He does not touch me beyond his hand draping across my back. “How was that for the first time, my love?”

I ache to tell him it wasn’t the first time. I ache to tell him about that night. I ache to tell him how he unleashed the full strength of his Dragon wings on the night we came together for the first time as husband and wife. But it’s one of many things forbidden by the Triumvirate. I may not share any of the memories.

“*Heavenly,*” is all I say, and Neo catches the trimming of my word with his mouth.

“Good...because it’s your turn.”



BEAMING down at Neo with dozens of my butterflies poised on the edges of my skin, I lower myself so I may nip at his jawline and sweetly add, “Tit for tat, Neo?” And then, I snap my chin in gesture and truss him up with my Halo-whips just like I did in the past. I tone down the holy fire, reducing them to mere gold embers—enough to keep his arms above his head to grant me full access, enough to grant him a *slow* smolder but not enough to harm him.

“Aren’t you fifty shades of Elysia?” coos Neo, flexing his muscles and almost causing me to weep from the recollection of that singular night. His hardness prods my sex, wetting its tip with my gold. Oh, I’m going to get him back for that.

“Pretentious bastard,” I scold him and snarl at his ear, nipping the lower lobe, feeling his member respond, feeling it twitch. “We’ll have none of that!”

Before he can protest, I silence him with a Halo-gag, punishing him by pushing it deep into his mouth before I form a similar one for his vamp-manhood, gagging his considerable length with my Halo strips just as I’ve done his beautiful, full mouth. He struggles, he thrashes, but my makeshift chastity belt holds.

I roll my hips, nudging my sex upon him, grinding to weep my gold along his pelvis and downward to slip past the chastity belt linings. He snarls through gritted teeth, and I giggle.

“If you’re good, Neo, I will remove the gag,” I promise.

I suck on his lower lip before rising so he may view my grandeur. So he may bask in the sight of me touching myself even as I imagine his hands in place, curling low into my sunrise reservoirs.

His neck muscles thicken, his veins spark to silver life, his jaw rigid. Suffering with desire, his member is ready to burst right through my chastity belt, so I strengthen it because I am not finished with him yet.

I lean in from where I’ve straddled him and command him, remembering our bargain, “Bind my hands around my back, *husband*.”

“It would be my pure delight, *wife*,” echoes Neo before clamping his

shades around me in not just soothing ribbons but handcuffs that nearly bite. I breathe through the pain.

“You want me in your bed, do you, Neo?” I purr close to his ear, loving my newfound power, feeling a rising pleasure from it all as I tease him. “You imagine yourself entrenched inside me. You imagine the taste of my pure blood, the purest of tastes, the very juice of the angels. You imagine me clenched around your vamp-member. Can you imagine *biting* me and sinking your fangs into that heavenly liquor?” I rub my nose along the side of his neck, to that pumping of his silver, elite jugular, those pearly veins stimulated by my Everblood siren call. “I’ll bite you tonight, my groom. You think those harem girls can compete with a *real* angel, however fallen and vengeful she may be?”

Time to create something new with my Halo. No human could ever hope to penetrate vampire flesh with her mortal teeth, but my heart hammers against my rib cage, exhilarated as I create angel teeth. As if every edge of my tooth is a gold Halo-hewn fang.

Before I lose my drive, this newfound power, I plunge inside Neo’s skin with a light love bite. Enough to draw blood, enough to garner a moaning growl from his throat, stifled by the gold gag. I lap at the silver blood trickle and suddenly snap my upper half back. It’s not as potent as venom, nowhere near as potent, but there is still a quintessence about the taste...like fire and ice.

I strain at the bindings on my back, but Neo’s power holds them firm. Judging by the way his hips thrust, the way he anchors his head back against the coverlet, I know he loves the bite.

So, I bite again! Harder this time—enough that it will leave a mark to show up tomorrow. I drink more of his silver blood as if it’s some tonic of the gods. I taste him, his destructive essence, that black hole energy as if sampling some dragon’s brew. I taste spice inside him. A flaming aroma.

My curls frolic all around his chest, breasts rubbing his flesh as I bite and bite and taste and taste, leaving my love marks all over his body. As soon as I finish, my butterflies kiss the marks, soothing them with their antennae like the tickling of feathers to rival his.

When I finally reach his pelvis, when I finally nudge my nose against my makeshift chastity belt, I consider how he did not dive, he did not bow to lick me tonight.

Peering up, I find Neo studying me—expression ironclad, offering me

nothing, whether a plea or a denial to take him into my mouth. This is my choice.

I consider our first time, *my* first time. How I shared my trauma with him that night. How he made a solemn blood oath to understand my trauma. And he did. So, I release the gag from his mouth first before I loose him from the belt.

“When Thanatos died, what did you feel, Neo?” I charge him, poised still at that Halo-belt, tiptoeing my fingers along the dusted gold edges, not quite touching him.

He grinds his head back against the coverlet, and I love to hear him beg, “*Elysia...*”

“What. Did. You. Feel?” I rub my mouth lower, loving how he twitches.

He roars, “Guilt and loss!” Neo whips his head lower, panting out smoke, actual smoke from his nostrils. “I lost a part of me that day. It’s why my heart froze. I loved my brother. I hated my brother. I love you more. I love Nita most! Damn it to hell, is that enough for you, my love?” In agony, he writhes as I bite him again and stare up at the myriad of rivulets of silver trickling like my own personal map of rivers.

As soon as I free him from the chastity belt, his aching member unleashes. One little nip at its base. One single sweep of my tongue along that length. And one pocket of Halo gold to massage him is all it takes for the Prince of Destruction to discharge, shedding his vampire seed.

He thunders a vampire brawl, every last muscle in his body enlarging. Oh, how I imagine the fullness of that length sinking inside me. His destructive force ruptures through his skin: an explosion of shades and dragon flames, shackled within his blood to lure his scales to the surface. How he thrashes within the blood moonbeams.

For the first time, panic pulses through me. How much greater will his desire be by the time the blood moon is full? My Halo pocket captures his seed, transferring it to the damp stain of gold off to our right where I came prior, as if a precursor, a foreshadowing to what might be between us someday.

Once he comes down, Neo commands me up, then jerks his head in a fury snarl of dragon breath, “Get them off me, Elysia.”

The moment I release him from my Halo whips, he seizes me in his arms so my legs are wrapped around him. I shudder against him while the Prince, my husband, my *Neo* buries his head in my shoulder, kissing, mouthing,

sucking, nipping, and uttering in a voice loveliest, darkest, and deepest, “I love you, Elysia.”

And I weep, I weep, I weep!



## CHAPTER 20

## HOW ELSE CAN I POSSIBLY TEMPT HIM?

The next morning, I nip at Neo's skin, reveling in his soft growl of appreciation as I wake him. Several of my love bites cover his neck, his chest, his arms, his stomach, and one single bite mark on his member. Perhaps next time, we'll get to our legs.

I touch my fingertips to his stomach, skimming them to trace my bite prints around his nipples and then his neck, where I cup his throat in a tender collar. "Elysia," he murmurs low and deep, turning to me as I snuggle closer. "We will be late for breakfast if you keep doing that."

Tilting one shoulder up to my cheek, I give him a dazzling smile that prompts more gold butterflies to kiss his cheeks. "If you're skipping Court, I doubt being fashionably late to breakfast will matter that much."

I haven't slept like that in a long time. Dreams of us tangled together still whirl around my mind. Even if I still can't sleep with him at my back, his heart hasn't felt this close since our one night together.

Emboldened by my words and my flaming butterflies, Neo shifts his whole body, positioning his knee on one side of me, nudging my hip. A breath hitches in my chest as he hems me in. Oh, Saints! He hovers low but doesn't sink. Just those winter tide eyes roving over my form to settle on my face. His eyes dart between mine, studying me. My insides soften and warm. Though everything in me wants to melt into the pillow, I raise myself, propping my upper half by my elbows so my curls may tumble behind me. Now, I'm close enough to kiss him.

He stops me a feather thread from his mouth to ask, "What was it like in the Soul Plane?" When I pause, lips parting, Neo leans his head to the side to dilate his eyes on mine and ask a follow-up question, "What was it like with

Thanatos?”

A dark shadow crosses his eyes. A shadow to crawl along the back of my neck, whispering the sickle’s curse—how I traded my hair and my trauma, and Thanatos stole a crack of my Halo light.

Part of me is enraged, always will be in some ways. Another part is astounded by what he did with my power—how he used it to reject Satan’s mark and forsook his flames even if he could not walk away from his Court O’ Death. The final part of me is horrified that he staked a claim on my soul. My gut twists and tightens from his proclamation that if I give him anything more, I will damn my soul. Even now, he haunts me. Will he summon me again, try to reclaim me?

Despite him burning off the mark, it was all a dream, a game. A predator’s seduction. A temptation until the Soul Eater.

My chest nearly caves in, my heart sinking when I remember falling asleep with the Prince of Death at my back. Perhaps even that was a game. No matter how much I try to deny it, some still, small voice in the back corner of my mind recognizes how Neo’s brother understands my trauma, my scars, more than any other. And all those violent emotions.

Finally, I utter against Neo’s mouth. “It was...*beautiful*. Like serendipity. I could explain, but it would take me years. It could fill libraries.”

“Did he hurt you?”

*In some ways. In the deepest of ways*, I almost find myself saying. “It doesn’t matter. It was a dream, Neo.”

Neo nods and presses his brow to mine with a whisper, “A dream within a dream.”

Shock seizes my heart, and my eyes fly open wide. Neo’s are closed. Shades cloak his face to consume my butterflies. How could he possibly...? As much as I want to know more, the last thing I need is for him to believe any bond remains between Thanatos and me.

Touching my brand on his chest, I remind him, “We should get to breakfast so we can make it to the border. I’m sure you’re eager to see if Rook Idrys has carried out your orders.”

“Indeed.”

Neo climbs out of bed and bids me to get dressed while he moves down one of the hallways to do the same. Easing out of bed, I gather Neo’s shades around myself and hasten toward my suite for the Infinity Wardrobe. But as I kiss Neo’s shades goodbye, a warm hand taps my shoulder. I flinch, spinning

to face a pale, squeamish Lux.

“Shit! You scared me, Lux. I thought you were sick and couldn’t get out of bed.”

I wince. She truly doesn’t have any respect for my space, even when I’m naked, because she leans in and touches her mouth to mine before folding her hands, prim and proper at her naked stomach. All she wears is lacy lingerie. “Please forgive me, Elysia. I’ll return to bed soon, but I just had to see you. I had to *thank* you!”

Her eyes roam along my body, and I taper my brows, ready to crouch into a threatening lurch. I don’t bother to cover myself when I’m not ashamed. Two can play at that game.

“I saw all your marks on him. I’m sure he loves that even if it’s not what he’s used to,” she implies in the passive-aggressive. I cross my arms over my chest and pinch my eyes. Shrewd, Lux. “I’m so thrilled that you’ve bonded because so much more will be expected of you now.”

“What?”

She strokes her navel area, prompting my eyes to fly open wide. Holy foremothers!

“I’m saving the news for Valentine’s Day. Please don’t say anything to him. I just had to tell someone.” She clasps my hands and plants them on her stomach.

My cheeks burn, and I know it’s not just discomfort, it’s not just anger, it’s...jealousy.

The very edges of Halo serpent heads begin to curl from my chest when she kisses me again and finishes, “I will be the first to bear the Prince of Destruction a child!”



WHEN NEO and I descend the staircase to the Commons, Nita stands in the center with Quillion pacing near her. Their eyes compete for our attention as they rush to the base of the staircase to greet us. A thrill of pride courses through me, something Lux’s announcement can’t steal.

I kiss Nita’s cheeks in greeting while Neo clasps his old friend’s arm and

slaps him across the back of his embroidered waistcoat.

At first, Nita says nothing, merely pinches her eyes to scrutinize my expression, the incandescence radiating from my skin, or my charmed mouth—swollen from Neo’s kisses. Even now, my skin still tingles from last night’s silver blood fix. A second later, she sweeps her gaze to Neo, leans in closer, snatches his collar, and tugs down. My smile spreads when she pops a few buttons on his tunic so she may behold his skin.

“Mmm...” Nita deduces right before her posture transforms into that bouncing tigress we all know and love. “Love bites! She gave him love bites!” Kitty points, elbowing Quillion in the side.

He gives me a thumbs-up sign. My lungs expand as he taps his tattoo to open his digital chart. “How many? Should I award her with a point for each one, Neo?”

Straightening sovereign, Nita peels back Neo’s collar more and examines the bites.

“Nita...” Neo rolls his eyes and side-eyes me because my flushed cheeks would mirror his if vampires could flush. “Uncertain of that, my friend,” he tells Quillion. “Unless you intend to tally my feather-torture. And how her ass grew as pink as her cheeks from my hand.”

Beet-red but beaming when Nita turns to me while shoving Neo’s face away with the side of her horns, she stations her hand on her hip and taunts, “Hope you didn’t bite off more than you can chew, little angel.”

My normative pattern is to clasp my hands into sweet fists beneath my chin. Though I don’t break tradition, I open my mouth to display the wonder of my newly-created angel fangs, then send my butterflies to spiral around her horns, “I drank dragon’s brew last night.”

Nita weaves an arm around my shoulders and kisses the side of my head. “Come along, sweet Ezer. You may come, too, Neo,” she adds and pokes a finger at his collar, repairing the popped threads. “I was fully prepared to remove your kneecaps this morning. But I suppose they’ll keep for a little longer...so long as you don’t fuck this up.”

“Yes, Nita.” My husband bows at the waist as she passes him with her arm still draping mine.

I pause to peck Quillion’s cheek, warmth swelling my chest. “Thank you for talking to him, Quill.”

He raises a hand, dismissing my words. “I did very little compared to you and Nita.”

“Both of us will join you at the border today,” expresses Neo, prompting Quillion to snap his head toward Neo, jaw dropping a little. All Neo offers is a shrug.

Nita squeezes my bare shoulder and emphasizes, “I suppose that is the reason for your contrasting but impressive garb.”

I love my selection this morning, even if Neo couldn’t help himself when I emerged from the Infinity Wardrobe. Not that I minded him pinning me against the wall to impale my lips with his in a steamy kiss. His hand had slid up the snug purple leggings patterned with the Tenth Court roses before he’d trailed his fingers along my undergarments. I’d almost shoved him right into that Wardrobe since it’s big enough for both of us. Luxurious, sumptuous gold skirts with white ruffled under layers billow to the floor on each side of the leggings.

“Marvelous strapless sweetheart neckline,” Quillion compliments the bodice and how the blushing gray skirts fan out to my hips along with thick, purple transparent swathes of fabric that overlap but don’t detract from the gold skirts. I’d also selected a dusky rose shade to accent my seductive eyes with a neutral lip.

When I catch Neo’s eyes centering on that area where the over-dress skirts tease the leggings between my thighs, I focus on anything to prevent myself from goldening perfectly good leggings...again. “Is everything on track for the border?” I wonder to Quillion as we enter the breakfast room.

“Neo’s team was dispatched last night. And by the time we arrive, they should be distributing the treatment.”

We take our seats, but it’s the first time Neo pulls out my chair for me. And it’s also the first time he sits in the chair next to me, diagonal to Nita, content to relinquish his head chair. I sit up straight and practically glow, smiling at her because it feels...it feels *perfect*—like we all were just a few months ago.

While Nita orders chilled blood soup and Quillion blood pudding, Neo orders an entire meal of blood-laced drinks: a smoothie, a tonic, a cocktail, and even coffee. Solids consist of blood fruit and croissants stuffed with bloody chocolate, biscuits and blood gravy, blood sausage, and more.

I rub my lips and eye him, then sip my tea and enjoy my pancakes, trying to ignore my insides quivering from anxiety. After a minute or two of him gorging himself, he turns to me and lifts his hand to brush his knuckles across my cheek. “Don’t concern yourself, my love. Remember, it’s natural for my

appetite to increase with the growing blood moon.”

“I’m simply thankful the harvest one happens only once a year. Full blood moons are bad enough,” Nita expresses and scoops up the last of her soup, then taps the back of Quillion’s hand as he peruses his morning reads. “Remember what happened last year?”

I glance at Quillion, who nods a “mmm” and sips his tea, peaceful and pensive.

“What happened?” I turn to Neo, brows lifting.

He grunts, swallowing a thick piece of blood sausage to answer, “Not one of my finer moments. I had no bride at the time. Taking my usual fill of my harem didn’t sate me. Nor did five courses like this one.”

Quillion lowers his cup. “Let’s just say you and Neo have much more in common than you ever knew, considering your first time meeting me,” the bishop hints, silver veins glimmering beyond his warm brown skin.

“You drank from a canal?” I ask Neo and shiver, but he snatches my wrist and rubs his mouth along my wrist, kissing his horned mark.

“He drained it…” Nita purrs, opening her lips to show her bloody fangs.

My anxiety grows to crawl along my skin because of the news Lux shared this morning. Because there is no way in hell he will supplement with her blood now. What does that mean for me? If my blood is the purest, would it be enough to sate him in one feeding? He’s only bitten me once…on Hallowtide, but he doesn’t remember. Back then, we didn’t speak about it, what it was like for him, even if I could see the rapturous expressions all over his face, felt it bathing our blood bond.

What does it all mean for his *flesh* lust when I’d only received a sample of destructive power on our honeymoon in the grotto? I’d asked him to destroy me, but he’d given me venom, he’d numbed me. Will my Halo light be enough to meet him as an equal, to raise myself to his throne of Destruction?

I pale at the thought, feeling weak.

“*Elysia.*” Neo suddenly cups me by the waist, transferring me into his lap. I almost whimper against him, but he raises his hand to comb his fingers through my hair just as he used to. “I vowed to you that I would never raise my hand or whip to you again. I will not bite you without your consent either.”

Closing my eyes, I nod, trusting his word when his mouth presses to mine, curving my lips back, tongue sampling my sweet essence. But all I

taste is blood.



“WE SHOULDN’T WASTE time with such flesh bags,” I overhear Rook Idrys, where he stands outside the coach when Neo arrives with me at the border.

Of course, the Rook is unaware that Neo is inside. A little prank of his, and the first I’m privy to and a willing participant. First, we linger so we may hear Idrys grumble to Quillion, who stands outside with Idrys. “Without a cure, this is a futile attempt, only delaying the inevitable. And the bodies are attracting more Chasm escapees. We should burn them all and be done with it, including the sick in the quarantined zone.”

A righteous fire races inside me, causing my Halo to spark with little flames budding on my skin. Neo suffuses them with his shadows and squeezes my hand. *Fear not, my love. He can do nothing apart from my word.*

Neo opens the carriage door and strolls out in all his Court finery, gripping the ends of his vast black robe and evacuating it from the coach in one fell swoop. His shades and flames tighten around Idrys, who bows low, uttering, “My lord Prince! I didn’t know you were—”

I simper as Neo extends a hand to me. Taking it willingly, I step out of the carriage beside him to hear him address the Rook, “I trust everything is being carried out according to *my word*, Idrys.”

“Yes, my lord Prince. Just as *you* instructed.” Something in his tone when he emphasized the word is a dead giveaway that he believes I’m the one truly responsible, especially when his licentious gaze travels to my form, daring to cross the threshold of my neckline.

“Good. Now, after you raise your eyes from my wife’s bountiful breasts and respect her enough to look into her eyes, you will escort us to the quarantined zone where we may inspect the conditions of the people together.” Neo’s voice is undefeated, which launches a lightning live wire right into my sex to rouse the heat and churn warmth in my belly.

Dozens of knights stand at attention on all sides of us, prepared to guard us, but they are far more spectacle than anything, considering Neo could



destroy every one of them. The Father's beautiful Warhammer. And mine.

"Come, Elysia...you know how I appreciate making an entrance."

Maintaining his grasp on my hand, Neo takes the lead in straying toward the balcony overlooking the Iron Walls, though he maintains a few purposeful steps in front of me. A deafening tidal wave of gasps and shouts and even screams from the crowds floods the air. My heart twinges.

I can only imagine their terror, their horror when they behold the Prince of Destruction at the border, where he rarely ever comes. I doubt any amount of time or favors could repair all the damage of the past.

Not one being is left standing by the time Neo tugs on my hand and urges me to join him, pressing a hand to the small of my back and coaxing me to the edge of the railing. My presence suffocates all the screams to murmurs. And finally—silence as Neo turns to face me, rubs his lips across my knuckles, and bows his head to me. Oh, Saints! Not to the waist, not to the hips, but a bow regardless!

"People of the Court O' Nines!" Neo thunders to the spectators. "May I present Princess Elysia Rose, daughter of the Phoenix Queen, the Angel Bride, the bearer of the Halo, the Everblood: your salvation!" His eyes seize mine—a flaming silver storm—upon the granting of my titles, causing my lips to part, my jaw to drop. "And *mine...*" he echoes from that night of Scheherazade. My heart leaps as he kisses me one more time before releasing my hand, raising me higher in a whole new way.

I can't believe it, not even when all the people cheer and applaud. All I focus on is Neo and his dark energy unraveling around me. All this time, he's believed I was an imposter and Lux, the true Halo-bearer.

Even as he gathers me in his arms and charges from the balcony so the wind whips through my curls, I wonder if it's all a dream. The spectators scramble away from where Neo lands. I tremble in his arms from his body forming a small crater in the earth, but he keeps me safe and sheltered in his strength. His hands congregate on my cheeks, luring my face to his as he leans lower with his fingers sifting into my curls.

Kissing me strong and fierce, Neo proclaims through our bond, *You harnessed my destruction last night, Elysia.*

*What?* I ask, breathless to his mouth devouring mine, and somehow find the strength to grip his dark robe while his shades kiss my hand.

With deliberate focus, Neo's tongue duels with mine, tasting that spice that I love. *I would have destroyed the whole suite if it weren't for you. I may*

*have even destroyed my heart. Your power...it was my shield. You are my shield, Elysia.*

The heart that belongs to Lux. In more ways now.

As if sensing my fear, Neo breaks from my swollen mouth to study my eyes, study that fear, and trace a finger around my mouth. Now that we're closer than ever, I feel weaker and can't seem to claw my way out from underneath her shadow or the memory of her lips on mine. Of knowing what will happen when Neo discovers her pregnancy. An ominous chill runs through me.

What I wouldn't give for the kiss of frost along my spine.

Understanding my apprehension, Neo brushes his knuckles across my cheek to assuage my fears. *Yes, Elysia, she is still my first wife and the rebirth of my heart. But perhaps, you are not the Scourge I was led to believe you were. Perhaps the Everblood is not here to destroy me after all.*

I say nothing because nothing will stem the panic, the violent emotion from breeding within my core. If his faith in Lux is still this strong after everything that has happened, how else can I reach him? How else can I possibly *tempt* him?

"Come, my Everblood bride..." Neo places a hand along my back, his shades forming a path for us to walk upon between the crowds that maintain a safe distance. "Let me lead you to the quarantined zone."

## CHAPTER 21

# “CAN A DRAGON BE TAMED?” I WONDER...

When we reach the quarantined warehouse-like building, we linger outside for a moment, listening to Quillion and Idrys arguing over the state of the people.

*Why on earth did you reinstate him?* I ask Neo through our bond, thankful that our drawbridges have practically shattered, allowing us to cross each other’s network of Halo dust and shades and flames.

*Laws of the land, Elysia. If anyone survives my destruction by a million cuts, they are granted automatic reinstatement.*

*But you promoted him to a Tenth Court Rook position, not his original Court O’ Nines title,* I point out.

Neo’s shades whisper-creep along my legging-clad legs up to my sex. *Forgive me, my bride. It was an error in judgment and a response from that giant ego you’ve referenced. I should not have subjected you to such a grievous insult. But rest assured, I will keep a tight leash on him. Unless, of course, you’d prefer to do so.*

*Tempting, but I’d rather Halo-tie you to the bed tonight.* I snicker as my gold currents ripple into his tunic and frolic with my love bites on his skin.

*Duly noted. Tit for tat?* Those shades prod into my sex, combining with his flames to rouse my fire blossom.

I inhale wind through my teeth and rein in my gasp with my hand on his chest. *Only if you invoke the Right of Substitution, Neo.* When he cocks his head to the side, confused, I navigate my Halo ripples down, down, down, slipping past his pelvis, turning him rigid and rigorous. *Your tongue instead of your shades.*

*Anything else, my lady?*

Oh, Saints!

I bite back a whimper. “I suppose I’ll have to find out tonight,” I murmur against his mouth, allowing my Halo ripples to retreat, gesturing to the warehouse. “But this is not the time or the place, Neo.”

“Quite right, my angel. But perhaps I’ll take you somewhere else tonight. Somewhere lovely, dark, and deep,” he hints like seductive velvet in my ear, and I almost ignite at the thought, at the memory of the grotto.

Oh, Saints! If he offers me a soul, if I urge him to restore even one of the countless bodies in the Bridal Canyon, perhaps that would be enough to grant him a new heart and renew our bond. My body hums at the thought, heart catapulting into my throat.

For now, I follow my husband into the quarantined zone for another kind of healing because my Halo is restless. The hairs on the nape of my neck prickle. Together, we enter, and I smile at Quillion, who’s sorting through blood configurations on his digital interface, barely acknowledging a perturbed Idrys standing opposite of him. Idrys bows his head to the Prince.

“What do you think, my love?” Neo dismisses Idrys and guides me a few steps.

I smile because the people are no longer on floor cots. Warmth blossoms in my chest, preparing to branch outward. They’ve been given hospital beds, warm blankets, clean hospital gowns, fresh water, food, and even silver-blood tech supplies along with the administering of Quillion’s treatment. Dozens of born vampire staff, lower Court servants have been dispatched beyond the Walls for potentially the first time.

“How are the staff protected?” is my first question. Judging by the Prince’s warm smile as he tucks a few of my curls behind my ear, it seems to meet with his approval.

However, Quillion responds while Neo settles a hand upon my back, shades creeping up and down my spine like...like that one night in the Chasm. I swallow and force myself to listen to the bishop. “I developed a synthetic immunization patch that works as a barrier for the infection. The people you rescued yesterday provided an excellent source through their blood samples.”

“Are they all here?” I wonder to Quillion, motioning to the myriad of beds.

Quillion nods while examining several DNA helixes that twirl a

whirlwind of cell matter above his arm. “Yes, they’ve been asking for you.”

“Best not keep them waiting,” Neo muses and bids his blood bishop to lead the way.

*Couldn’t you destroy the Scourge infection, Neo?* I beseech him as we follow Quillion.

*Not on a mass scale, I’m afraid.*

*Have you tried one?*

Neo sighs and rubs his eyes next to me. *No, Elysia.*

*But—*

*I tried the same day we set up the zone, Neo informs me, fingers straying to my cheeks, his eyes darkening, silver mist fading, lost in the memory. I only succeeded in aiding the infected mother to her death. I was so enraged by my failure that I abandoned the zone and left Idrys to it all. A wrong decision, of course. But you deserve to know. You and Lux are the only ones in the entire world who have been able to survive my destruction. And Nita.*

*Perhaps we can ask her—*

Neo’s shades shoot up to the back of my neck, curling around my throat in a kissing caress. *Already asked, my love. She was the first I went to. But this is some malevolent force from hell, even beyond my sister.*

I lower my head as lament wades in the depths of my heart, an alew sounding there, while I breathe prayers for some mercy, for some hope as I gaze at the patients around me. Tears shimmer in my eyes, but I swipe them away, refusing to mourn before them, especially the children. The little ones smile at me, arms clutching stuffed animals, the kind that come to life thanks to silver blood tech while the adults read or watch shows on digital tattoos they’ve been provided with.

Pulse thrumming in my throat, I glance up at Neo, who notices my observation and winks at me, mouth etched with pride because he must have spent extra for such boons, potentially out of his own Court funds.

*If it’s beyond Nita, does that mean your Father sent the Scourge?* I think back to its lair, at the thought of descending into that abyss if it will bother returning since I freed its food source and left my Halo print everywhere.

*I cannot conclude anything else, but I have not sensed him lately, nor do I wish to reach out to him, especially with the rise of the blood harvest moon. It would not be prudent to have both of us in the Tenth Court at this time.*

I can’t argue with that. I shudder at the notion, considering how the Father could reap any he desires. I won’t let that happen, and I chastise

myself for my selfishness, for my lack of concern when I formed the triumvirate and didn't include the non-reap of his harem as a stipulation. Neo and I both have regrets.

After a few minutes of walking, Quillion brings us to another area separated by a divider and plastic sheeting. Beyond are twenty hospital beds with several patients. I recognize them. As soon as the group notices me, they sit up from their beds, extending their thanks, but I raise my hands and implore them not to move. Then again, they don't seem like they're about to. Not with Neo's shade and flame presence towering over me from behind.

Off to my right, a dark-haired middle-aged man with cobalt blue eyes and fair skin, who seems to be their spokesperson, addresses me, bowing his head, "My lady bride."

"Lady Elysia please, or Lady Rose, if you prefer." Neo plays with the curls along my back as if gesturing his approval. "What can you tell me about the vampire who locked you in that lair?"

"We've all shared similar stories, Lady Elysia," he tells me without getting up since Quillion's treatment, along with other fluids, feeds his arm from a silver blood tech pump—an advanced replacement from the ancient IV system. "The vampire had no pattern and took a different form for every one of us. It was the perfect predator and lured us to the Spirit Realm as if it knew how to prey on our weaknesses. It took the appearance of my wife, who I'd believed was taken to the Tenth Court farms."

"So, it can clone itself and shapeshift?" I glance toward the rest, who nod their affirmations.

When I turn to Neo, his neck muscles clench, veins glinting to the surface as if impatient to confront the Scourge demon. I attribute that to the blood moon cycle and still can't help but wonder how much worse it will be. A chill creeps up my spine, partially from his shades.

When the child off to my left coughs up blood, that mournful longing in my heart returns, but Neo thumbs my cheek, summoning me in a whisper, "Rumors still travel despite your attempts to nullify them, my angel. Even if it takes all day, my love, I will remain at your side. No Court today."

I beam up at him before rushing toward the little girl, my skirts swishing along the floor. These twenty are worse off than the rest of the quarantined. They were in the belly of the beast, drowning in that Scourge amber for Goddess knows how long. So, I collect the little girl into my arms, channel that midwife spirit, and pray and kiss her eyes.

Choking back tears and defying the ringing sensation in my ears, I imagine myself injecting liquid stars into her blood cells. Could my healing Halo power trigger the reconstruction of new cells freed from the pestilence? No, instead, my Halo *absorbs* the Scourge. Its hot venom trickles into my veins, causing me to wince with a fine sheen of sweat forming on my brow. But once that tainted bloodstream touches the Halo, the Goddess-blessed device surges to life and causes the black capillaries to fade, replaced by my healing wavelengths to penetrate her matter.

As the duskiness invades my mind, and I wobble from the dizziness, Neo catches me. It's his arms I hold onto and take solace in so I may strengthen my power and finish healing her.

When I open my eyes, no more Scourge exists. The remaining nineteen sit up in their beds, alerted by the transformation, mouths open in longing, whispers of "Angel Bride" on their lips. Except, I fear I won't be able to help them all. I felt weak this morning, and now...

"I still dream about it..." the little girl utters in my arms, shivering. "I keep saying 'go away, bad dream', but it's still there whenever I close my eyes."

*Let her go!* I cry out in my head to the Scourge because its pestilence still prowls within her mind. Like my Noralice invisible scars. And she doesn't deserve it. *She's only a child!*

"Perhaps I may help, little one." He stretches out his hand to the girl's mind.

*Neo, Neo, Neo!* I shout his name in a blessed new chant that soars around the fortress of our bond. My heartbeat rushes in a swell of elation because he may use his destruction for good or evil. He uses it for good. I envy his centuries of skill when all he needs do is touch her head, determine the eye of that nightmare hurricane, and snuff it out, destroying the bad dream.

She then tilts her head up to me, points, and says, "You're so pretty. Oh! You're the Angel Princess, and you're the Dragon Prince." She turns to him and asks, "Are you ever going to have a baby?"





BY THE TIME I finish healing the last figure, I nearly pass out in Neo's arms. Layers of sweat breed on my flesh, and all my skin stings from my power. Heart utterly spent. It's nightfall, except Neo does not carry me back to the Tenth Court. Instead, he shadows me into the Spirit Realm, into those deformed woods, into the deepest and darkest throng of them.

"What are you doing?" I ask, curled up into his chest, nearly whimpering from fatigue.

My eyes blur open. Countless macabre ghouls flee in his destructive wake as his shades and flames surround us like guardian knights. When he doesn't answer, when I notice his pupils swollen, smothering the silver mist, when his mouth opens to reveal his scintillating fangs whetted with hunger, I pause before confronting him. Here, all the Chasm energy feeds his black hole destructiveness, along with the blood moon beams slicing through the canopy around us. My husband has never been more dangerous. Is he even my husband? Or is he just Neoptolemus, Prince of Destruction?

"Where are we going, Neo?"

Neo growls under his breath. "To the demon's lair."

Chest tight and heart tentative, I tiptoe into the bond. Within that dark, destructive force, I don't find the same seductive vampire who usually stands upon the drawbridge before his fortress. Instead, I crash right into a resting Dragon!

Too spent, too weak from my full day of healing, all I can manage is to kneel before it, to adopt the fetal position near its nostrils that puff out smoke and embers. In the darkness facing the Dragon, I am but a little gold blossom next to his scaled, dark fortress. Within the desolation of the bond of his mind, I go deep and beg him, *Neo...where are you, Neo?*

The Dragon rumbles, shaking its wings, heat roiling in its belly, promising fire. Swarms of Neo's shades encompass my gold form, but all he does is nudge me with that armored nose and exhale. I hug my arms to my chest as one great dragon breath stirs my curls to fly from my face, baring me.

The Dragon's voice barrages the air surrounding my light blossom of a figure. Its warm breath purrs across me, rousing all my nerve endings to tingle. *If you are going to give me a child anytime soon, Elysia, then I will rectify this situation.*

Oh, Saints! When did we discuss that? Yes, I want that. I've always desired a baby, a *family*, but it's too soon. That he desires the same thing

grants me hope to expand my chest. Until I consider Lux...

*I will destroy this Scourge and protect our future,* insists Neo. *Or I cannot call myself the Prince of Destruction.*

I remember the words of the Goddess: *Only once you defeat this Scourge will you find the next piece the Courts have forgotten.*

Me, not Neo. I cannot possibly share that. The Triumvirate oath forbids it. But I'm too weak to do anything but curl my head into my chest, curls eclipsing my face. Inside our bond, his Dragon scents me, belly rumbling with possessive need. I feel that rumbling down to my toes.

When I depart from the bond, when I stare up at Neo, I chew on my inner cheek, debating, but it's not the right time to argue. My Halo is too dim. And he is nothing but dark Destruction. Somehow, I can't bring myself to fear him, not when he's bearing me this way, not after everything that's happened the past day.

Neo carries me into the belly of the beast, right into that lair with its amber throne and pillars and the husks of broken egg-like encasings. Pools of black Scourge toxin lie inside each one from the drained capillaries, but somehow, I understand that toxin is dead now—nullified by my Halo power.

Suddenly, Neo cranes his head down to me, eyes black as a moonless Tenth Court night. Deep and not lovely or dark but impregnated with violent emotion.

"You came here? You did this?" His voice is a low thunder, an omen. My chest hitches. Everything inside me screams to, *run and hide, Elysia*. But I seal my lips together and touch my chest to will my heart to slow. The Prince gazes at the husks, and I imagine he can scent the bones above our heads.

"Neo, I—"

"Answer me," he commands in a voice I recognize. The same voice that commanded me to kneel in the Inner Circle.

"I came here. I set them free." I don't mention how Syn helped with the last because I imagine any association with Thanatos would only trigger him more. I tread light—as if I'm walking on dragon eggshells.

Something like thunder rumbles from inside him. "What the fuck am I going to do with you?"

A righteous fury invades my heart, and I claw at his tunic, demanding he put me down, eggshells be damned. He sets me down, harder than necessary, which prompts another spark of anger inside me.

"You kept me from the border, Prince," I point at this new Scourge of

Destruction, careless of how he seizes, how he tremors, how his horns begin to extend from his head. “*You* left me to the likes of Idrys. On *your* orders, I was not permitted to go beyond the walls. So, I phased under them instead.” Seething, he stalks toward me, hands balled at his sides, those horns curling out even more at my words. I ball my hands into fists. “I won’t apologize for any of it. I won’t apologize for killing countless ghouls, dealing with Pan to get here, or finding the lair. I won’t apologize for doing what I was created to do.”

“Elysia...*I* will do what *I* was created to do,” threatens Neo, hands gathering up the skirt attachments and digging into my waist. Only when I hear the sound and feel the ripping fabric do I realize his claws have grown. His muscles swell, armored scales budding, tearing through his tunic, ridding himself of the cage of buttons. That destructive force, that Scourge undulates around us, tempting, threatening, inflicting.

A deep pang lodges in my throat. I have to do something. I vowed to be his shield. It’s time for me to protect both of us from his danger. Somehow, I wrestle for a second wind, an adrenaline rush to stoke my blood.

Desperate, I launch my Halo power into him like a golden net and climb up him. Hands firm, I climb him like a tower, shocking him. Those claws retract, and his hands descend to the underside of my thighs to haul me up. Without hesitation, I slam my mouth against his to temper his Dragon muscles.

Everything inside me screams to run, but I can’t. Because I am strong enough to bear his burdens, to share his darkness, just as he is strong enough to bear mine. No, I won’t take his abuse. I’ll challenge his beliefs, but damn it to hell, I want his darkness. I want *everything*.

My body softens the instant he kisses me back. When I finish plundering his mouth, pillaging his depths, the silver veins overwhelming his neck have faded. He doesn’t stop. His tongue travels past the seam of my mouth to taste me. I moan into his mouth. A kaleidoscope of butterflies flutters to life in my belly.

With my legs wound around his waist, with his member bulging against my sex, with his bulwark of strength reminding me of the time he bore us up on our honeymoon, I recognize I won’t last. One flesh hunts me, stalks me.

It doesn’t have to be perfect like before. If I want this, if I want him, want *more...*

Winded, I pull away and remind him about his promise. “Lovely, dark,

and deep, Neo!” I mumble, my mouth swollen against his, breathless and worn. “Secret,” I hint and note his eyes sinking upon mine, that familiar seductive silver mist returning as I arch my neck and tempt him with one flesh. Because the last thing I want is for us to make love in this beast’s belly. “The aesthetics here are horrible.” Teasing with a shy smirk, I shrug, swinging my curls over my shoulder.

Neo returns, chuckling, laughing, boisterous as he cinches his hands around my rear, sturdy, before charging out of the pit and into the hub. “Damn it all to hell, woman. I’ll never know how you manage to infuriate me one moment and then tame me in the next.”

“Can a Dragon be tamed?” I wonder, rubbing my lips along his neck.

He tightens his grip on me, his arousal throbbing through his breeches. My lips part, but I’m too breathless to do anything but listen. “Never. But I swear, Elysia, you hold my chains. And I don’t know how to react to it all.” He whispers against my mouth. “Lux stays in her tower, lets me defend it all I want. You...damn it, Elysia. You’re not even in the tower. You’re some warriress of light rising higher than me and defending my drawbridge.”

I smile at that image, an image that he grants me inside my head, but Neo chastises me, “Stop smiling.” I throw him a look, brow wrinkling, but Neo wrenches me closer and promises against my mouth, “I love you, Elysia. But you cannot be higher than me. I will make an exception now and then for you to act as my shield under these extreme circumstances...in our bed, before my sister. Remember, my love, you are still my bride. You are not higher in my Court. You are not higher than me. And I do not need you to be my shield or my deliverance. You may be my healer. My grace. The soother of my soul. But that is all.”

*We’ll see about that, Neo. We will see...* I tap his jaw and kiss his mouth, feather-light as he carries me out of the pit and right into a throng of Fallen!

## CHAPTER 22

# “I’M FEELING TRULY ENERGETIC, NEO. DO YOU REALLY WANT TO KILL MY BUZZ?”

**N**eo becomes the Warhammer.

Aroused by the blood moon careening through the trees, Neo puts me on the ground. Though I know he can command these Fallen away, Neo is a beast off his leash. He’s going to pick a fight and willingly put himself in danger. Supercilious ass! I recognize what Neo is doing. This is how he runs away. How he takes to flight and returns to what is familiar, what he knows: Destruction.

“No, Neo,” I whimper as he shoves me behind him.

“For once in your life, stay down!” he thunders, pushing me back and vaulting out his wings. Not the Dragon ones but the vampire ones because it’s all he needs to conquer the Fallen, all he needs when it’s not yet the harvest moon.

He’s a fool if he thinks I’m going to stay down. I am his equal counterpart. His militant warrior of light. Even when he’s acting like a damned fool, I will stand beside him.

The wizened demons crouch, encroaching closer to my husband, their sinister and thin, sword-like claws ready to shred right through his wings. So, when he hurls himself into the shadowy mass with a mighty roar, breaking their bones as easily as snapping twigs, I unleash my golden stakes and attack.

Two Fallen hem me in, fiery eyes marking mine, crimson waterfalls of blood dripping down their chest cavities and macabre rib cages. Springing as high as I can, I plunge my stakes into their eye sockets, digging deep so the blood stains my front. It bubbles up, frothing its mouth as its shriek is cut short. Mine begins! I scream, I scream, I scream to the claws that have found

my back.

*Elysia!* Neo's frenzied snarl roars in my head.

I swing around in a ferocious arc and stake the damned fallen, forming a sword out of my Halo to hack at those claws until they clatter to the earth. Blood still oozes from the wounds in my back from shards of claws embedded in my flesh.

"Neo!" I scream when he flies toward me because it's not just Fallen now. Now, it's dozens of ghouls rushing along with the remaining fire-eyed creatures.

Just before his arms can seize me, before he can capture me, I do as he wanted in the first place. I get down, tuck, and roll until I emerge on the other side with him behind me. I call upon the heavenly hosts inside me, arch my pained back, and unleash a hundred gold stakes to find their marks in every Fallen and ghoul until they crash to the ground. Neo grabs my waist and hauls me from the tumbling hoards, rising above them and soaring beyond the canopy. I whimper when he touches my back, the sting from those shards that pierces my flesh.

"What the fuck am I—ugh!" Neo bellows a groan and hauls me closer into his arms.

"Where are you taking me?" I gasp against his chest, lips finding that ring brand and kissing it.

"Somewhere secret."

I pass out in his arms.



WHEN I WAKE, it's from cold water on my skin. I bite back a shriek at the liquid lashing my wounds. Sharp aches. All around me are nothing but sparkling embers from what remains of my gown...warm glitter fabric smithereens. He's destroyed it.

Neo's hands stroke my back, and I shiver when he pours another cupful of water. When I throw my head back so my curls drape over one shoulder, I open my mouth, but Neo raises a finger and reaches inside the Soul Pool. He's brought me to the grotto just as he'd said he would. All the spirits skim

away to his destructive energy, except tonight, he's destroyed for me. He destroyed the claws in my back.

After another cupful of water, Neo growls, cursing under his breath. "Not enough. Fallen blood got in your wounds, infected them. *Elysia*, I don't, I..." Neo suddenly drags a keen fang across his wrist, and I gasp when he sluices a cupful of blood onto my flesh, then strokes it into the wounds.

"Neo!" I cry out and slam my head down into the dirt, snapping my teeth and sucking air through their cracks.

"I can bite you, give you venom," my husband offers, but I refuse, shaking my head back and forth, resolving to feel the fabric of my skin renewing itself. It feels like birth! Like my skin rebirthing, stitching itself back together to Neo's blood power that destroys the Fallen blood, destroys the infection.

I collapse against the ground, biting back a scream, but it rages through my throat as the wounds close up, flesh resealing itself due to his silver blood.

Suddenly, Neo hauls me into his arms and wades into the very water of the Soul Pool. Though the souls around him disappear, he surrenders me to the water but bears just enough of my underweight, so I float on the flat of my back—as if he's presenting me like an offering to the spirits. An offering they chase and cover in a silvery, shimmering mantle. Hundreds of them twirl all over my skin, sinking as if granting me a healing kiss and rousing my Halo current to become gold, mirrored wisps.

It's a dream within a dream. A second chance. Hope. Especially when Neo shares this moment when he's brought me here. Am I granting him a new heart?

Once the pain ebbs, I gasp, sobbing a little against Neo's chest as he carries my naked body out of the water and lays me on the gray moss before the very heart of the Soul Pool. I sense the light of those spirits, still drawn to my presence. Above me, Neo shifts me to the side to trail a hand down my spine to check my back, but there's no pain. The wounds are gone.

"Those claws went deep," he informs me and sweeps aside the curls from my eyes. "I almost..." He rubs a hand down his face, groaning frustration through his nostrils, neck muscles hardening before he leans in, hovering above my ear to reprimand me, "I told you to stay down. Why didn't you stay down?"

I muster a shrug against the gray moss beneath me. "I'm down now." I



giggle, remembering when I'd presented myself like a photograph for him to capture on our honeymoon. All Neo does is deadpan, the corners of his mouth curved low into a glower. With a little wave, I add, "Right, right, what the fuck are you going to do with me?" I echo his earlier words, but Neo grips my hand, raising it, anchoring it against that moss, and I refrain from gasping. Something in his subconscious registers this image from that night. He'd memorized that moment in time before he'd traced his breath around the outline of my body.

Curling my fingers up to perfect that image, I tremble as his eyes sail across every inch of me, studying as if memorizing a new moment in eternity. Those pupils intensify just as they did on our wedding, on that honeymoon, while his shades trim my body's outline. How much does he remember?

A splash of water to the side diverts us, and Neo leans over, dipping a finger into the embers to restore my gown. "I'll get you back to Court now. You need rest."

"I don't want to go back," I tell him. I don't want to rest. All of my weakness from earlier has fled. It shouldn't be possible after I'd used so much of my power today. One little swim in the Soul Lake shouldn't prompt such strength, such energy, such revitalization, but my currents ripple into the air and tease from my hair in glimmering filaments until I spin them in a random, dance above my head.

"Quit playing with your Halo and get up," Neo scolds me, derision in his tone, a grumpiness.

Mischievous as I remember that time after I'd healed him following the hellhounds, I get to my feet and suddenly leap onto him, throwing my arms around his neck. "You owe me a Dragon ride."

"What are you doing?" Neo balks at my boldness, hands coming down on my back, but his arousal grows, tempting mine all the more. Oh, Saints! He said I could ride him anytime I wanted.

"I'm feeling truly energetic, Neo. Do you really want to kill my buzz?" I clench my thighs, and it seems to do the trick because he growls, drops the gown, and slams his mouth against mine.

He holds me just like on our honeymoon, bearing my full weight. Hands sliding up and down my back, he finally settles on my waist, arms weaving all around me as if struggling to wrench me closer.

I tug at his outer robe, and he obliges me by destroying it and the rest of his clothes with one touch. Moaning into his mouth while his abundant length

stabs just the edge of my center, I taste all of him, nip at his jawline. One hand anchors around my waist to bear me. The other cups the back of my head to draw me closer to his smoldering mouth so he may circle his tongue into my depths, stealing my breath. Fresh Halo gold trills down my thighs.

Here in the grotto, I lose myself. In the sounds of the waterfalls cascading to feed the pool, I lose myself—in the shimmering wispy spirits collecting in the Soul Pool, lose myself in the wind unfurling all around us like a promise.

Despite everything that's happened, despite that he's not the same Neo, I have no regrets when the Prince nudges his vamp manhood to my sex, wetting it, going slow to allow me to adjust. But I can't bear anything slow. With one grip of my nails on his hip, I urge Neo onward.

In the moment that he drives himself into me, Neo's whole body pitches forward, the full force of his length sheathing itself inside my core. Destructive energy, his dark matter splinters the foundation where he we stand, fissuring and fracturing the ground. A stalactite crashes. I nearly scream from the inertia.

Neo roars as fresh wind bashes us, and the entire grotto is suddenly canvassed in the shadow of...his wings. His *Dragon* wings! Just like before, they are enormous enough to stretch from one side of the grotto to the other so the waterfalls spill onto their edges. He's so dangerously beautiful, just like on our honeymoon.

Immediately, Neo pulls out of me, eyes like silver thunderclouds when he sets me on the ground, cups the sides of my neck, and asks, "What the devil have you done to me?"

I whimper, aching to tell him, dying to tell him. His body remembers. Somewhere deep in the recesses of his subconscious, Neo *remembers!*

His grip on my neck strengthens, claws curving from his fingertips, armored Dragon scales emerging. "I *never* release my Dragon wings when I fuck, Elysia. Only ever my vampire ones." He thrusts his gaze to each side of his beastly wings.

He released both for me that night.

Suddenly, he seizes my jaw and tugs my face upward, eyes brutal and demonizing when they rake across me. "What do you know?"

"I know I love you, Neo. I know if I could tell you everything, I would. But the Triumvirate—"

Neo snarls and shoves me away, prompting tears to spill down my cheeks. "And here, I was beginning to trust you. Such a damned fool. Lux

was right. For months, she's been convinced that you will be my destruction. That you only agreed to the Triumvirate with my Father so you could defeat us with your power. It's your grand game, isn't it?" I stay still as a statue before him, a statue weeping gold as he destroys me with his words. "You rebel, you resist, you refuse to kneel, you deceive my sister and my friend—you lure me with your power, you *tempt* me with your body, your power, and even your heart. You are making me *weaker!*"

"No, Neo, no!" I deny and reach for him, only for my heart to lament when he pulls away, when he runs from me, when he transforms those wings into his vampire ones and flees from the grotto. Naked and grief-stricken, longing for unity, all I can do is stand in the darkness and soul-light because what can I do? Somehow, I muster the strength to put my gown back on, but just after I do, the ground shudders. No, it quakes! I lose my footing, stumble, and fall back so my gown cushions the hard blow.

As soon as I try to get up, Neo is there. Without a word, he gathers me in his arms and wraith-shadowing me right out of the grotto. Just beyond the hidden pathway in the rocky outface is the Bridal Canyon, except it's not a canyon anymore.

I shriek at what he's done, at how the cliff faces on the far west side have disintegrated while he's sunk a mile-long crater deeper into the ground to act as a...a grave. Now, all the corpses are covered. Now, it's become a burial ground, not a dumping ground. *This...this* is what Neo has done with that uncontrollable power.

Gazing up at him, at the grim seam etched in his mouth, at the deep shadows growing around his eyes, I murmur the words, "Beauty from Destruction, Neo."

Neo can destroy, but sometimes, there is beauty in destruction, beauty from ashes. So, why do I feel like he will do the same to me?

When we return to the Tenth Court, I remember how we've been gone all day, how Neo did not do Court today. Once he shadows us across the causeway and into the main doors of his tower, multiple Court Stewards await him.

"My lord Prince." They bow their heads as Neo sets me down. "As they were reuniting families, our knights identified two Court Mordere scouts within the tent city. They seized them at the border and are holding them hostage in our dungeons."

Neo balls his right hand into a fist, veins puckering, humming with

power. Despite what happened at the Bridal Canyon, he still has more to spare, putting my Halo to shame.

Neo hasn't closed up our bond or raised his drawbridge, so I hear his next thoughts.

*Scouts can mean only one thing. War!*

## CHAPTER 23

## “YOU WILL PAY FOR THAT, ELYSIA. WITH YOUR HEART.”

*Why would Mordere attack this close to the blood moon when you're strongest? It makes no sense!* I storm inside his mind, shoving my way into his fortress, sensing his dark force binding all around me.

Neo angles his head to mine, upper lip curling back to display a warning fang. *Unless Mordere knows something I don't. Let's find out, shall we?*

*We?*

*I wish you to be present, Elysia. I wish to remind you of how I deal with my enemies.* He digs his fingers into the small of my back just after those words, and I resist the urge to take flight. Instead, I steel myself, clothing my body in fresh Halo currents that respond with a lightning bite to his shades in an ebb-and-flow battle. Still, his hand does not retreat from my back, not even when we descend crisscrossing diagonal staircases far beneath the surface where only Neo's flames and my gold ripples light the way.

Dozens of knights trail us, but Neo regards them as no more than the ends of his black robe.

All along the walls to my right are Tenth Court designs sculpted into the stone. Thanks to silver blood tech fused into them, the fire roses and vines glisten like teardrops. At one point, we pass a rocky outface where a silver blood-fall trickles into a river.

*Power dampener,* Neo explains upon noticing my reflections. *The silver blood is derived from mine, synthesized—so it carries my essence. Surrounded by my destruction, none may use their powers in my dungeons but me,* he finalizes, trenching those fingers even deeper as if goading, daring me to.

Angling my neck, I stare up at him, keeping my lashes low, eyes sultry just before I poise my hand and flick it once to conjure multiple orbs that blaze in the darkness. A second later, Neoptolemus destroys them, capturing my hand and warning, *Do not interfere, Elysia. Do not test me. Not here.*

Why would he bring me here in the first place? Shuddering as he leads me across a great arching bridge teaming with that silver blood essence, I wonder what sort of example he's referring to. I've seen his destruction on his own citizens, from reducing them to ash to taking their wings. What else could he possibly do in these depths?

From beyond the bridge railing, deep pits hollow into the ground, into the boundless rocks. At a shrill scream somewhere below, I leap back, startled at the woeful sound. Behind me, Neo's hands come down on my wrists, shifting me back around and prompting me to walk. I shiver while part of me reflects, questioning whether or not he wants to just throw me in a pit and be done with me.

Sighing, Neo removes his outer robe and drapes it across my bare shoulders, then thumbs my chin, tilting it toward his face. *It's a tempting thought, but no, Elysia, I have no desire to lock you away...yet.*

I cast my eyes down a little and smile softly. *It wouldn't last. I'd just make myself a Halo key.*

*Yes, you'd undoubtedly form hundreds to release every last prisoner. And that would be a mistake, I guarantee you.*

The bridge leads to a stone walkway flanked by spectral trees. Truly spectral since the trees have been formed of skeletons, fused with the same silver blood essence, eerie and powerful. I linger closer to Neo's side, welcoming his arm around his robe to frame my waist as the walkway spills into a rotund throne room similar to the Inner Circle of his Court. Except there are no statues of the Father. Here, Neo is not under his Father's eye and only answers to himself: the Prince of Destruction. At the end, on the far wall, is Destruction's throne. No blood-ruby finery or luxurious diamonds are necessary. This is the Throne of Destruction: of skeletons twisted and tangled together with silver blood essence and robed in his shades and flames.

There are no other chairs, no lower thrones. Only the ascending steps leading up to the dais. I pause, but Neo strengthens that arm at my waist, nearly drags me up the staircase, lowers himself into that calamitous throne, and hauls me onto his lap.

"Bring forth the prisoners," he commands in a grim voice, dismissing the

rest of the knights to guard the bridge—well away from peeping eyes.

“What are you doing?” I whisper as his hands pin my hips to his lap. It has to be more than wanting me to view the display. Everything Neo does is intentional, and a suspicious voice preys at the back of my mind, a subtle reminder: *He plays his games, but he will destroy you. Run and hide, little Elysia...*

Neo sinks his lips low to my ear and alerts me, “I’m cashing in on one of our deals, Princess. After all, it is after nightfall. And you look so lovely in my Court O’ Destruction. Prepare to sup, Elysia. I will feast tonight.”

*Here? Now?*

*You want to be a helper, Elysia. A strong Ezer. So, help. We are going to send a message to Mordere.*

*That’s not—I’m not—*

Without another word, Neo coasts his fangs along my neck and destroys my gown. In seconds, I’m clothed in nothing but his robe and quivering against him. I suck in a deep breath, my spine turning ramrod straight against his chest, but Neo divides the robe just enough to grant him access to the smooth panes of my stomach. Sliding his hand up between my cleavage, he captures my throat in a collar of dark skin to my starry gold.

*You want to harness my power, Princess? Do it tonight.* His eyes brutalize me with the dare. This is just another game. Destruction’s games of raising me higher to drag me lower. Here, he holds the ultimate power while I am a spectator, a pawn of fantasy for him to use and display. This is Destruction’s mask. *You believe you can upstage me in my true Court? I will show you otherwise.*

He wraps his shades around my neck to act as a dark collar.

*Don’t do this, Neo,* I plead with him, shifting against those shades that feel like cold iron. *Not after everything that’s happened. This is not what Ezer means.*

*Steady, Elysia...*

I’m reminded of the times he prevented me from acting in his Court and the worst time in his suite when he brought me to my knees. This is just another level of low. *My husband, my Neo played games...but not like this.* More than ever, I wish I could battle that heart inside him, that faux heart that belongs to Lux. How can he claim she is his saving grace and his love when his heart seems blacker than ever?

When the knights deposit two bitten vampires into the Inner Circle—



chains bound around their naked fronts and their backs to tie their wings down—, Neo slides his hand into his robe to rub the skin of my hip. Before addressing the prisoners, he barks an order for food from one of his knights. As he does, I battle that dark energy at my neck, incensed by the invasion biting my skin.

*I am not your property, Neoptolemus!* I snarl inside our bond, hearing him chuckle and lower that thumb to my pelvis, finger slow to curve along the bone, following a line to its underside, reminding me of that night he pushed me against the Chasm wall.

*Remove the collar, Princess, and your runt goes back into the Chasm.*

I want to scream Noralice, but I know I can't return to Thanatos. Part of me wants to dissociate. Go deep into myself and become some wild, dark creature in his arms he desires—his pretty pet sitting on his lap on his throne for his satisfaction. I could play the role. I could even enjoy it and welcome the caress of his hands on my naked flesh. But I am stronger than Neoptolemus' games. Tonight, I will harness his power, whether his Destruction or manipulative mind games. He thinks he can drag me down? I will bring him to his knees in his own Court of Destruction.

He lets the prisoners stew on the floor for another few moments and accepts the dinner provided on an iron platter. Venom-spiced wine for me and blood wine for him, juicy grapes, and succulent pork slices, which he proceeds to feed me. At first, I clamp my mouth shut, refusing to oblige him until he hums the reminder in my ear, "Supping with me every evening..." His words shoot into my blood like a projectile, and I arch back from the sudden stabbing right before I close my teeth around a grape, splitting its juice into my mouth.

Shoving my face back to him, my eyes are lethal when I solicit my own reminder. "No touchies...*under* the measly pittance of lingerie you'll have me wear."

Slowly, Neo huffs and removes his hand from my thigh. "Have it your way, Princess." Instead, he forms lingerie from his flames for me—the barest of lingerie that reminds me of fiery lace that hardly covers me but purrs a warm promise against my skin. Instead, he removes the robe, and I snarl at him. *Pretentious bastard.*

The Prince nips my ear and seethes while feeding me a plump slice of pork, "Check, Elysia." I bite his finger with my angel teeth, and he taps my nose. "Naughty little halo."

“Bring the prisoners closer,” he orders and toys with the gaps of skin on my breasts where the flames break. I grit my teeth.

Neo will not shatter my chart tonight. No way in hell, even if this is pretty damn close. While Neo waves a hand forward so the knights bring the prisoners closer, I devour the rest of the food, refusing to be daunted by Neo’s little game. I register the sweetness of the grapes, but they might as well be arsenic.

Once the bitten vampires bow low before him, Neo charges his shades all around the prisoners, his power yanking their necks up so they may gaze right into the Prince of Destruction’s eyes.

Up close, I recognize the differences between these vampires and the Court O’ Nines. Their pale heads are all shaved except for the few tufts of hair that form a single stripe down the center of their scalps. A status symbol but one much lower due to their mere scout position. Branded into the center of their foreheads with molten silver blood tech, no doubt, and because that damn warlord could care less if anyone recognizes his soldiers is the Court Mordere symbol: a sabertooth skull.

“Yes, feast your eyes, Mordere scum. Only one of you will be leaving with them, so take a good *long* look.” Neoptolemus swipes his hand down my stomach to my thigh to tempt fate with the lingerie’s trim. I hurl a tiny throwing star from my chest to embed itself in his hand, singing his flesh and causing him to flex his fingers and pull back.

The Prince loosens their tongues, prompting them to speak, but all one can muster is, “My Lord Prince...”

“Oh, how respectful,” muses Neo, turning his face to me and capturing my mouth, his tongue licking the insides of mine until I bite down on it, drawing his silver blood. He groans inside my mouth from the action, but I shift my hips from side to side in his lap and suck it up—every last drop of that silver blood, then down the venom-spiced wine in one gulp.

Knowing he’s lost this little round, he shifts his gaze to the Mordere scouts and mutters, “Has Mordere gone soft? Sending just two little scouts with proper manners to beg for my mercy when he knows Destruction allows for none? Not even from my bride who begs for mercy from me each night...” He drums his fingers across my knee, tapping like a war drum.

Careless of my lack of manners, careless of how it will reveal my sex through bare flaming lace, I spread my legs as far as they will go, knocking his hand against the skeleton throne. Then, I throw my face back to his,

glaring because I will *not* play his game.

“We are but humble messengers, my Lord Prince,” the bitten vampire utters, his eyes roaming along my gold-dusted body. Nothing more than little constellations on my skin because I’m preserving my energy, energy I’ll need.

“Mordere wishes to go to war?” chuckles Neoptolemus because I know this is a familiar dance they’ve engaged in for the past century. As the Father built his Court O’ Nines, Mordere formed his in the Deep South, a warlord society trafficking blood and flesh. “I will give you a message. *One* of you will tell him my dance card is wide open. But first...”

Neo suddenly cups my hips and rises, bringing me with him, gripping my legs and urging them around his waist. I buck, but Neo deadpans, his shades becoming bars imprisoning me while his hands slide to my rear to anchor me against him. Bile churns in my stomach, and I snap my angel teeth, but Neo’s collar tightens against my throat, forbidding me from sinking them into his flesh.

*Check, Elysia*, he purrs in my mind, hardens against me, and carries me down the staircase and to the Inner Circle.

*Supercilious ass!* I hurl at him.

*Saucy minx.*

Another after-memory but one I can’t even take pleasure in. We are mere inches from the bowing vampires. I cringe when Neo places his boot on the back of one’s neck and leans over, one arm stationing me while the other reaches down so his fingertip traces one scout’s wing. In that fingertip treads his force of destruction, his dark energy branching out. The scout screams and screams, and I slam my eyes shut, listening to the torture, scenting the burning flesh, the membrane melting away.

“Where will Mordere attack first?” Neo interrogates the scout and taps the wing, restoring it, only to destroy it again when he receives nothing but silence. Now, I understand why he is the Father’s perfect executioner, why he wears the title better than any other. Gifted with this singular power of restoring whatever he destroys, it becomes the best brand of torture. Just like he has built me up, broke me down, and raised me up again.

Shrieking and screaming and whining like a trumpet in these catacombs, the scout crashes to the floor and begs for mercy.

“Where will Mordere attack first?” repeats the Prince of Destruction before slow-destroying the other wing.

*Neo, stop!* I plead, burying my head into his shoulder, rubbing my lips up to his neck, his muscles thickening, silver veins nearly thrusting a predatory threat. *I can read their minds. I can get you the answers you need.*

*You will not upstage me in my Court, Everblood. You will not weaken me. Tonight, you are my pretty, pretty Princess.*

Oh, no, he didn't. That fucker did not!

This is not my Neo. This is not the Neo who refused to trade in flesh and blood and protected the tribute girl in Court. This is not my Neo who bid me to rise higher than the Father in his Court to protect the Steward's daughters. Not my Neo, who bowed low to the floor before me after I'd gifted him a new heart. He raised Nita and me high on each side of his throne while he lowered himself before battling ten thousand demons for me.

"Mercy, mercy, mercy!" screams the scout.

I rush into his mind, discovering his most conscious thoughts. No, memories. Memories of when he was a human, when Mordere raiders attacked his home, raped his mother and sisters, slaughtered his father, and stole him when he was no more than a teenager. My heart goes out to the scout as I wade through all those memories—of Mordere pressing him into his army, beating him, torturing him, and turning him slowly into a bitten vampire weapon. Now, he's reliving his trauma.

As the Prince of Destruction destroys the wings down to their very nerves, causing more screams, more trauma, I slam my hand down on his. Neo jerks his eyes to mine, no silver to be found. Narrowing my eyes, hoping the gold rings will burn, I breathe righteous fury through my nostrils and sink into our bond. My nails dig in like armored claws as I strain for that tether of energy, that annihilative power that is so cold, deep, and dark.

*You are Neo!* I preach the truth over him. *Not Neoptolemus, the Prince of Destruction.*

In one slamming move, like a drawbridge going up, Neo overthrows me and strengthens his fortress of our bond, filling in every last chink.

I whimper when the Prince restores the wings of the scout, planning to destroy them again. And he does...till they're burning stumps!

"Your heart!" The scout arches his neck back, screaming the answer. "He's going to attack your heart!"

"Lux..." is Neo's first word, his first growl. Every last muscle in his body bulges, his boot pressing harder against the scout's neck, forbidding him from breathing. A raging, roaring Dragon, Neo's furious power becomes a storm

inside him. The Prince's black hole will implode. He's going to destroy the scout. He's going to torture him and burn everything until all that's left is his head for the other to take back to Mordere. Neo won't listen to anything, won't see his history, won't see him. Not with that faux heart beating its poison inside his chest.

Neo chucks me onto the floor with one firm command, "Stay down."

He advances toward the scout, who trembles, understanding what's going to happen.

My atom bomb of energy desires the purity of release. No romance or rapture tonight. History repeats itself, and I rise in one monarchical move!

Now, my Halo-light doesn't just tangle with that intense gravitational force. It bites it, grappling onto it like a collar to force Neo to pause, forcing him to crane his neck back to gaze at me, brows over his hoodless eyes lowering into deep pits, pupils swollen to black seas ready to devour. His shades attack me, but I channel my power, transforming it into dozens of baby scythes to destroy the shades while fortifying that collar on him. He battles to break free.

Advancing toward him, my eyes hunt his, and I beat down the door of his mind and force his drawbridge to slam, to shatter against the earth of his thoughts. I proclaim my bridal seal: *I am a Princess. Your equal in every respect. I will always be higher than you, Neo. I am the Halo-Bearer, the Everblood, the Angel Bride. I will never kneel!*

I boldly approach the Inner Circle, passing Neo, where my power anchors him to the ground. Nothing more than a Destruction statue, for I have harnessed his power. I've collared him. "Knights!" He bellows the order, a desperate attempt to save face.

Exalted, clothed in my own Halo-light as blazing golden roses, my sublime fire, I throw my head back to constellations of stars surging from my chest, glorifying all of my flesh and blood. They catapult into the Court O' Destruction and beyond to prison pits below. My angel flames ignite, torpedo into a gold missile to command every vampire in the Court to their knees, eyes crashing shut from the devastating light, my power of violent emotion!

I lower my fingertips with tendrils of lightning curling out from my skin. I touch the scout's bloodied stumps as he quakes and shrieks, then freezes when I grip the whole stump and pray mercy upon his flesh. A million and one blessed breath prayers, but no arrows. Instead, thousands of Halo needles resurrect his flesh and blood and sinew and bone until the wings charge forth,

beating in the air.

And then, I turn to face Neoptolemus. Not my husband in this moment. He wears the mask of the Prince of Destruction. So, I tempt Destruction.

Naked as an incandescent topaz, I bring myself to him to where my Halo collars him, to where my golden light shackles his ankles and wrists in an unbreakable prison. Zealous tears streaming from my eyes, I cup his cheek, cradling it like a dark lullaby.

*I will never kneel to you, Destruction. I love you, Neo.*

In one instant, I take a leap of faith, and I raise him up instead. I release him from the collar, from the shackles until he towers over me. But *my* robe of light now mantles his shoulders as if crowning him with the promise of who he truly is and who he will become again.

*Elysia...*

The sound of him speaking my name...

The mushroom cloud explodes from my chest and showers the galaxies of my power to burn the heads of all the vampires in the Court O' Destruction, including Neo's. Nothing but destructive scythes in his eyes when I fall into his arms, and he kisses my brow, *my* brow, and purrs a low promise in my ear, "You will pay for that, Elysia. With your heart."

As I pass out, I tilt my head up to kiss him, and remind him of our blood oath, "No touchies, Neo."

## CHAPTER 24

# “GO, BABY GIRL. STAND BY YOUR MAN. AND KICK MORDERE’S ASS.”

When I awake the next morning, I’m in Neo’s bed...facing him.

He stirs as soon as I do and drapes his knuckles across my cheek. I freeze because it’s the last thing I expected after last night. Peering down, I survey how I’m draped in his robe, open with nothing beneath. His shades tease my curls and dance around my naked figure.

Spitfire is curled up on the floor behind me, puffing cold smoke, so I turn over and grant my hellcat some relief in the form of an entire ghoul of flames. Beyond appreciative, my hellcat pounces on the flaming ghoul to devour it in chunk-sized bites.

Neo’s arms slide around the robe, around me a moment later, his mouth collapsing against my neck. “Found him wandering the woods when I returned to hunt the Scourge. Seems he had a bit of fun with some ghouls... brought one home for you as a gift,” he croons against my ear as I flick my head up to eye the ghoul carcass nudging the wall.

I chuckle at my hellcat. “Much more interesting than a mouse or a bird.” Apprehension grows within me as I remember the events of last night. I angle my neck back to seek Neo’s eyes. “What happened, Neo? What did you do after I—”

“I wasn’t about to leave my bride on the floor unattended. I sent a message to Mordere. And the vampire you protected so religiously is still in my dungeons. I’m certain he will want to pay his gratitude to you.”

Relief floods into me, and I slump against him, but Neo coaxes my chin up to his face and rubs his mouth against mine. A simple, tender kiss, no invasions. “Come, Elysia. Lux’s sickness returned in full force this morning.



I've postponed Court until after the harvest moon. So, I suppose I'll have to settle for joining you at yours, my love."

"Mine?"

"Court O' Halo?" He snickers a moment later and leans in to kiss my brow. When I blink, confused, the Prince clarifies, "Very well, Elysia. For now, we will call it the Border Court until you have one worthy of your title Court O' Rose."

"You'd give me a Court, Neo?" More than confused because of his last words, I decide not to bring them up, not to question them. Instead, I cherish his tenderness, his affection and slide my hand along his bare chest since nothing but his shades clothe him.

Neo grips my hand, removing it from his chest, and kisses my fingers one by one. "A human one, of course, but yes."

I pinch my lips, remembering his promise to erect a throne next to his. I remember how Thanatos gave me a throne, higher than his pedestal, and invited me to participate. Still, it's more than I can ask of Neo for now. Not with that bedeviled muscle beating in his chest that is undoubtedly from his Father.

A short time later, Neo and I travel down the staircase together. I've selected a gown very similar to the first I ever wore following my wedding. The same peekaboo illusion neckline that hides the Grail ring housing Neo's soul—the same sweetheart bodice with its Tenth Court roses, skirts to sweep into a trinity-layered gown with a high inverted V cut to showcase much of my leggings. This is the one gown I stated I could wear every day, and it's no less true. Except today, unlike the black and mahogany gold I'd selected the first time, I've chosen royal purple and gold.

As usual, Neo prefers his extended train of a black Court robe and ruby finery, though he's also donned gold and iron-fused armor along his boots, leather legs, and the shoulders and arms of the black velvet robe. As if he still wants to prepare for a battle at any minute. Understandable with the threats of Mordere, but I haven't asked him if he believes they are empty threats.

In the Commons, Quillion and Nita await us, but they are already seated in the breakfast hall at the table. The blood bishop rises from his seat. Not Nita, but Neo leans over, skirting her horns so he may kiss her cheek before taking his seat next to her.

"Brother." She nods to him before and only rises to greet me, kissing my cheeks. "Does he get to keep his kneecaps, sweet halo?"

“Hmm...” I swing my gaze to Neo, to that soft silver mist that seems to sigh an apology for the previous night. Still, I expect him to bring his A-game and meander over to his chair and dig my hand into his collarbone. “Let Nita be the judge. Why don’t you share your actions last night with your sister?”

Neo grunts and reaches for his goblet, but Nita levitates it out of his grasp, downs it instead. Sitting straight-backed in her chair, she swings one arm up, curling her talon-tipped fingers that seem to extend, animalistic... waiting.

Adjusting his robe, Neo scoots out of his chair and stalks around it, eyes gleaming upon mine, shadow assaulting me. From where I stand behind my chair, I recognize that bedroom battle glint in his eye and quicksilver tongue behind his side smirk.

“Perhaps it was no *righteous* collar, my pretty, pretty Princess, but you certainly got *hot* under it *and* in my flaming lingerie *and* with my hands all over you.” He threads his brows up and down, head dipping low, and I match his smirk.

Nita snarls under her breath and scrapes her talon across the table. “I’m surprised you still have your dick attached, Neo, as we both know she’s conquered it before.”

“In the days of Queen Dick will this pretty Princess ever destroy my most prized possession,” Neo goads me, wrenching my hips to his so his vamp-shaft bulges against my gown through his breeches.

Pretent—oh damn it to hell. “Neo may have pink-collared me for a few precious moments. But he and all other vampires in the Court saw the light in the end, *my* light, when they fell to their knees before me.”

Nita sighs as if disappointed and circles her talon in a halo pattern as if encouraging me further. I shrug because she’s right. Neo crouching and prodding his member into the gown folds near my sex is proof. So, I climb up him, shoving my gown folds back and rising higher than him to conclude, “No, Neo, I may never fully destroy your balls, but I thoroughly enjoyed yanking your chain last night.” I thrust one finger to the chair behind us and direct him, “Sit, stay, good demon. You’ll be my throne this morning.”

“Yes, my love.” He kisses me and follows my command, twisting me around. Now, I’m sitting forward, facing Quillion, who tugs at his ascot.

“Um...” the blood bishop looks confused as to what he should tally. I relieve him and fill him in on the details, including what happened before when Neo took me into the woods. As I do, I take my revenge on him from

the previous night and pretend my ass is awfully *fidgety* in his lap. To my astonishment, Neo does nothing more than feast on his bloody meal and occasionally touches my hips to scoot me forward again.

*What's going on with you?* I can't help but wonder.

*I'm saving my flesh lust for tonight, Elysia.*

Oh, Saints!

“What’s the news at the border?” I finally ask Quillion while finishing my omelet.

He and Nita both cast a glance at one another, but Quillion sets his morning brew down and clears his throat to admit, “There’s good news and bad news from my recent overnight check-in.” I go still in Neo’s lap and listen. “The good news is my treatment is slowing the rate of infection. The bad news is more are becoming infected. We’ve had to set up multiple more quarantined zones.”

Nita turns to both of us, though her eyes fixate on mine. Such a twin copy of Neo’s, except hers are deep-set and not hooded like his, but the winter mist is the same. And at any moment, she may sharpen hers to scythes to rival his. Even now, they seem to tread on that scythe blade as she addresses me, “Elysia, I am leaving for a short time.”

I drop my fork. “Leaving? Where?”

“I am going into the Chasm. I am going to track the Scourge.”

“What?”

Neo’s hands frame my hips, a warning because I know just as well as him that Nita comes and goes as she pleases. Nor is there any point in battling her. Even in the dungeon when I won her over, it was her Hydra heart that truly conquered mine, just as she conquers all...except the Father.

“I cannot call myself an ally, sweet Ezer if I do not do all I must to combat this Scourge. We all know it came from that underworld. And according to our last reports, Father is still there, forming his army to prepare it for the Centennial Eclipse for his final showdown with you. So, I have a feeling I may just run into him and this Scourge together.”

I lick my lips, understanding, but I already ache to lose her. Quillion may be a worthy balm—but nothing compared to...my *sister*. For that is who she is—the sister I never had and always wanted.

So, I stand from Neo’s chair. Nita rises, predicting my embrace so she may welcome it. “Now, don’t you start fussing, sweet girl. You know we have the ultimate faith in you.”

“I’m just going to miss you. All of you,” I say to Nita and her alters, but mostly to Kitty and Bryony since they’re the only ones I have met, though the infamous Tourmaline has been referenced a few times.

With her arms around me, Nita’s posture shifts, and I can’t help but spread my smile when I recognize Kitty’s hands settling at my waist right before she kisses my cheek and hisses in my ear, “When we get back, I expect to see more love bites on your Prince. He looks mighty fine with them.”

“I look mighty fine with anything, Kit,” adds Neo, standing to touch the small of my back and beaming at his sister’s echo. “And trust me, the next love bites shall be mine.” He grins, causing Kitty to fan herself.

I throw him a look, but the next thing I know, he’s hauled me closer, my back pressing to his chest. With one hand cradling my jaw, his other roams up to my chest to sweep my throat. He rouses heat between my legs when he purrs low, “Trust me, Elysia...when I bite you, I will leave love marks all over your skin. You will be proud to display them. And all will know you belong to the Prince of Destruction.”

Oh, Saints!

Kitty cuts through the tension perfectly. She’ll never stop trying to smack Neo’s behind, but he always masterfully captures her wrist, pecks her cheek, and prods her away so she pouts. Gold dust breeds on my skin, floating through my gown to spritz the air with the scent of spice and honey. I doubt I’ll ever stop loving the way he treats Nita and her alters, especially Kitty, though I suppose I don’t have much to judge on.

“So, do I get to do multiple twerks today to make up for lost time?” Kitty spins around and crouches, nudging her ass against my pelvis.

“One a day, Kitty,” I remind her and lean over to kiss her cheek, too.

“Your loss, angel.”



FOR THE NEXT several days leading up to the harvest moon, Neo has become a paradox. No trace of the beast of blood lust that I beheld in the woods, in the grotto, and in those dungeons.

Every day, he joins me at the border, even if it still feels like one step forward and two steps back. After I heal all I can, he carries me back to our bedroom for more exploratory experiences. Yes, his appetite for “flesh-lust” as he dubbed it, has never been stronger. I still speak my safe word anytime that vamp-member nudges too close to my sex. Not that he’s minded. It seems...*dominance* is a great form of arousal for Neo. One I much enjoy, considering how much my Halo exhausts me at the border all day.

Perhaps the most memorable night was when he bound me with his shades, stuffed my ears with them, and used a blindfold for sensory deprivation before sinking me into a bath of rose petals. Oh, I’d turned all the water gold that night.

“You look lovely,” comments Neo, mouth skimming my neck as he shadows us across the walls.

I smile fondly, considering the dark amaranthine fur-lined coat I’d selected today, patterned in Tenth Court rose designs and cut high at my waist to exhibit the black bodysuit underneath.

“I’ll look forward to removing that bodysuit later,” Neo hints, stirring the blood in my belly as we prepare to join Jesula.

Today, Neo sets me down at a different sector of the tent city, a sector on the far outskirts where the Prince doesn’t normally stray since it’s further from the Iron Walls. For the most part, Jesula tends to greet me near the balcony, but I haven’t seen her lately, as if she’s been getting out to the city earlier and earlier to help. I understand why since she’s the one who’s kept the most detailed records of all the separated families. Thanks to Neo’s order, the knights are still working to reunite them, and Neo placed my mentor and friend in charge. Her hands are fuller than ever since she’s preparing for the incoming cargo train, recent escapees from the Deep South, from Court Mordere.

When I find her today, a knight escorts her while she clutches a toddler to hand him back to his sobbing parents, overcome with joy at the reunion. As soon as she’s finished, she turns to where Neo and I stand in a gap due to the crowds parting in his wake. No knights escort us since Neo ordered them to transport any sick to the quarantined zones and reunite families. His shades and flames are escort enough.

Immediately, Jesula dashes to hug me, her braids like a beautiful black cat o’ nine tails swinging behind her. She feels hot to the touch, sweat-ridden. “I suppose all the border changes are your doing, Halo?” Jesula cups my

cheeks but flicks a sharp gaze upon Neo.

“More of a team effort,” I acknowledge, granting credit to my husband.

Jesula shoves me aside and lurches for him, brandishing her taser. “I don’t care if you’re twelve forget-me-nots short of a bouquet, Prince, if you hurt my baby girl, I can guarantee you, balls will roll!”

Neo opens his mouth, no doubt to elicit a witty comeback, but he doesn’t get the chance. Not when he hones his vampire vision, judging by his pupils expanding. One second later, screams echo in the distance.

In one instant, all his muscles harden as horns, silver veins erupting over his flesh before he unleashes one mighty growl, “Mordere!”

I whip my head to the south where hoards of vampires attack the cargo train packed full of those escaped humans, refugees.

“No!” I shriek, but it’s too late.

In one indomitable move, the Prince grips me and Jesula by the waists and shadows us to the Iron Walls, deposits us there, and orders his knights to protect us. He kisses me once, breathes a low, seductive demand, “Stay here, Elysia. I will come back for what is *mine*,” and charges from the walls, wraith-shadowing into the air.

All I give Jes is one defeated glance because she understands what I’m about to do. Sighing, she drops her arms and expresses, “I know not to argue with you by now, Lyssi. Go, baby girl. Stand by your man. And kick Mordere’s ass.”

The cargo train is surrounded on both sides by thick brush and woods. Nothing like the Spirit Realm woods, but enough covering for miles till they curve toward the Deep South mountain ranges where one enormous tunnel marks the entrance to Court Mordere borders.

By the time I arrive, after phasing to the train area, the families closest to the front of the train have evacuated. Meanwhile, Neo attacks Mordere’s vampires, grinding wings and bone to dust, protecting the other families. I protect the refugees’ retreat, surrounding them in glowing cocoons of holy fire that will burn any vampires who may try to touch them.

In the distance, I can make out a hundred of Neo’s knights flying from the Iron Walls to join him. But when I swing my head back to my Prince, I fear they won’t reach him in time!

Thanks to my father, I know better than anyone how bitten vampires are more difficult to kill than born ones. Why isn’t Neo transforming into his Dragon? As soon as he destroys another two individual vampires and breaks

apart the door to the cargo train, I know why. He's harnessed his power, caged it in such a way to allow for a surgical attack so he doesn't harm any humans.

Court Mordere forces move in, but he hurls his vampire wings to shield himself. Several assault him, assault those wings, their fangs driving deep into him, tearing at flesh, spilling silver blood. I circle every rushing human, protecting them before racing in vampire speed to get to Neo.

Before I can even reach his side, before my hands can unleash my Halo power to fly, the strongest vampire I've ever felt, save for Neo, save for Death, commandeers my body, arresting me against his chest. My human skull crashes against his hardened shoulder, and I see stars. One powerful arm secures my waist, caging me.

"Mordere!" Neo's thunderous scream roars as Mordere's vampire teeth prowl my throat a second later, his fangs edging out. Goddess, preserve me! I buckle to those fangs pricking my flesh several times through the high neck of my coat.

"Stay down, *Neoptolemus*," the bitten vampire chirps, and a moan catches in my throat at the sight of Neo falling to the ground. Immediately, more vampires set on him. No! How can one mere command overthrow the Prince of Destruction? Though Neo remains on the ground, he still battles them, roaring and reducing the ones he can to ash as blood pools around his body.

"Thank you for joining us, Angel Bride," Mordere's sinister voice bleeds into my ears, his hand bearing armored claws like mine, though his are formed of vampire bones and teeth that bite into my neck as he yanks me back by my hair, ripping at curls and blackening my vision.

Mordere looks every inch the warlord and butcher that his reputation boasts of. Hundreds of fang marks eclipse his fair skin like tattoos, like brands, like trophies. Not forsaking his face or the shaved sides of his head, they continue and only disappear beneath that exalted ponytail. His eyes are gray smoke following a bloody battle.

"*Elysia*..." he savors my name, and every scrap of his commanding force dives inside my blood. Damn it to hell!

Now, I understand why Neo is still down, why he cannot rise, why Mordere's Deep South Court strikes fear into the Court O' Nines—and why not even the Father can control him.

Beyond the Father's inability to control bitten vampires, the same inability that transcribes to Neo, Mordere bears the power of *Command*. And

he's a damned master commander from just one utterance of my name. A name that Neo proclaimed at the border just over a week ago. Everything inside me shuts down because I know, I know, I *know*...Mordere will not let me leave without adding his bite mark to my flesh.

“Don't move, Elysia,” Mordere commands.

I freeze.



## CHAPTER 25

# NO! I CAN'T LOSE HIM NOW

“Stay down, Neoptolemus,” Mordere issues the command again when Neo gets to his knees, battling the commander’s force, destroying what he can. More of Mordere’s vampires descend upon Neo, fangs gutting his wings, his muscles, his flesh.

“No!” I shriek, but Mordere silences me, collars me with that bone armor, restricting my breath to a rasp.

“Don’t move, Elysia.” There is no possible way I can. The command is stronger than all the trauma serpents surrounding my heart. Paralysis overcomes me. No matter what else happens, I must remain rooted to the ground. “His *heart*,” Mordere purrs low in my ear, then pricks the side of my neck again. Aggravated by my coat, the vampire rips at the fur and velvet so he may have full access to my skin glowing with my ethereal light. I flinch from his stubble—an abrasion on my skin. Webs of fear assault my spine.

“Stay down, Neoptolemus,” he orders again, rocketing my Prince to the earth with his power. I try to summon my Halo, but it falters, weakened by my emotions as Mordere raises his voice. Careless of however many soldiers he loses, the warlord is only content that Neo follows his command. “I must thank you, my Lord Prince. When you returned the scout to me, it put away all doubts. I had my suspicions from the first moment I heard of her standing *higher* than you in your Court. As if *you*, of all vampires, Neoptolemus, Prince of Destruction...the Dragon could allow such a thing!”

When my chest sparks with embers, when I wrestle against the force of his bruising mouth, the vampire growls, “Don’t move, Elysia. Stay down, Neoptolemus.”

Names have power. He must use them every time. His power shackles my

whole body. No, it forms an impossible labyrinth, injecting deep into my blood, nullifying even my half-blood powers, causing my heart to retreat, to dig in deep.

“Time out, pretties. He’s had enough for a few moments,” Mordere orders to his mass of vampires, who back away from Neo, relieving him of their torture. “Stay down, Neoptolemus,” the warlord reminds him.

Could he rise if he desired? Any armor left has now shattered to smithereens, his cape is in shreds, and hundreds of bites and claw marks ravage his skin, including his face. Blood forms a deep pool around him.

“We don’t have long before Neo’s knight forces arrive, Princess. My tigers will delay them for a short time. Stay down, Neoptolemus,” he must repeat whenever Neo begins to rise, only to his knees. Mordere’s vampires still surround him like a wall.

I scream from the vampire slashing through my coat until only my thin bodysuit with its low neckline remains. Mordere grips my waist, jerks me around, and pins his chest to mine—those gray eyes like warships, anarchic brutality in what would otherwise be handsome features. Again, he commands me not to move, then inspects my face, eyes coasting lower to chuckle at my lack of marks.

“Mordere!” bellows Neo behind me. “Don’t you fucking touch her, do you hear me?! I’ll destroy you where you stand!”

“Stay down, Neoptolemus.” Mordere clicks his teeth as he examines me. A lightning bolt of fear prompts my body to quiver. “Why, she’s practically glowing! Such *angelic* beauty.”

Disgusted by his fingers crawling all over my waist, by the smoke storm of his eyes pillaging my body, I spit in his face. In response, Mordere digs his armored claws into my bodysuit and chortles low. “Pity I may not savor now. But there will be time for that later,” he avows, and bile churns in my stomach. “I’m surprised it was so easy for us to conquer you, Neoptolemus, and you’d better stay down, old friend. How, unlike the Prince of Destruction. Tsk, tsk, tsk, I suppose his little Angel Bride has something to do with it. Your Father’s gift to me may have been short-sighted.”

What gift? What is he talking about? Why would the Father of Vampires give someone like Mordere a gift?

He turns his ruthless eyes on me again. “By now, you must know I’m a Commander. So, Elysia, darling...answer my question and remember not to move.” I close my eyes to the weight of that command striking me as saber-

tooth jaws, penetrating deep into the fabric of my being, waging war against my sanity, against my free will. “Does Neoptolemus satisfy you in bed?”

All I want to do is spit again in his mark-ridden, butcher face, but I can’t when he commands me otherwise. No choice but to answer, I do my best to retort with that smart mouth Neo adores, “Yes, even if I’m no bed bunny. And I’d say you should take a *bite* out of reality. You’ve made *your* bed, and you will lie in it. But I guarantee you it won’t be satisfying.”

“Is that so, Princess?” Mordere swipes his thumb down the line of my throat to settle on my jugular. “Hmm, I like this one, Prince. Ugh, Neoptolemus...I said stay down!” He huffs in a growl when Neo manages to get to his feet, all his shades healing his wounds. Mordere sets his vampires on Neo again to enforce his word.

In that split second, when he’s more consumed with Neo, I press my lips together, clamping them shut—somehow managing not to give the shifting behind them within my gums away. Between his commands, I strengthen my Halo, reinforce it, taming the serpents, mutilating Mordere’s dark force with my star-fire. Beyond the train in the distance, a small army battles—Mordere’s tigers and Neo’s knights.

“Trust me, Princess, *you* will satisfy *my* bed very soon.” I swallow when Mordere’s hands roam the bodysuit up from my waist, traveling across my breasts and up to my neck to angle it to the side. “You see, I have a little surprise in store for Neoptolemus.” His voice dips to a whisper to tickle my ear. “But first, I’ll take a bite out of you.”

He doesn’t command me to freeze, and the heavenly hula hoop in my chest radiates, kindled with righteous energy laced with a little madness. But any physical attacks won’t be enough to combat Mordere. Instinct prevails me to sink inside his mind, to bind my Halo like a subtle warmth, eclipsed inside his powerful blood force. Like a gold tracking trail, I probe the depths of his mental cavities so I may find the source of his power. A surgical approach with the perfectly balanced precision of a baby scythe blade. No, a sickle.

*Before the blood moon sets and the sun rises...* My Halo happens upon the stray words infesting his consciousness. What does that mean?

Mordere sucks my neck, almost causing me to break my concentration, but I wince and hold on to my fiery conspirator, lauding the conniving Halo.

I lean into Mordere’s mind just as he pricks my neck and prepares to stab his fangs into my flesh. There it is. I find it! The Commander tether to Neo’s

destruction. And mine.

However my mind tries to deny it, I have Thanatos to thank for transforming my Halo into a star-fire sickle. Two precise swings. Two meticulous cuts are all I need to sever Mordere's connection. In that moment, Mordere's fangs penetrate, but it's too late. With me no longer forbidden to move and Neo no longer commanded to stay down, we attack. As husband and wife, we attack with everything!

Mordere's eyes fly open wide as the Prince barrels into him, cocking his head to the bitten vampire with bloodthirsty blade eyes. By now, Neo's knights have arrived to attack Mordere's other vampires.

Before Mordere can open his mouth to inflict his force upon Neo again, I loop my Halo whips around his throat and pull tight—not enough to strangle but enough to burn, enough to choke. His eyes reel to their ceilings.

I leer down at him, grin at my husband's voice taunting him as he struggles with my power. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, Mordere. And yes, I do satisfy her in the bedroom just as she does me. Perhaps I'll let her pussy-whip you in my dungeons." Neo's shades and flames kiss the sides of my body, glorying in my angel light. None of those shades or flames affect Mordere, thanks to his bitten status, but he's still no match for my Halo.

"I can think of some things my whip-smart mouth would like to do," I banter with Neo and snap my angel teeth just for him.

"Perhaps I will have you cut out his tongue and reduce it to ash," he recites from our *Scheherazade* dance, grinning that quicksilver gaze on me. "But please, start with a gag, my love."

I do him one better and transform the rope into a collar and a chain, shackling him, binding his mouth and his whole body with my firelight. It holds until Neo's knights arrive and chain him with vampire bones and teeth.

"I've been saving something special for you, Mordere." Neo's eyes gleam as he retrieves something from his chest, digging right into the flesh to produce what looks like a bone needle.

Narrowing my eyes, I examine it, puzzled until Neo touches it, restoring the needle to its original purpose—before his destruction. My grin is automatic at the sight of the mask that reminds me of a medieval torture device with bone needle spikes all around the mouth—infused with Neo's silver blood essence.

Mordere snarls beneath my Halo gag, but the knights prevent him from struggling as Neo boasts of the device. "Beautiful, isn't it? The mask will

destroy any commands, but it will still afford me the pleasure of hearing your pretty screams in your throat.”

Righteous vindication rushes through me when my husband fits the mask to Mordere’s face, locking it in place as the bitten vampire growls...through his throat with absolutely no ability to form words. After everything this butcher has done, from pressing children into his Court armies to trafficking girls to be his blood whores, he deserves every needle of pain.

“Take him to the dungeons!” orders Neo, and his hands harness my hips to gather me into a honeymoon hold.

“The dungeons are too good for him,” I spit as the knights drag Mordere away.

“Trust me, my love...not this Dragon’s dungeons. I look forward to seeing him later.”

*Before the blood moon sets and the sun rises...*Mordere’s lingering thought haunts me again as if...as if it’s meant for me. It seems laced with the Father’s voice, his poison. And the way Mordere purred “*his heart*” in my ear. But all this time, Neo has maintained that Lux holds his heart.

That night in the dungeon when I’d defended the soldier, when I’d faced Neo in my golden glory before passing out...could it be? As Neo shadows us back to his Court, to our bedroom, I capsize both my hands to his chest, on my halo brand, probe his mind through our bond, sinking deep. And I weep, I weep, I weep! No, it’s not Neo’s heart, not *my* new heart, but I froze Lux’s heart!

For the last week, he’s kept the truth from me with a steady supply of his shades to mask it from me while distracting me in any way, from joining me at the border to exploring me in the bedroom, gifting me with sensory and sensual rose baths—and more. Nita must have known that morning at breakfast. It’s why she felt confident in leaving.

“Oh, Neo!” I drop my head onto his shoulder as he carries me to our lovely, dark, and deep.

“Yes, *Elysia...*” Neo soothes me, lowering me into the bed, hovering over me, and starting the slow process of removing my body suit as he’d promised. “I was going to save the truth for a Valentine’s Day gift. I should have known I couldn’t keep the secret from you. You have utterly ruined me, my love. Blasted my damn drawbridge right to hell.”

“But you said! You said I’d pay with *my heart!*” I point out as he rubs his lips along my shoulders, along my neckline, printing along my stardust.

“Figure of speech, my love.” He slides the dress lower, tugging to my waist.

With one fierce Halo whip, I wrap it around his neck and tug him up to my face. “You are a terrible liar, Neo.”

Pausing, he groans from the singing of his flesh, but I don’t let up. Finally, he bends his head to mine and responds, “The moment you froze my heart, all the rage and the bloodlust, all the *destruction* I’d felt only moments ago faded. That threat was the subconscious response to that destruction. But as soon as you passed out, as soon as I considered what it would mean to lose you, I...” he sighs, lowering himself to my breasts, to the thin scraps of lace that cover them, causing me to inhale sharp, he finishes with a dark laugh, “You will be the death of me, Everblood.”

“Yes, she will.”

We spin our heads to the subject of that lilting voice. Only Neo rises fully to greet his first wife. “Lux, I thought you were unwell.”

“I am.” She leans against the iron bedpost, scattering Neo’s shades and flames. She’s dressed in one of his robes, sashes unfastened and dangling, but judging by the minute lines of skin between the robe sides, I know she’s naked underneath. I can make out a few of those hundred marks on her flesh. “But you are worse, my Prince. Do you see? Do you understand, my husband?” She approaches his side of the bed and moves toward him, stretching out her hand.

I glare back at her and hiss, “Don’t touch him!”

“Elysia,” Neo halts me, cupping my shoulder. “Our relationship may be stronger than ever, but please don’t forget Lux is still my first wife. I’m used to my harem girls fighting over me. I’ll not have it between my wives.”

Before I can speak another word, Lux sinks her hand onto his naked chest, onto my halo brand. “She froze your heart, my love. She froze the heart *I* gifted you. Do you know why I gave you your heart back, Neoptolemus? The same heart that I fell in love with all those centuries ago?”

I sniff her poison from a mile away, but Neo...he tenses, straightening and turning his whole body to her. No! I can’t lose him now.

“Your Destruction is who you are. It makes you *stronger!*” Lux lowers herself to mouth his brand.

“That’s not true, Neo,” I deny and pin myself against his back, staking my claim, warring for him. “It’s only a part of you! Just like my Halo is a part of me. The first time your heart froze was after Thanatos, and you said it

was the one time you felt peace. Nita was the first crack in that old stone heart. She knew someone existed beyond the Dragon.”

“You’ve tamed his Dragon,” Lux whispers, raising her head so she may stare into his eyes. “The Neoptolemus I know never would have let anyone conquer him in his own Court, never would have allowed anyone higher, never would have allowed Mordere to keep him down. Everyone knows now, Neoptolemus.” She weaves her legs around his waist, cups his face, and rakes her nails into his flesh. Her golden eyes assault him, burning him like throwing stars infected with her poison. “They know their Prince is weak. It’s why Mordere attacked during the height of your power.”

Veins in Neo’s neck begin to shimmer, pumping blood faster and faster as if...no! I hone my vampire vision and hear the sound of his heart warming, thawing, his heart waking, his heart *beating*. No, no, no! I want to rip out all her pearly hair. I want to launch myself at her, but I can’t. Not with Neo’s baby inside her.

Lux gasps and turns those blazing infernos like hellfire upon me. “This is your doing, Everblood! All this time, I wanted to believe differently. I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. You deceived me!”

When Neo plants his hand on the bed, muscles hardening while Lux presses herself to him, I back away because all that’s left in Neo’s eyes are scythes.

Lux whimpers, fawning before the Prince. “Do you see, my Lord Prince? The reason why Elysia has been going to the border? She and Mordere—”

“No, Neo, you can’t believe this. Please...believe me!” I back away more, but Neo seizes my arm. Lux rolls off of him but continues to inject her poison as he pins me down, those blade eyes honed to cut.

“Why do you think she saved the scout in your Court O’ Destruction, Neoptolemus?” She drives her manipulation by using his full name as if reminding him of his old identity—all those masks that I worked so hard to destroy—not his new one. “It all makes sense. Your father was a bitten vampire.” Lux jabs a finger at me, degrading my father’s good soul. “And Neoptolemus destroyed him. You’ve sought your revenge all these months, deceiving *my* husband with your games, seducing and distracting him every chance you got when I wasn’t around. While we were on our honeymoon, she must have cavorted with Mordere all that time. No doubt, she shared his bed as a price she was all too willing, too eager to pay.”

The moment Neo preys his lethal eyes on me, a hint of a grin crosses



Lux's face. All this time, she's wanted me out of her way. More than ever now that she's pregnant.

"I protected you from Mordere!" I defend myself but know it's all in vain. "I went into his mind. I destroyed the tether. I destroyed his command."

"See!" exclaims Lux, her hand winding around his frame to claim him, stirring the fire in his heart. "She admits to entering his mind. No vampire alive has ever had the power to do that, save for you, my husband. She's always rebelled against you." Lux doesn't flinch once when she lies, but that spark of amber turns to a flush—an omen of hellfire.

"Listen..." I rasp even as Lux clutches the Prince's arm and sidles her body against his side. "Mordere is planning something before the blood moon sets and the sun rises."

Lux touches her chin to his shoulder and sighs, "I know what he's planning, my Lord Prince."

Neo whips his gaze to her, his attention divided...his heart and soul divided.

"I went through the portal, my husband," her voice softens, and Neo releases me so he may capture her face, thumb away the glistening gold of her tears. "This past week, while you've been at the border, while you've been with her, I've gone into the portal to challenge Thanatos and to spy on your Father. And I caught Mordere and your Father speaking with Thanatos. They were speaking of the Everblood and how she would be the key to destroying your heart, my Prince. And bringing back Death," she baits him with the lie.

"That's not true!" I try to get up, but Neo collars me again, shackling me to the bed as I rake my Halo currents against his chest, just enough to singe.

"Think about it. Why do you think she has the sickle on her neck? The mark of Death!" she reminds him, her words an icy sickle slicing deep into his heart.

Neo squeezes my throat. "You said it was the most beautiful experience you'd ever had, Elysia. Like serendipity." He uses my own words against me. And I can't refute them. Nothing within me can refute how Thanatos tempted me, how I tempted...Death.

"She's been trying to destroy you since she met you. She tried to kill you on your wedding night, my husband. She left you to die. I gave you your heart back just like I did tonight."

"Lies!" I wheeze. "You were bound to Death back then."

Neo growls as if unleashing some anger over a piece of history I've missed, something Lux never shared.

Lux swings her pale hair toward me to eclipse my face. "Neoptolemus and I were strong enough to fight Death, Elysia. When we shattered the Grail pieces, when we forged our rings, when we sealed our blood oath, I gave him a heart of such Destruction, he was strong enough to stand against Death. So, Thanatos could only claim *one* Grail piece but not the others. And the Father killed me because of it."

Thanatos...*Thanatos* gave me everything! I was too preoccupied with the king, with Neo. All along, it was the queen!

"I love you, *Neo*."

"Yes, only Neo. She doesn't love the Prince of Destruction." Lux slowly removes her robe and places her silvery body up against his, exposing that road map of Noralice, of *my* bite marks, *my* trauma. With one last cold and cruel glance at me, she pins her eyes to Neo's, then to mine in a promise of how she is digging my grave with her culmination. "But I do. I love Neoptolemus, the Dragon Prince of Destruction. Your past, present, and future. Your heart *and* soul. I love all your masks just as you love all my hundred bite marks. And I would never ask you to take them off, my husband. You don't need my strength or my protection. You just need my love. I am strong enough to take your destruction. If I wasn't, I would not be carrying your child."

In one moment, Neo releases me and kisses her.

With nothing in me to fight her, or to fight him, to reach him, I turn over and fall asleep to the sound of them fucking, to the sound of Lux moaning and screaming *Neoptolemus* until it drowns out my inner voice that weeps for Neo.

## CHAPTER 26

# CHECKMATE, ELYSIA

When I wake, it's to Neo's knuckles slow-dragging along my cheek—cold and familiar, tender and dark. Immediately, I scramble to a sitting position, almost fearful that I'll find Lux's fingers in me again.

Spitfire rises to his haunches, growling from scenting my fear, but I stretch out a hand and stay him, rubbing his head to soothe him.

"I'm almost surprised that you're still here. I thought you may have escaped to my brother," he reflects as I gather the blankets around myself, protecting my throat, my eyes straying to his chest, to that succubus' heart beating inside. Upon noticing my observance, he sighs and clutches the Grail ring at my neck, wincing at the pain it causes him.

"Where is your ring, Neo? The one she gave you?" I challenge him but softly, treading once more on dragon eggshells.

"After you tried to kill me on our wedding night, I hid it for safekeeping."

I groan and drag a hand through my curls, straining with my scalp, desiring the pain. He won't listen. Nothing I say will change his heart, will it? Lux has checked me. More of a checkmate. She's claimed my queen. I have nothing left.

"I went to Mordere while you and Lux were sleeping," he explains. I hadn't realized they had slept at all last night, considering there were a few times I woke to them fucking. "He had quite a few interesting things to say in his *mind* between the screaming. About how Thanatos unleashed the Scourge, giving you a reason to go to the border so you could distract me from Lux, harness my power and work to freeze my heart, make me weaker

so he could attack. Did you know he raised an army? He provided the grandest diversion of all, but his army will be my true test. You failed yours, Elysia. You failed to tempt Destruction.”

Neo grins at me, and my Halo staggers to the sight of his fangs. “You may have stolen my soul, Everblood, but rest assured, you will not have my heart.” He grips the ring so hard, his dark knuckles gray from the pressure, but ultimately, he releases it, letting it fall back onto my skin before tapping me on my nose. “Fortunately, for you, I am in a forgiving mood. So, you will join me at Court today.”

“Court? I thought you weren’t—”

“Tonight is Valentine’s Day. I am holding Court today to make a special announcement about the pregnancy. I wish my second wife to be there to celebrate the news...in all her *finery*.”

Something about the way he says it strikes fear into my heart. I open my mouth to ask him, but Neo crushes his lips to mine in a destructive kiss, painful and dark, punishing, almost bruising. So, I don’t delay when he departs from the room with all his shades and flames trailing him. Not one curls around me.

While I change in the Infinity Wardrobe, I give Spitfire the greatest meal I can conjure because he’s the only spark of good left in my life. And the refugees at the border, of course. No, I refuse to give up. The prophecy stated our bond is the key. How can I give up after one failed attempt? If I can freeze his heart once, I can do it again.

When I embark from the Infinity Wardrobe, Lux is waiting for me, already garbed for Court. Why am I not surprised that little has changed? While I chose a gown of full and luxurious drapery skirts of fondant-like layers—purple and gold—with a sweetheart neckline and a royal cape, Lux wears something sheer—far more fitting for the bedroom. It emphasizes much of her breasts but more the swell of her belly and the hundred-and-one bite marks.

Just as I open my mouth, Lux pins me against the Infinity Wardrobe, her mouth claiming mine in a feral, hot kiss, tongue licking all over my inside as if inflicting the same punishment Neo had. Similar to the last time she used her body against mine, I freeze and cannot flee because there’s nowhere to run. Even with everything that has happened, I can’t bring myself to hate her, not when the Father has used her as a pawn in all this, not when she’s my ancestor, not when the Father killed her and Thanatos kept her soul. So, I let

her finish spilling her envy, her rage, her hatred inside my mouth, let her bite my lower lip, and be done with it all.

“You will understand soon, Everblood,” Lux lilts in that soprano voice, cupping my cheek and fingering a few of my loose curls. “It’s better this way. Now, you will never destroy my husband.” After she smiles, she saunters away, earning a growl from my hellcat as his fur stands on end.

I shiver but don’t know if it’s from her assault or Thanatos’ shades and frost patterning the wall near the Infinity Wardrobe and whispering his shade voice, *Elysia*...

Spinning around, I crouch and practically punch the wall, feeling it give way, feeling his frost surround my hand instead. “You think this changes anything?” I scream. My hand opens to the will of his shades, to his frost prickling and thickening, hardening to crystal. When I yank my palm out, it’s clutching the same frosted rose he’d created for me before. Except this time, I don’t let it drop because hanging from one of the petals is that single strand of gold I’d traded to him months ago. My hair.

*No, it’s too late to apologize.* I hurl the rose right back through the portal wall. Instead, I turn around at the sound of Neo clearing his throat behind me. Prepared to escort me to breakfast, he extends his hand and bids me to accompany him. On our way out of the suite, he casts one glance at the portal before smiling at me and greeting Lux in the main bedroom before offering her his arm. They share a knowing grin that raises the hairs on my arms—some ominous writing on the walls of their mind. What does Neo have planned?

In the Commons, Quillion paces, waiting for me. Remorse fills the bishop’s eyes, deep shadows etched beneath as if he’s been up all night. When he doesn’t even comment on my gown, I know something is wrong, so I take his hands in mine and stare into his warm woodland eyes. Only now, they seem more like deadwood. “Quill, what is it?”

“The Scourge has become worse, Princess. And the Prince...” he sighs, eyeing Neoptolemus, who presses his lips into a tight seam as if warning the blood bishop to maintain his proper respects. But it’s the first time Quillion’s veins truly blaze through his skin as he confronts Neo. “Good God, Neo! How can you do this? Does our friendship, do my services mean so little to you?”

“Tread carefully, bishop,” snarls Neo, his shades encroaching closer to Quillion.

“What’s going on?” I squeeze Quillion’s hands tighter but can’t seem to summon my Halo light to offer any sort of gold caress, no ripple of encouragement.

“The Prince stopped the treatment, sent all the aid workers home...and the medical supplies with them. In the name of the Angel Bride.”

“What?!” Dropping Quillion’s hands, I ball mine into fists and fume at Neoptolemus. “Don’t punish the people because of your anger with me.”

The Prince of Destruction curls a lip back to showcase a glimmering fang as a warning. “You dealt with Death, my bride. Now, you will pay the price. After all, I did say you would pay with your heart, didn’t I? They will see how the Everblood is not their salvation. We know you’d never make the ultimate price for them anyway.” He coils an arm around Lux and ventures into the breakfast hall.

And I fall into Quillion’s arms and weep. Just before Neo disappears around the corner of the wall, Quillion utters to his back, “Prince Neoptolemus, I can no longer continue in your services.” Neo inclines his head back as the bishop holds me, strokes my hair, and informs Neo, “I cannot bear to see the loss of hope in their eyes that was in mine when I suffered under the scourge of Father. If you will not allow me to tend to them as your bishop, I will go as a vampire with no title and a friend of the Princess.”

“Then, consider our friendship rescinded, too, *former* bishop.”

Quillion and I do not join them for breakfast. Together, we share our grief, and I know Quillion feels every last stripe upon his flesh just as I feel those serpents nipping at my heart. Beyond tempted to go to the Soul Plane, I sink instead, sink to the floor with my friend, wishing our last hope, wishing Nita was here. If anyone can get through to him, it’s her. But she will not be at Court today, for whatever Neo has planned, he would never do it in front of his sister.



NEO IS DELAYED MORE than usual. The arena is far more packed than ever, and judging by the way Lux sits with her back straight and proud—the first-

wife cat who ate the second-wife canary—, this will be so much worse than the time Nita invoked her Right of Substitution. Far worse. Despite how Neo can't lift a whip or his hand to me according to our new blood oath, it's the invisible scars that hurt the most. Noralice lurks along the back of my neck, hovering around the sickle mark, reminding me of my invisible scars from that night.

Everyone in the arena flinches, cringes, and startles at the sight of Neo charging down to his throne, shaking the foundations of the arena with his power, fracturing the very bones and teeth and skulls of his throne, cracks branching into the Inner Circle. More shades and flames than I've ever seen. That's when I remember the blood moon phase will come to full fruition tonight. I imagine his dark force must already harness that harvest moon force. If he drained a canal last year with a frozen heart, I don't even want to speculate about what he will do tonight.

After their official cursory sweep, his eyes settle on mine but not silver blades. They are dilated, black scythes. I flinch as Lux squeezes my hand and blows Neo a kiss before he tethers me with his shades, wrenching me right through the air until my body collides with his.

For all of one second, I'm pressed to him before he vaults from that throne to land in the Inner Circle. Statues topple, crumbling around us, causing the ground to quake. I buckle but don't crumble to my knees. The sheer force of the Prince of Destruction's power surrounds me in a net...no, a full-body collar. Nothing but shades and flames, fire and ice, to drown out the flicker of light that is my Halo. No dark erotic poems. No seduction. No lovely, dark, and deep. Only Neoptolemus circling me like a predator, like a Dragon, puffing embers from his nostrils to flick against my skin.

Still, I do not kneel before him. Still, I tempt Destruction when all I have for weapons are my tears. If tears have anatomy, mine are a lost bride searching for her husband.

“Princess Elysia Rose!”

Neoptolemus' voice rumbles the entire arena, shattering stained glass windows on the upper levels, causing some of the humans present to scream. For the first time, Neo's harem girls sit in one of the front rows close to the Inner Circle. I meet Piper's eyes only for a glance before she lowers her head, whether ashamed or pitying, I can't tell.

I snap my focus to Neo as he completes a full circle, his shadow monstrous as it dethrones me as if commanding me to kneel. But I don't. I



will never kneel before abuse. I will never kneel before the Dragon. If I were to kneel, it would only ever be for myself, for something outside myself. I would kneel before the heavenly throne surrounded by the Goddess and all the saints while imagining the crown of gold and stardust that awaits me. To my dying breath, I will hold fast to my Ezer, to the warriorress of light inside me.

And Neo smiles.

So, I tempt Destruction more by journeying into that bond, into that dark haze that is his mind where I discover his Dragon setting fire to his drawbridge! Not just raising it. Not just casting me out of the fortress but leaving me on the other side of...a canyon.

“Deeply divided, we gather here today to bear witness to the dissolution of a union.” His words echo the burning of that drawbridge, and I am unashamed to shudder at the profession.

*No! Neo, no!* Wild and desperate, I scream within our bond from the opposite side of the canyon with no hope of a Bridal Path, but the Dragon roars to smother my voice, refusing to hear me, refusing to listen. He incinerates the drawbridge into embers.

Beyond the bond, Neo’s smile spreads into a grin, cocking his head to mine. Not his hand. Not his whip. His words and the breaking of our bond, of our marriage. *You will pay with your heart...* His words catch onto the ends of his new ones. “Your grievous transgressions against the crown are of such: playing the whore, soul-theft, and treason. For such crimes, the punishment is death by a million cuts.” Fear rockets into the back of my neck: *run and hide, Elysia!* But then, Neo raises his hand, staying the explosion of the Court while his dark shades encompass me like a cocoon, like the shadow of his Dragon wings. “However, out of respect for my sister and the blood oath, I am reducing your sentence to banishment.”

Coward, he knows he cannot lift his hand to me, but instead, he raises my hand to his, which is already bloodied. I whimper when he gashes my palm with his fang, when he joins our blood to confirm his destruction, which nearly forces me to my knees. All those serpents *squeeze*. “From this day forward, you are the princess of a fallen kingdom I destroyed. You will never be welcome in my Court. Should you step foot in my Court again, you will die! Let all bear witness to this dissolution: Elysia Rose, the Everblood, is no longer my bride.”

The horned crown mark on my wrist disappears until there is nothing but

my naked skin.

In a soft Dragon purr that strokes its way across that Canyon to tickle my ears, Neo whispers through the last string of the bond, the last tether: *Checkmate, Elysia.*

It snaps. Nothing but drawbridge ash left. The only dignity Neo allows is a permissive nod when Quillion arrives to halt the Prince's knights so he may escort me out of the Court instead. As Quillion sets a hand on the center of my back, he is the only reason the serpents have not sunk their non-venomous fangs into my heart. No, there is one another. The people at the border. The refugees afflicted by the Scourge.

"Tonight, this Court will be reclaimed through our Valentine's Day festival," announces the Prince in the background as Quillion leads me down the walkway. Gluttonous, debasing Dragon will feast tonight while the people, my people, suffer and die at the border!

"Tonight, before the blood moon sets, I will meet Court Mordere's army with the full force of my Destruction. And while I recover with my first wife at my side, I appoint Rook Idrys as Tenth Court Overseer and Ruler in my stead."

*Neo!* I buckle against Quillion, and my friend, my ally catches me, pulling me into his arms and exiting the Court with the last words of Neoptolemus piercing my ears. "This is my word and command that you will obey him in every regard as you would your Prince."

I float on an island in my mind, shrinking into myself. I cannot escape. I cannot get out, so I go in.

Even now, I cannot bring myself to hate him. I hate his actions. I hate that poisoned heart inside him that has vanquished me. I hate the Dragon and vampire of his past that has become his present. But I will *always* love Neo. My Neo.

While Quillion carries me out of the Court, out of the Tower itself into the ashy air and to the border, I know I will not rise from this. There is no more lovely, dark, and deep.

All that is left is Destruction.

## CHAPTER 27

## “I’LL GET YOUR SOUL.”

“Princess...” Quillion persists in calling me the title. I am a broken princess now. Just as the Prince had declared: the princess of a fallen kingdom he destroyed. I don’t ask how Quillion managed to secure the coach to carry us to the border. Perhaps because he still bears the seal of the bishop on his wrist. Can I have any hope with how Neo has not yet removed it?

“Tell them to take the high road,” I urge Quillion, knowing who I must go to, though I said I’d never return. I’d say he owes me more than ever now.

“What are you doing?” Quillion wonders as I stare at the ascending road flanked by those familiar iron trees and deeper layers of ash.

“Just visiting an old friend. Need to be more isolated when I do. Will you wait for me, Quill?”

He presses a hand to his tunic. “On my honor.”

“Always...” I somehow manage a soft smile but end up thumbing my wrist. I should not miss the horned crown mark that symbolized me as a bride according to the Court. All I have left now is the Grail ring, Neo’s soul, hanging upon my chest. For once, it feels colder than the tip of an icicle, as if ready to pierce my flesh. All of me feels cold, forsaken by Neo’s warm flames that caressed my flesh like *Scheherazade* musical notes only a couple nights ago.

I suppose this is my distress signal, I consider when I venture up the path to the lookout overseeing the Tenth Court and Court O’ Nines castles. The irony: now, I must seek the vampire Reaper who wants to destroy my soul so he may live again—all to reclaim his Dragon twin brother who has already destroyed my...no, I can’t bring myself to say heart. I am a broken princess

but not a broken Halo-bearer. I. Elysia. Rose. Am. Not. Broken.

But I still break down. In the deep ash between those iron trees, I fall to my knees, bury my head in my hands, and cry for all I have lost. My homeland in ashes and ruin, my father dead, my mother a prisoner thanks to the triumvirate deal I agreed to, my trauma unveiled before Death himself... and what was it all for? I am suffering and bleeding...aching and burning!

Breath ragged, I muster the strength to get up, to rise from this ash clinging to my Court gown. I cough from the ember flecks invading my nostrils and throat, overheating my veins in a hellish plague.

Finally, I make it to the overlook and stare down at the nine castles surrounding the mega-towers, the Tenth Court, and consider those blood falls feeding the canals. How I ever believed I could conquer this vast empire!

Truth and honor are all I have. I cling to those marks on my soul— invisible marks upon my skin of a hundred invisible bites...and one. Deep down, I still remember that night and desire his fangs in my flesh again as our bodies and hearts married with the promise of those souls in the grotto. This time, it does not feel serendipitous when I cry my *Noralice*!

When I pass through the veils of reality, its first layer cradles my physical self. My soul is dimmer. No frost gown clothes me. No echoes of Court finery to eclipse my *fading* glow. Only Thanatos' arms catch me before he drapes my naked soul in his Reaper robe and cups my face with his unfeeling hands, capturing my teardrops and turning them into tiny rosebuds.

“*Elysia...*”

I burrow myself into him like he is a shrine, like he is a sepulcher, like he is my...tomb of the potpourri potion of dead roses. I kiss him, angling my neck so I may dig in deep because I cannot escape, nor could I ever hope to run from Death. The kiss is not punishing. Death's hair is cold black silk falling around my face as he leans in, uniting with the kiss I've initiated, one I know he can feel all the way down to his...does Death truly have a soul? What had he said? He wears all the souls of the centuries, and he can choose any of them. Does he hold so many there is nothing left of his?

As soon as Thanatos brushes his tongue into my mouth, stirring me with a prick of frost into my depths, I break away from him to ask in a whisper-gasp, “Did you see? Do you know?”

Nodding, Thanatos peels the robe away just a little so he may pacify my spine with that frost, but it doesn't seem to help. Nothing helps.

“How?” I demand. “How have you known when I come through the Soul

Plane? How did you know about my past—about the conversations Neo and I have shared—about *everything*?”

Thanatos sighs, dipping his head low, those fingers lingering at the center of my back, part of his arm overlapping my curls. “Not everything. But you hold his soul, Elysia. A soul that was bound to mine for centuries. Whenever you come to the Soul Plane, I receive some shared memories.”

I press my lips together, almost ready to shove him away, to unleash my Halo light in the desolation of his soul-tower. Not yet, I hold myself back because there’s more I need to release.

“You said it would happen! Back in the tower, you predicted it!” I scream, pounding my fist against his chest, marveling at how he doesn’t grip my wrist, doesn’t stop me. “You said he was playing with me. That I was just his pawn. That I was a game to him and that he would destroy me.”

“Yes, this is Destruction,” Thanatos murmurs against my neck, fingers continuing their course up to his sickle mark. “He is a Warhammer, Elysia. That is his design. Neoptolemus does not know how to be anything different. His words are a weapon. His body is a weapon. Even his love is a weapon. He builds you up and raises you higher just so he can destroy you.”

“Not my Neo.” Not my *New*, I almost say, balling my hands into fists.

“No, not your Neo. That imposter is not Neo, my love.”

“Stop!” I cry and rake my nails into his neck, wondering if he can feel it...when I draw his soul blood. “I am not *your* love!” For the first time, the gold in his eyes fades to those pupils dilating. I battle a soul-deep shiver.

Nothing in his expression is perturbed. All that is there is sympathy and affection. Not even pity in those downcast eyes. “Forgive me...” he relents, bowing his head.

“You said he would use me to bring you back, that it was his plan all along. He should be closer to you than ever!” I try to work out the pieces in my mind, pieces that Thanatos has understood or predicted all this time.

“You said yourself, Elysia.” He raises his chin, coaxes mine up so I may not lose his eyes. “He cannot raise a hand to you. And your flesh, your blood, your tooth, your tear, they must all be given. Unless...you’re already dead.”

“What?”

Right after he speaks, I fall to my knees and retch, vomiting Halo-fire and soul-light, coughing *blood* onto his floor of frost. Blood: the only thing that may transfer. Thanatos takes my curls in his hands and holds my hair back so I may finish. I stay on the floor, panting and gasping at the sight of the black

capillaries that breed along my skin, webbing forth from my veins. The Scourge!

How can this be? How can the *Halo-bearer* become infected with the Scourge?

“*The Scourge of Destruction...*” echoes Thanatos. When he divorced me, did the Scourge infect me?

“No!” I rise, swiping at the blood on my cheek, and throw myself at him in one last desperate attempt, my distress signal. “If I have his soul, you should be able to bring him here, Thanatos! You should be able to tell him, restore his memories.” I clutch the Grail ring, rip the chain of hair from my neck, and thrust it at him, but Thanatos holds up his hands in defense, moving away from me.

“No, Elysia. I can’t.” He shakes his head and kneads his brow, his voice a deep, silken whisper. “Trust me...if I could, I would.”

“Why?” I whimper, I sob, as I dangle what he’s desired most right before him. *This is my life, Thanatos!*

Death raises his head, all the gold in his eyes gone, his jaw of iron and ice when he confesses, “I cannot share anything with him, Elysia. For...I am also bound by the laws of the Triumvirate.”

“What?” I almost drop the ring. “How-how is that possible? Is that...” I cough up more blood and rasp, “...why you are bound by the blood oath like him?”

“Yes.”

Incensed, I wrap the hair back around my neck, but it doesn’t want to tie. “Answer my questions for Goddess’ sake, Thanatos! Did you send the Scourge?”

“No.”

At seeing my trouble, Thanatos extends a hand. At first, I refuse, but after a few moments, when he does not lower his hand, when he forms another crystalized rose, I surrender. He did not send the Scourge. The Father sent the Scourge, it’s the only explanation. Thanatos sweeps my hair to one side of my chest and takes the silver hair strand of Neo’s. Instead, I cup his rose gift and hold my breath as he binds my ring’s chain, fusing it with his forever frost. It will not melt when I return.

“I sent Lux,” Thanatos admits, and I freeze, almost ready to sink to the floor from his words.

“Why?” I moan, grappling with my neck, with the onslaught of another

cough wishing to escape. I double over in a coughing fit, but Thanatos seizes my waist and lifts me into his arms in a honeymoon hold. I breathe in his familiar scent as he lowers me to his bed—alive with his shades and frost.

Thanatos touches his fingertips to my cheeks in that noteworthy crystalline kiss. “Because I knew she would be the only one who could tempt my brother from you. Because Elysia...when I could not claim you in that tower because you conquered me instead, and when you came to the Soul Plane, and I watched your strength and power to reclaim him and vowed to understand his darkness, it granted me hope for just one moment that you could understand mine.” Thanatos cups my forehead, eyes seeking mine as if knocking as if...praying. “And I do not regret taking a crack of your power, Elysia. Yes, I regret how it made you feel, regret how I robbed you—”

“I *gave* you Noralice and my hair!” I remind him that nothing was stolen but cough more blood onto his bed as he overlaps my words.

“—regret how I manipulated you...but I cannot regret rejecting that damned Satan’s spawn mark. I do not regret giving up my flames or the fullness of my power over the Soul Plane. I regret nothing because it was the first time I truly *felt* anything other than *Death*.” One cold finger descends to my chest, one cold hand pressed to my weakening heart. “For I felt Neo’s new *heart* before you ripped us in two. Felt it fused with mine. So, I claimed all the memories I could in those moments. Every word I spoke to you was true: I would follow you to the ends of the Soul Plane, into Limbo itself—ten thousand times over in order to find you and bring you back to me. Because I love you, Elysia...Ezer Kenegdo.”

Gripping onto his robe, I arch my neck and seal my mouth to his. Clinging to all Thanatos’ words, *every last one*, I seal himself upon my heart. Part of me wonders if he is the one who holds Neo’s heart, but I know it’s not true...not when the Father claimed it.

After folding back his mouth so I may taste as much of his rose scent as I can, I cough once more, blood sprinkling his bed. “If Neo wanted to bring you back, if the Father wanted to bring you back, how can they possibly do it now?” I consider this Scourge and how much closer to Death than I’ve ever been.

“They can and they will...because of what Nita discovered.”

“What?” I slide my hand along his chest, only to have Thanatos seize it, kissing my fingertips as I grind my head against his sheets, sensing another coughing wave coming.



“Father is using Mordere. This army that Neoptolemus is going to battle...it’s a trap. Mordere was the true bait.”

“How?” I wheeze.

“Mordere agreed to be the vessel for the soul of a necromancer.”

A necromancer! My blood chills.

“What does that mean, Natos? For you?”

Thanatos captures the sides of my face, thumbing away my tears. “If he uses the Necromancer to bring me back, Elysia, and not the Everblood, not *you*, I will lose everything. I will lose my heart. I will return to who I was. I will become nothing other than Death! Please...my love.”

Triggered by him laying claim to that word, I thread my brows low and start to rise from the bed. “You supercilious ass!”

“Elysia—”

“You pretentious bastard!” I shove him back, my Halo sparking till all my skin flickers with flames. “This has been your plan all along! All a deception, the *long* game to get everything from me! You knew about the Scourge. You knew *all* this time. And you know what happens if I don’t defeat this Scourge. I won’t fulfill my quest. I won’t claim the next Grail piece. I won’t be the Everblood anymore. I won’t defeat the Father!”

“I am Death, Elysia! I can protect you from him, my love!” Thanatos objects and moves toward me, but I unleash a wave of fire to fling him back and pin him to the bed.

Coughing, I plant one solid knee on his chest and snarl, “You claimed their souls, you deceived me, you *tempted* me! And now, you’ll use it all—just so you can come back and claim me for your own. You don’t care if the world suffers under his hell. Just as long as you get your revenge on Neo and keep me all to yourself.” I bite down on his lower lip, hard, and hiss against him, reveling in the dilation of his pupils when I grow my angel teeth. “Listen, *Thanatos*...you may love me, but you love yourself more. And I refuse to be your salvation. Do you hear me, Death? You get *nothing!*” I let go, burning my eyes against his.

“I’ll get your soul.”

Gripping my waist, he rolls me over until he hovers on top of me, his dark Reaper all-encompassing like a predictive shadow.

“No!” I scream and deny, hurling his words back at him. “You said you can’t hold my soul.”

Wrenching my hands up and mounting me, leaning in, Thanatos touches

his brow to mine and purrs in a low growl, “No, but Father will. You are dying, Elysia. From *his* curse. Your love is not strong enough. You’ve failed his Triumvirate oath. Once his Scourge desecrates your soul with his hellfire, he will claim your soul unless...”

“Unless what?” I cry, I cough, I sob, I moan.

“If you will not give me your tooth, your flesh, your tear, your blood, then vow to me your soul. Once you do, I may bite you and kill the Scourge. I will take you to *Elysium*. You will try to run from me, but you can’t run from Death. I will protect you from Limbo, from the Soul Eater, from ten thousand demons in hell if I must. I will doom my soul in the process, but just as long as I get to look upon yours, even if I can never feel you—” he touches my heart, his lower hand rubbing the slope of my breast, “—I will pay that price.”

It is so tempting to give him my soul right now. To trade it all away. Even now, I long for this Scourge to be released from my soul. I long for Elysium! Countless pictures like snapshots of a promise abound in my head at the thought of Thanatos’ utopian sanctum. And isn’t that why I am called Elysia? So I may walk the realms of the dead? I understand what I could become. I will forsake the Halo and my heavenly calling and become the Ice Princess of Elysium.

And Thanatos would protect me, would give me a throne, and my soul could skate with his for an eternity. No more suffering, no more bleeding, no more growing, and I may sleep with Death behind me and him kissing his frost down the pathway of my trauma every night.

Is this why I am called Elysia? Is this the moment for which I’ve been created? So I may walk the realms of the dead?

And then, I remember the Goddess’ words like the ringing of a cathedral bell, no ten thousand cathedral bells chanting in my soul, chanting deep into my heart: *From this moment on, you will have a Scourge of a curse upon your heart but not upon your soul.*

Not. My. Soul.

I will *never* lose my value.

Remembering what the Goddess stated about the price, I find the strength to open my mouth to bare my angel teeth, to bite down on Thanatos’ wrist, drawing blood and forcing him to release me. So I may challenge him with the strength of my spirit, of my soul. Releasing myself of his robe, I shine my light. I force him to his knees so he must shield himself from the heavenly

beams. “If there is a price to pay, Thanatos, it will be *my* ultimate sacrifice. Not yours! I accepted this darkness. I accepted this Scourge. I accepted the Triumvirate.” Unleashed, that life force, that vitality deep in my heart: an orb of acceptance radiates from my chest—radiant and resplendent and melting all of Thanatos’ frost as he cowers before me. “Whatever else I am, I am still the Halo-bearer, the Everblood, and I will carry healing to all who are afflicted by the Scourge. If I must perish for that, then I will perish!”

Trembling, Thanatos dares to lift his head to me, tears in his eyes to plead one last, desperate time, “Elysia!”

“Noralice!” I scream.

My essence rockets back through the fabric of reality, turning upside down and uniting with my physical form, clothed in the same Court gown, to return to that scenic overlook. First, I crash to my knees and cough up a pool of blood. Next, Quillion picks me up and leads me into the coach, where I command one word, “Border.”

## CHAPTER 28

# ALL ALONG, THANATOS WAS RIGHT ALL ALONG!

“How long do I have, Quill?” I ask the bishop after he’s isolated my blood sample following my latest coughing fit.

“Elysia, I—” he trails off, hangs his head, so I know the results aren’t good.

“Just spit it out. You know me better by now.” I cough again and pick off bits of ash from my gown but rip one of the fondant layers so I may use it as a handkerchief.

“Princess, somehow, you’ve received a far more lethal dose. You may have till the blood moon sets.”

Less than a day since it’s already late morning. I tilt my head onto Quillion’s shoulder and cough into my ruffle handkerchief, bloodying it. The bishop sighs, offers me his right from his embroidered waistcoat, then pats the back of my hand.

“Fitting,” I tease him, squeezing his arm as I coil mine around it. “When I met you, you were covered in blood. Now, it’s my turn.”

“Elysia...” Quillion’s voice cracks, and he wraps his arm around my shoulder.

Aching for her more than ever, I adopt Nita’s voice and put on a brave face to reassure him, “Don’t you start fussing, you flouncy, old fossil. I still have till almost sunrise.” My words are frail when I utter them, belief in my heart fading to the firestorm in my veins, the fatigue in my body, the sores afflicting my throat.

“I can’t allow you to the main border encampment, Princess.”

“Just take me to the quarantined zone. I’ll heal all I can.” I squeeze his

hand and trace the Tenth Court designs on his bishop's robe.

"Can't you heal yourself?"

"Too much of a lethal dose, like you said," I excuse, but even if I could do such a thing, if there is a price to pay, it will be my ultimate sacrifice.

When I reach the border, then the quarantined zone, I understand: this is what he truly meant by me paying the price with my heart. Curling up beside my best friend on the mere cot lying in the dirt, I clasp the Underground Queen's hand and lean my head against the braids on her chest as she forbids me from healing her.

"Please, Jes," I press her again, casting tiny gold crowns along her braids where some Scourge blood lingers. "You still have a husband and four sons. You're still the leader of the Underground. We need you. *I* need you."

"Children first," she insists, jerking a finger to the random little ones all over the warehouse, bereft of any belongings. All of them are fresh, bleeding wounds once everything was taken. Some parents regard me with contempt, lips pinched, eyes dangerous and desperate because the Prince did all this in my name. A double disgrace and debasement.

Obedying Jesula's command, perhaps her last command, I utter a silent breath prayer to Goddess, to the angels, to the saints, to our holy foremothers, and even to Death to let her live, to let her strong soul hold onto its body. Quillion remains nearby as I pursue the children, lay my hands on them, and pulse Halo power into them. For each one, it takes longer, and some parents force me to give up rather than give their little ones false hope. Some don't even let me near because anyone can see I'm infected from my skin paling, the black capillaries growing, my flesh splotching red, and my coughing fits.

Today, I use everything I have when visiting multiple quarantined zones and prioritize the children just as Jesula asked.

By the time nightfall approaches, my gown is ruined. Nothing left but the innermost layer since I've torn a great deal of it to provide some warmth for the others. My cape was the first thing to go. All my jewels, my gold circlet—traded to the knights to offer some rations to the quarantined. If I can't bring their hearts any hope, the least I can do is fill their bellies.

"The blood moon will rise soon," Quillion alerts me, but I kneel beside my best friend and weep because her breath is weak. Jesula is never weak.

"You're still my girl," wheezes Jesula, striving in vain to lift her hand to my cheek, to wipe away the tears that glisten there, but as soon as one drops, I realize they are not gold: they are blood. "Just sorry that I didn't get to use

my taser one last time because he hurt you. And no one messes with my family.”

“Oh, Jesula!” I slam my head down onto her chest and press my lips to her burning skin. Just as I do, I notice Quillion, out of the corner of my eye, retrieving something from his waistcoat. A syringe.

I flick my head up as he lowers himself to the ground beside us, takes Jesula’s arm, and swabs the skin before injecting her. “I only managed to smuggle one dose, but it will delay the Scourge as long as possible. And my silver blood that I added will help her sleep.”

I embrace Quillion and whimper, “Is there any hope, Quill?”

“Not without a cure.”

Yes, a cure. Now, I realize where I need to go. The one place I may find some hope. In the most hopeless of places. Tonight, this demon vampire of a Scourge will not escape me. So, I kiss Quillion on the cheek, harness the last reservoirs of my power to hold the virus inside my system at bay, and make my way toward the Spirit Woods. Thanatos’ offer weighs heavy on my shoulders while the chill of the forest lurks along my bare arms and seeps past the thin layer of my gown, little more than a chemise at this point. Goosebumps riddle my flesh. A patchwork of black veins pollutes the skin of my chest if they know to target my heart first, but they will have to get through the fortress of dark serpents surrounding it.

“Where are you?” I scream within the cadaverous trees, almost daring any Fallen or ghouls or demons to attack me. Claws scraping on trees echo around me. Screams in the distance. Monsters are ripe within the Chasm’s playground tonight.

“Elysia.”

The sudden lilt of her voice does not shock me as it should. Or perhaps I’m just too weak to care that I was blind to her all this time. Far too tangled up in believing she was just a Father pawn. Far too tangled up in the pretty mess of her flesh and face and the trauma marks she stole from me. Far too tangled up in Neo and yanking on his tether and trying to tear them apart. But when I turn and behold Lux’s eyes wreathed in amber flame and the Father standing next to her with his fingers stroking her silver song strands, I understand she may be a pawn, but she is also his queen.

“Where’s my mother?” is my first demand of the Father. “Where’s Nita?” is my second.

The Father chuckles, fingering Lux’s strands as if they are chains he and

he alone imprison. “Why, your mother is at Court, Elysia. Do you think I would honestly miss my own son’s pregnancy announcement? Or his holiday festivities? As for Nita, she got the answers she was after. I trust she is undoubtedly wrestling with my gift even as we speak. But she will not succeed. Plans in motion, wheels spinning,” he boasts and steps toward me.

“Why the Scourge?” I heave another series of coughs as the Father begins to circle me.

“It bought me the time I needed to find the necromancer. They are so awfully tricky to track down, you see. When it became clear to me even before our Triumvirate pact that you would foreseeably never give up the spoils of your golden *bounty* beyond that single strand,” he pauses behind me to scent my curls, continuing, “I needed a backup plan. Death was only too happy to oblige me with that strand...for a price.”

I angle my neck back to him, fuming, “What *price*?”

The Father tucks his hands behind his back and dips his head low so his eyes—nebulous dark like eternal dungeons breeding monsters and torture—deadpan against mine. “Neo’s heart.”

I almost buckle. All this time, Thanatos has held Neo’s heart. He could have given it to me at any time! Adrenaline-induced bursts of Halo light careen from my skin like lightning but not quite striking. No wonder he played Destruction so well!

“Little matter that Death turned into a far greater ally than you ever considered.” He dismisses the lightning tendrils breeding on my skin. “Both my sons of old will be returned to me before the rising sun, and we shall form a new Triumvirate once you are dead. The only time the sun rises in my kingdom is following a blood moon. Did you know that, Elysia?”

“You infected people, my people, human beings, all for what?” I seethe and hurl a wave of Haloed lightning at his back, rejoicing in how it causes him to stumble, to spin around, and pay attention. “To distract me?!”

“Oh, it was quite difficult. Tell her, Lux,” the Father bids her.

She rubs her hand up and down her naked arm as if playing a role. Everything she wears is a role with the diamonded cobweb bustier draped across her breasts with tiny diamond strings dangling across her arms. And the same diamonded thong barely covering her sex and the hip attachments of luxurious white ruffles puffing out to exhibit her bare legs. And the angel wings headdress.

In her eyes are nothing but those gold stars until they spiral into eerie



amber flames. Amber. And then, she dances the few steps into my circle, her body graceful and seductive as usual when she reaches for me and kisses me. A Scourge kiss! Infectious, it injects deep into my throat, stirring all those black capillaries to approach the territory of my heart. And I let her do it every damn time. Lux is not just the pawn credited with Neo's new heart and salvation. *She* is the Scourge—the Father's viral vessel.

"I didn't expect you to be so strong." She cups my cheek, fingers tender as always. "I had to find ways to get closer to you, even convincing Neo that you were playing the whore at the border so he would have me check your hymen. Any way I could get closer to you so I could kiss you. But I didn't count on you taking my food supply, so I had to contrive a reason for why I had to sleep more and why I was sick." She frames a heart around her bare navel. "I didn't expect Neo to take you to the grotto so quickly or to heal you. It made you stronger, so I alerted the Father so he could put the next steps of the plan into motion."

Court Mordere's attack. And the bait for Neo.

"Why on earth would you deal with the one vampire you cannot control?" I challenge the Father as he weaves his way back to Lux, coasting his hand along her naked hip and roaming up to her breast.

"I use whomever I decide to, Everblood." He leans down to kiss Lux. I wince at the sight of him claiming her mouth in a slow savor before bending her lips back to a ferocious devouring. "Lux's reward will be Neoptolemus' true seed. Mordere's reward will be the razing of the Tenth Court. He will have his fun so long as he harbors the necromancer soul I require to bring back my prized eldest. You see, a necromancer can only be housed in the blackest of souls, so Mordere was the obvious choice."

Holy foremothers. The razing of the Court. Quillion, Neo's harem girls, all the innocent humans, and even vampires, despite how blind they are, thanks to the Court's bread and circuses. And I shudder to imagine what Mordere will do with the human blood farms, the anarchy and war he will unleash upon the border.

"I do hope you are not too put out." The Father wanders back to my side and pats my head. "You should have known better than to make a deal with the devil, little angel. Nor to believe your love with my Neoptolemus was strong enough to overcome centuries of our bond as Father and son. Of course, he was attracted to you, or perhaps he was simply attracted to the ghost of the girl he once loved: his first true bride, who will also be his last.

Come, Lux, we have a Valentine's Day party to get to. I doubt this broken princess will make it out of the Spirit woods alive."

No, I want to cry out. I am his *last* bride! But the truth is sealed as a ghost of a scar on my heart, upon my arm. No more horned crown upon my wrist. I am no longer a bride. Now, I'm just a broken princess of a fallen kingdom, and by the time the blood moon sets, I will be dead, and the Father will torture my soul for eternity. Unless...I vow it to Thanatos. But if the necromancer raises him from the dead, he will no longer be Thanatos. He will become Death. His flames will return, the mark of Satan will return, and I will be Death's prisoner in Elysium! Or I will become fodder for this *Soul-Eater*.

*I love you, Ezer Kenegdo.*

I stumble against a tree, catching myself with my hands and weep. Thanatos' voice is a dark lullaby in my mind, made possible by these woods. Could he stand against the Father? Could he truly destroy this Scourge if I give him my tooth, my flesh, my tear, my blood? No, I hold onto the words of the Goddess, the words of the prophecy. I am the Everblood. Even for just a few more precious hours or less now that Lux has kissed me again, I am still the Everblood. Most of all, I choose to hold onto those words of Ezer Kenegdo.

All this time, I've clung to that story I shared in Neo's harem. Of a warriorress going into battle. Of another Ezer driving her tent peg into the skull of an evil general. Except, there are other ways to be a shield, protect from danger, to deliver from death. I rack my brain, seeking all the testaments of my spiritual foremothers until the answer strikes me like a holy star because I should have known.

I crumble to the ground because he was right. All along, Thanatos was right all along!

Over and over again, I slam my fist against the tree until my knuckles are bloody, until the sound of wings flapping above me disturbs me as if summoned by that blood. I lift my head just in time to see the ghoul lunge toward me through the trees, aiming its teeth right for my throat. I scream, but before the claws can find their mark, something warm charges above my head, a familiar flick of an arrow-like tail on my skin, and that fiery roar.

"Spitfire!" I shout my jubilation as my hellcat pins the ghoul and tears his feline jaws into the throat and the mess of black blood, coating his face and whiskers with it.

My runt, my beautiful and ferocious runt, turns on his haunches and pounces for me, licking at the little lightning buds on what remains of my gown, soiling it all the more. Those lightning sparks are all I have to offer him now.

Throwing my arms around his neck, pinning my body against his chest, my cheek to his comforting hide, I cry because of what I must do. I cling onto him, scratch his ears, rejoice in the feel of his hot tongue scratching my cheek, wishing I could savor more, but there isn't enough time. So, I mount my hellcat and direct him to take me out of the woods and back to the border. One last ride. My gold tears stain his hide as I hold onto the memory of his powerful muscles, of the stirring heat in his belly, of this runt of a gift from Thanatos in an indirect way. How Neo bonded with my hellcat and wrestled around with him. Ever my faithful daemon, Spitfire carries me the entire way to the border, but I direct him to stop at the line of trees.

"Spitfire..." I address my hellcat, the ache already growing when he snaps to attention at the sound of my voice stating his name. Cocking his head to me, tongue lolling to the side, Spitfire hiccups. Now, I see the baby runt that love-bit me, imprinting upon me, marking me as his own. Somehow, I manage to steel my voice because if this doesn't work, he can't be bound to me. "Spitfire, go back to your mother. I release you. Don't come back for me."

My hellcat rises to his haunches, tries to approach me, to nudge my hand, to rub against me, but I back away, crying out anguish, crying out my pain, "Go, Spitfire! Get away from me!" I blaze one lightning warning, striking his chest, striking his heart. Tears fly from my eyes as I turn my back and whisper, "I don't want to see you again, Spitfire. Go away, Spitfire!"

When I turn around and witness my hellcat scrambling back into the woods, I drop to the ground, drop to my knees, hold my chest together, and sob uncontrollably.

*Elysia...*

*Thanatos, please...take care of him!*

*I will. But who will take care of you?*

Not him. *Not you*, I say as much, invigorated by that spark of rage, no matter how little. Shoving the grief down, I rise and proceed out of the woods with a tiny teardrop on my cheek. Only to recognize it's not mine. First, I peer up at the sky, at the netting of clouds that hover right above the border, at the thunderclouds promising rain but no lightning. Peering at those Iron

Walls, at the balcony, I see *her*. Nita is bringing the rain, but why?

With the drizzle misting my gown's leftover inner layer, I kick off my shoes, forsaking them, and break into a steady run. I don't stop until I reach the elevator, only to find a new barrier of the Prince's knights forbidding me to enter.

"Let her in!" Quillion barks the order behind me, and I spin my head to see him marking the knights. "The Hydra Queen desires her presence."

"What's going on?" I ask the blood bishop as I lean against the ironwork of the elevator for strength.

"Idrys. His ruling has gone into effect now that the blood moon is rising." Quillion flicks his head to that gory circle that will continue to rise and harvest to a full, bloated orb. "He's ordered the knights to round up all infected they can find...and set fire to the quarantined zones."

Foremothers, preserve us! El Shaddai, Goddess on high! Can't you hear your people cry? No wonder Nita is bringing the rain. She's delaying the knights, Idrys' orders as long as she can.

Driven more than ever, with bloody tears mixed with rain streaming down my face, I kiss each of Quillion's cheeks and beg him, "Stay with Jesula. Please...don't let her die, Quill!"

"I'll do my best. Where are you going, Princess?" When I don't respond, when all I can do is whimper a plea for him to understand as I climb into the elevator, Quillion takes a step back, eyes widening, pupils dilating—a rare occurrence. "No, Elysia, please."

"I'm dying, Quill." I close the elevator door. "There's nothing else left to do."

"I can give you the treatment. It will slow—" he tries to protest.

I shake my head and raise my hand to the bars, to the very first vampire who showed me true kindness in the Tenth Court...and has again and again. "I love you, Quillion." My voice cracks as I say goodbye. "Thank you for... my chart."

The elevator ascends. I unleash as many coughs as possible to fortify myself for what comes next. Because I have a feeling this next goodbye will be the worst. Worse than saying goodbye to my mother in the remnants of our burning home, worse than saying goodbye to her again in the Chasm, worse than saying goodbye to my father when I kissed his soul away to heaven.

The elevator reaches its final ascent. With the rain soaking my skin and

dressing my hair to my face, with its presence like an omen chilling me to the bone, and the thunder rumbling in the clouds like a thousand war hammers, I go to say goodbye to my sister.

## CHAPTER 29

**“YOU ARE GOING TO THE HALL  
OF THE PRINCE OF  
DESTRUCTION IN A LAND  
WITH NO KING.”**

“**W**e wish we could join you, sweet Ezer, but as you can see, we are rather *busy*,” professes Nita, pivoting her wrist and directing one single bolt of lightning to the knights approaching a warehouse with torches.

“Nita...” I clasp my hands to my neck even though I must look far more wretched than sweet to her. “Do you know?” Does she know what I am going to do?

“Of course I do, angel. I won’t stop you. I can only help you as much as I can.”

“Right.” My throat cracks and burns as I remember: empowered women empower women. I take a few steps to her side, dare to touch one of her horns for the very first time, probably the last...and kiss her cheek.

She winces, then grins, and launches another lightning bolt, causing the knights to scatter, and the rain to drown their torches. “Run, run, little ticks. I’ll show you how lightning can strike in the same place twice!”

My voice is no louder than a whisper when I proclaim, “Hail, Hydra.”

“Give him hell, lightning rod. Go slay that demon heart.”

Spinning around, I run, channeling what little Halo light I have left to spur on my vampire speed instead. Who knows how long I have before Neoptolemus leaves the festivities? How long do we have before Mordere’s army arrives?

Just as I pass one of the Iron Walls outposts, just as I prepare to thrust my body into vampire speed, a strong, cold hand grips my arm, hauls me toward the shadow of that outpost, and slams me against the back wall. “Looks like I

captured the little star,” Idrys’ poisonous voice murmurs in my ear, and his beard chafes as he mouths my neck. “Little dying star now.” No, he won’t bite me, but it doesn’t matter. He can still hurt me.

True to form, Idrys’ hand grips the sodden gown layer and yanks it up to my hip. History repeats itself because my heart shuts down. I don’t have anything left to fight back. I’m saving everything for Neoptolemus. If this is another price I must pay, I can only hope he’ll get it done and over with quickly.

“Disgraced former bride. All mine now,” Idrys warns and pins my arms to the walls above my head, one knee driving my legs apart. “Let’s see how much of an angel you are.”

Unashamed of my tears, I sob openly, I cry, I scream when he rips at my lace panties, when he loosens his belt and prepares to stab me right to that wall. I close my eyes and wait for that impalement, but he releases me... nothing but wind and rain rage on my skin. I open my eyes and nearly plummet to the ground from hearing a familiar, feminine growl as she plants a firm boot on Idrys’ chest and leers down at him.

“How I *hate* rapists!”

“Syn!” I cry out, my hands flying to my mouth to catch more blood droplets. Did Thanatos send her?

One serpent lashes out from her shoulders, digging into Idrys’ neck. More soon join the first, and Idrys’ screams and wrestles with her, but Syn commands more serpents to bite his wrists and wind around them. “Mmm... fresh meat,” she muses. “A proper meal for my babies.” Then, she whips her beautiful, bald demoness head around, her expression softening. Puckering up her lips, I recognize Verena’s familiar expression before she nods her head to the Court. “Go, Lightning Rod. We got this piece of shit.”

“Love you, V.”

I break into vampire speed. Nita, Nita, Nita had known. She couldn’t protect me, knew she couldn’t get me to the Court. Somehow, during her time in the Chasm, she must have met Syn...and my Verena. All over my being, I bear the insignia of strong women, like modern-day foremothers, blessing me with their gifts of empowerment and protection. How can I do any less for all the ones at the border? And myself...

Only a mile from the Court now, but at the last second, I swing onto the high road. I hurry to that scenic overlook where I can make out Mordere’s army. Ten thousand bitten vampires strong no more than ten miles in the



distance. Any moment now, Neo will leave the Tenth Court. He will wait till the blood moon is as full and high as possible. I'm losing time!

I whisper my truth and honor. I whisper it like a prayer and a petition. Thanatos tethers me, binds me, and summons me through the webs of reality, dragging me into the Soul Plane so he may hold me one last time, so he may beseech me one last time.

I gaze down at my chest. My soul is dim. My Halo light is going out.

"*Elysia...*" he cradles my face, treasures the sight of my eyes. The heart beating in his chest is so familiar. If I have ten thousand lifetimes, I will never forget that heart that times its beat to *Scheherazade*. Only now...an undercurrent of notes lingers—another rhythm that echoes of *Swan Lake*. I can't help but smile.

"Thanatos...please send me back," I plead with him.

"Please, my love. Don't do this." His eyes swarm with ten thousand haloes shattering and showering gold constellations. They are what I need to walk through the doors of that Court. My own pocket of starlight.

"I know—" I touch my hand to his chest, palming through his dark robe, "—you have his heart, Natos. I know you *love* me."

"You are not going to him, Elysia. You are not going to Neo. You are going to the hall of the Prince of Destruction in a land with no king. You are going before Neoptolemus as he sits in his hall before his subjects, before his resurrected wife, and before Father."

"And I remember *everything* you said to me." I touch my fingers to his face, sliding around to the back of his neck to stroke that ruined skin, that brand, that hallmark of his trauma. I suppose I can credit myself with branding him just as I did Neo since he used my power. "I'm ready, Natos. You should know better than anyone...my light shines brightest in the *deepest* of darkness!"

The truest glimmers of his eyes seek mine, seek the windows of my soul. The gold rings in my eyes climb his like an angel's ladder. The gloriola of the saints. Not even ten billion chandeliers can compete. Blinded beneath those orbs, I strengthen myself to keep staring as if he's transcribing a groom's oath to me of belief, of faith the moment he proclaims, "Sweet Elysia..."

Thanatos trails his black ice along my spine up to kiss his sickle mark and whispers his oath, his prayer within our bond:

*Take this kiss upon the brow!*

*And, in parting from you now,*

*Thus much let me avow —  
You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.*

I BIND them around my heart and gird them around my neck as Thanatos sends me back to tempt Destruction. Only, he's hastened me on my way! No longer standing on that scenic overlook, I catch my breath as I gaze at the lower Court doors. Grandiose and arched, formed of iron and silver blood and bones, and flanked by vampire knights.

Thanatos has faith in me. If he and Neo share a twin bond, I choose to believe the Prince of Destruction will, too.

This is why I have saved every last infinitesimal spark. So I may discharge my power against the knights. So I may approach those Court doors, already hearing the sounds of the Valentine's festivities. The sounds of laughter, joy, and light while I am bringing darkness and suffering...and a desperate distress signal.

With my holy heritage engraved into that last fraction of my Halo that I sense is no larger than a crack, I feel the Goddess' words harking to my blood as I throw the knights to the ground, chaining them there so I may boldly approach those doors:

*You will be brought low. Your faith will be shaken.*

Soaked to my skin, soaked to my very bones, I raise one trembling hand and channel the last of my power to push the Courtroom doors open wide.

They boom! They crash! They resound! They reverberate! Like thunder. Like drums. Like ten thousand war hammers!

Every last note of music stops.

Every last clinking of champagne flutes.

Every last sparkle of laughter.

Every last ripple of conversation.

The entire Court stills...every eye rooted upon me.

*Nor will you face Death in your next great battle but rather a new Scourge of Destruction.*

And there is the Prince of Destruction on his throne a hundred feet above my head, his dark herculean chest exposed. A cape of scarlet blood falls, plummeting to the floor. Gold and diamond-fused armor. The Prince himself is dragon armor and fire unchecked. His first wife sits on his lap, whispering her poison into his ear. The Father stands on that balcony in the bone box, lips curled back to show his fangs like a ravenous wolf.

Boldly, I step forward, my bare feet warm against the cold stone platform as I walk. Hemmed in all sides by the Father's children, who crouch at my invasion.

The. Prince. Does. Not. Look. Down.

*"Noralice."*

I preach my trauma as a whispering breath prayer. I preach truth *and* honor. The names that have haunted me every day for years are brands of salvation on my soul. Of reclamation! I carry their blessing of a seal upon my heart, upon my arm to overthrow the Scourge of hellfire inside my body. I preach them in my mind to grant me strength.

Halfway across the platform now with countless vampires snarling and yelling all around me, their threats are promises, for all the Prince need do is lift his hand to permit them to ravage me. Not the Father's hand...but Neoptolemus'.

I carry the echoes of my allies to grant me strength: of Nita, of Quillion, of Jesula, of Syn, of Verena, of Spitfire, of Thanatos. And even the memory of Neo and the blood bond we once shared.

*I am strong enough. We are strong enough.*

The. Prince. Slowly. Sits. Up.

At the edge of the statues to the steps of the Inner Circle, I carry the mission: my Halo Altar I am prepared to die upon.

I am Ezer. I am a Princess. I am the Halo-Bearer. I was not created for abuse! I was created for a crown of stardust and gold. I was created to be a shield and a warrior of light. I was created to be one flesh, not for the razing of my flesh.

So, I move my body and descend.

The. Prince. Lowers. The. Barest. Corner. Of. His. Chin.

Not once do my eyes flee from Neoptolemus. My chin is high the entire time as I ask, I seek, I knock!

The. Prince. Flicks. His. Eyes. Down. To. Mine.

Silver scythes: all that is wrath and ruin, dragon fire, blood and shades.

The memory of the music of *Scheherazade* curls into my ears, its beautiful rhythm timed to the beating of my Haloed heart to drown out the roars of the arena, the horns of destruction calling for my death, balking to my breaking Court protocol—the laws of the land that cannot be broken.

Yes, I am here against the entire Court O' Nines. I am here as a broken princess, a former bride, divorced and divided, lower than the harem girls. I am here with a ragged, broken crown of curls and the black virus of the Scourge staining my skin and flesh and my very blood.

I am here with Neo's soul bound to the ring around my neck.

In the center of the circle now, in the shadows of those Father statues, I use the last remnants of my courage to thrust my chin up in assurance of my identity and use whatever I have left of my Halo, our bond...to creep into Neo's mind. It is open to me.

There is the Dragon on the other side of that canyon, guarding his fortress, roaring fire and reminding me of the dissolution of a union.

***Should you step foot in my Court again, you will die!***

***Let all bear witness to this dissolution: Elysia Rose, the Everblood, is no longer my bride.***

On the cusp of that canyon with no drawbridge to cross, I must take a leap of faith and cross that abyss to find the *truest* version of myself.

The Prince's shades and flames rake all around my body, an omen, a threat, a vow of what he will carry out. Still, I do not rise but hold fast to those words from Thanatos...from the depths of my Neo's heart.

*Sometimes, if one wishes to be raised higher, first they must kneel.*

So, I leap into that canyon...

...And I crash to my fucking knees!

***I vow to be Ezer Kenegdo. Noralice.***

I will never kneel before the Dragon.

***I vow to be your strong rescuer and warrior princess of light. Noralice.***

I kneel for myself, for something *outside* myself.

***I vow to be the power that will carry your burdens. Noralice.***

I kneel before the heavenly throne surrounded by all the angels and saints while imagining the crown of gold and stardust that awaits me.

***I vow to be your shield, I vow to save you from danger, and I vow...to deliver you from death! Noralice.***

To my dying breath, I will hold fast to my Ezer, to the warriorress of light inside me. With one final great push—my life force falling in that canyon—and with the cold floor of the Inner Circle where so much blood has been spilled beneath me, I stare up at my husband as if my soul can burn brands, unbroken halos right into the core of his spirit and proclaim: **worthy, worthy, worthy! We are strong enough!**

For, Neo is writ into my very blood and bone and heart and mind—and the essence of my soul.

I lower my chin, bowing before the heavenly throne and before the memory of my *new* husband.

I have faith.

First, the sudden force of his power breaks the foundations under me. Second, his shades and flames thicken all around me. Third, he seizes my shoulders just like the day he was going to raise the whip to my back. This time, I do not escape. I do not retreat even though non-venomous serpents inject their fangs into my heart, penetrating me, and preparing the way for the Scourge.

Finally, his words on the night we made the Triumvirate oath echo in my head:

*You are the only one in the world who can forge a new heart for me again and again, Elysia.*

“*Elysia...*” he murmurs so lovely, dark, and deep.

I know that voice!

Inside our unified minds, the Dragon catches my body before it can crash against the rocks.

And I collapse into my husband’s arms. Neo raises me up, carries me till I soar into the stars! But I sense my soul slipping away to the barest corners of the fabric of reality as I prepare to pay the ultimate price.

## CHAPTER 30

# “TAKE. MY. BLOOD. YOU. SUPERCILIOUS. ASS!”

**G**o back, Elysia. Go back.  
Thanatos?

My soul hangs on by a single thread. Straying somewhere between the substance of reality and the Soul Plane. Lost between worlds. Like the serpents of a non-venomous web of trauma around my heart, the Scourge invades the arteries around my heart. A network of hellfire blood vessels ready to lay waste to that vital muscle and brand me for the Father. A great force that I cannot hope to overcome myself.

And then...two familiar melodies enter my ears until the musical notes form separate *tethers*. Separate but unified for one purpose, one shared dream within a dream that is so lovely, dark, and deep. One is *Scheherazade*—Neo’s tether! It pulls; it seduces, it tempts me back as if he is reclaiming me just as I’d reclaimed him. The other is *Swan Lake*—Thanatos’ tether. But he does not pull. Instead, he merely binds that thread so I don’t float away,—a tether of frost and shades—so the Scourge may not vanquish me.

I am the space where the light meets the sound.

In that moment, I become a solar eclipse. As if the sun, the moon, and the earth have aligned.

Neo is the earth, Natos is the moon, and I am that star, the greatest star in the universe!

The three of us form our own powerful triumvirate of cosmic bodies of intense gravitational forces—aligned as one for a singular purpose. Wounds are healed. Bonds are forged. and as soon as those tethers meet within my Haloed heart, as soon as Natos’ frost brushes across Neo’s flames, I understand...I see them!

Before I can ponder the revelation about their identity further, I take a quantum leap of faith and grasp onto the tether of flames and dive through the webs until I feel a spark and a piercing pain, until I hear my heartbeat pumping blood to resound in my ears, until I smell vetiver and spice and deep water, until I taste old blood and rich venom-laced wine on my tongue—until I open my eyes wide. I suck in a shrill deep gasp, springing up as if my heart has been given a restart. And his is utterly frozen!

“Elysia!”

“Neo!” I spin my head to where he’s inches from my face, to behold his fangs dripping with my blood. That piercing pain. I stare down at the new mark right above my heart oozing a few drops. The Scourge still invades my flesh and blood, the pestilence encroaching once more. That’s when I register what Neo has done. No traces of my blood on his tongue. Instead, his lips are stained with that hellish invader. He *sucked* the poison.

A second later, I’m falling back against his bed, against Neo’s palm that catches me. My vision blackens again to the Scourge threatening to overwhelm me, to destroy me. It took all my strength to reach for Neo’s tether.

“The moment you crashed to your knees, my heart...it froze. Elysia...” He cups my cheek and leans over to tell me, “I can’t destroy it. My power can’t destroy my Father’s. But I can suck it. I can take it from you, then destroy it once it’s *outside* you.”

When the Scourge unites with my trauma serpents, granting them the power of the plague, I scream, gritting my nails into the sheets. “What the fuck are you waiting for?!”

“Not just in one place, Elysia. It’s too strong. It could take a hundred bites to suck all the poison out.” Neo combs his fingers through my hair, eyes like a winter storm, as he begs me, “Let me give you venom.”

*Trust me, Elysia...when I bite you, I will leave love marks all over your skin. You will be proud to display them. And all will know you belong to the Prince of Destruction.*

And suddenly, I thrash my head back and forth and scream, “No!”

One hundred bites. No venom. *Your time will come when you reserve the right to relive your trauma.* Oh, Nita, I will so fucking get her for this!

“Elysia—” Neo tries to protest.

“Would you deny me my trauma, Neo? No fucking *venom.*” The serpents hiss. Rearing up, they prepare to attack my heart again. “Neo, follow my



trauma map. NOW!” He knows exactly where to follow those marks.

Neo bites. He sinks his fangs into me. I scream just as I screamed over and over again that long night. Just as I’d required, he follows the map, biting my shoulder, sucking the poison. Through the pain blurring my vision, I glance up. A tremor rocks his body while his shades and flames rush out of his mouth, his eyes, his very skin. Because Neo can only destroy the Scourge once he takes it inside himself. He needs to save that destructive energy, he needs it for Mordere’s army.

So, when he bites my shoulder this time, I arch my back, writhing to the pain, but manage to cry out, “Take my blood, Neo!”

“No!”

“Take. My. Blood. You. Supercilious. Ass! I’m higher than you. Do as I command for once in your destructive life. You owe me that!”

The Prince huffs and bites down again. Five marks all around my neck. Then lower, to my arm. I sense him sucking. His tongue laps at my blood. His head shoots up, his vampire wings thrust out, and his dark force ruptures the walls and shatters all the windows to release the blood moonbeams into the room to awaken his full thirst. Except...those wings become shields—a dark cocoon around my body. Just like the night I shared my trauma. Now, I relive it. He bites the skin beneath my collarbone, and I rake my nails along one of those wings, punching its side to the pain. Neo bites my chest again, absorbs the poison, and tastes my blood.

His lips are different than theirs. Theirs were a hot plague. A different sort of Scourge. The night was not a shielding cocoon as Neo’s wings have become. On that night, it was nothing but fire and smoke, sin and suffering... nothing but destruction. Tonight, this is *beauty* from destruction!

So, I rip at what little remains of my soiled and blackened Court gown. I gaze down at my skin, at my flesh, at how the Scourge has retreated from my chest, from my throat. How my Halo flickers but not quite glows. “Keep going!” I plead with Neo and grind my head against the pillows, prepared for the next wave.

When Neo’s shades and flames dance all along my body, trying to soothe, to rouse—pain and pleasure as two sides of the same coin—, I beg him, “Touch me!”

My husband, he will *always* be my husband, sinks his teeth into the upper slope of my breast, but palms the flesh, rousing Halo heat between my thighs.

I close my eyes, feeling another tremor thunder through him. All his

silver comes to life within his wings, and I lean my spine against one, lean into that powerful essence. Every sinew in that mass of membrane tightens, every muscle in his body hardening, one arm underneath me binding me, strong as a seal.

Invigorating himself with another sample of my blood, Neo doesn't devour, doesn't consume. He *savors*. Another bite within my cleavage, but my scream catches in my throat when he strokes my breast along with his cool shades, tender and loving, rubbing his thumb along the sensitive bud. Tonight, I reclaim that long night when the Father's children fang-mutilated my body that still responded to their mouths, to their hands, but could not unearth any pleasure through the pain.

Verena came close in my underground lair. The only one I ever felt safe with.

"I am safe with you!" I gasp at Neo suckling my pebbled nipple into his warm mouth, tonguing my blood around the erect bud, his eyes deadpanning to mine. I reach down to run my fingers through his silver strands. I urge him as I'd had on our honeymoon, "You could never hurt me."

Neo studies me, his eyes of silver keys when I first shared my Noralice with him, when he vowed to understand my past, when he vowed to return it to me the next morning. Tonight, he is a participant. Tonight, he doesn't destroy me. Tonight, we reclaim...together.

So, when he bites the underside of my breasts just as my attackers did, I don't scream. First, I hold my breath during the few seconds it takes him to destroy the poison, to savor my blood. Now, I exhale and inhale to his mouth seeking my breasts, kissing and stroking them with his tongue. And I weep, I weep, I weep!

He pauses to kiss my tears, his mouth like a flame. Slowly, I learn to breathe *into* the bites, eager for his hands, for his lips, for his tongue to eclipse that pain with pleasure until my Halo begins to glow liquid gold.

Halfway down my body now, Neo bites my navel, then my pelvis, lower into my pubic hairs because they left holes everywhere, even in hidden places. But as soon as his tongue follows up in a lavish stroke along my sex to taste, to savor, to grant me pleasure to the forerunner of pain, I clench his wing, the powerful muscle responding. Those shades weave all around my flesh, massaging, soothing a cold rush to the dozens of pinprick wounds.

"Don't stop!" I wail. Neo bites my sex, drawing a slight trickle of blood to breed with my gold. Now, I love these short bursts of pain because I am

alive. I suffer and bleed and grow! Utter bliss and rapture follow from Neo's warm ribbon of silk tongue injecting into my sex, stroking and caressing the fire blossom, and cresting to lick the swollen nub in what can only be described as *serendipity*!

Gripping his wings, I plunge into his mind at the last second, uniting us as I fall over the edge to my climax. All my muscles tighten to the crescendo swelling from my sex, igniting a lightning path up my spine. Light beams flow from my eyes as my face wades in heated ecstasy.

The Scourge begins a slow fade. But Neo still must suck away every last drop.

"It looks like we're getting to the legs this time," I tease him with my climax sighing from my lips, and I palm the brand on his chest, remembering our night of feathers and love bites.

"Elysia," he sighs, remorse and regret drowning his voice.

"Don't apologize, Neo. Just...keep going," I gesture to my legs, to the Scourge still infecting my veins, the plague that will spread if he pauses too long.

I clench my eyes shut when Neo bites the underside of my thigh and continues, breaking only so his body may tremble from the power he must use to destroy the Scourge. I gasp because he plunges his fingers into my gold-soaked sex while he replenishes himself with my blood. Our pain and pleasure united. I love the feeling of his hot tongue tracing a path down my legs to lick the arches of my foot. To lick away every last drop of blood on my body as if savoring the last drippings of a heavenly drink. And his fingers pumping in and out of me. Ribbons of gold gush all along my skin, breeding with stars—a hint that the Scourge is gone, that my power has returned. In full force.

And something else.

Unmistakable, I hear it pounding inside his beautiful Warhammer of a chest I've branded my halo mark upon. A new heart! I slam my hand down to feel it thrumming, then fall back against the pillows with my radiant stardust drifting off my flesh.

What astounds me is when Neo dives back to my sex, tempting my arousal back to glory. A final present. Since he dines on my liquid gold, on my essence as if it's a feast fit for a prince, and sends me over the edge three more times until I'm sweating—moaning and gasping and screaming and begging for him to stop, it's more like a present within a present within

another present.

Pliant from pleasure, wrecked from his beauty from ashes, I pant, “Holy fuck, Neo!” My breath heaves as he raises himself back up to face me. “What was all *that* for?”

Sighing, Neo touches his fang, still stained with my blood, to his wrist so his elite blood may sluice out like a healing cupful that he rubs along my marks. I smile, soft, considering the fire and ice silver blood sensation that will aid my recovery. I battle to stay awake so I may hear his explanation.

“An apology?” My Prince proffers.

I yawn. “Weak.”

“Penance.”

I grin at him. “Now, we’re talking. Let’s discuss more of your *penance* after you go be that badass Dragon I know you are.” I reach up to thumb his chin.

“Hmm?” wonders Neo as he finishes rubbing silver blood into all the fang marks.

“Mordere’s army...?” I hint.

He lifts his brows as if he’d completely forgotten, but as soon as I hone my vampire hearing, I detect those forces a few miles off, just beyond the Iron Walls, waiting for him. Right on cue, Nita invades Neo’s bedroom with Quillion trailing behind. Only my neck up is visible, and Nita huffs, one hand on her hip, jutting it out.

“Honestly, brother, it’s one thing to leave early from your own party, but do you honestly think now is the time for wing play? I thought you were helping each other heal.”

Neo glances down at me, eyes glinting with the question. And I get a wicked smirk budding on my face and nod, granting him permission. So, just as he folds his wings back to showcase my naked body and all the hundred and *one* bite marks, I gleefully cheer, “We did!”

“Oh, dear God in heaven...” Quillion shoots his head up, eyes vaulting to the ceilings.

“Aww...” I lick Neo’s ear and proclaim, “I made Quillion blush.”

“More love bites!” Kitty squeals, clapping her hands and pouncing on the bed next to us as if she’s ready to sink her fangs into each of us. Neo prods her away with a gentle warning.

Nita rises in her stead as Neo folds a sheet around me, and I sit up to face her. “New heart?”

I reach over and touch Neo's chest, picking up on the steady, thrumming beat radiating with his powerful silver blood. "*Mine,*" I claim.

"That's my girl," Nita blesses me, leaning over to kiss each of my cheeks.

Deep inside his chest, lingering like a shadow, I sense a scar like a guilty brand on that heart. Guilt from those months with his lost memories when he wore the mask of the Prince of Destruction. I know we'll have to deal with that later. But I tiptoe into the bond to confirm...

*Yes, Elysia, he reassures me in my mind. All my memories have returned, my love. And I have never loved you more. Nor desired your forgiveness more.*

*It wasn't you, Neo. I had faith.*

*And you reduced my chart to ash.*

"At the border!" I suddenly remember. "What's going on—"

"The sick are being cared for," Nita reassures me, reaching for my curls to caress them lovingly. "For some hellish reason, Idrys seems to have disappeared. And someone quite powerful has taken the Prince's form to institute the previous measures in the name of the Angel Bride. And to apologize for past incursions."

Neo captures his sister's hand and bows his head to kiss it. "Thank you, Nita."

"Where's Lux?" I gaze around at the suite as if expecting her to show at any minute.

Quillion clears his throat and responds, "As soon as Neo fled the Court with you, she and Father left the Tenth Court together. That was the last report I heard about an hour ago."

"That's all it's been?" I lift my brows, a little incredulous.

Neo shrugs and leans in to fold my lips back in a supple kiss. "Centuries of finesse, my love." My sex releases a little burst of Halo glitter.

"Oh...prostrate servant again?" echoes Nita next to us.

Collecting my thoughts, I murmur against Neo's mouth. "Lux! Lux is the Scourge, Neo!"

He nods and kisses me again. "I know. I could taste her essence when I sucked the Scourge from you."

"She's got to be at the border."

Nita shakes her head. "I know where she is. I know where they are. Neo, are you prepared?"

Grinning to exhibit all his teeth and fangs primed, Neo unleashes one

hammering strike of his destruction and proclaims, “My wife has made me *stronger*.” With the full harvest moon shedding its rays all over us, Neo extends his hand to me and purrs the request, “Come with me, my warrioress?”

I grab his hand and practically haul him out of bed. “I thought you’d never ask!”

## CHAPTER 31

## “NEO, CRUSH MORDERE’S ARMY. LUX IS MINE.”

On my way to the sanctum of the Infinity Wardrobe, I chance a glance at the portal wall, finding it strange that Thanatos doesn’t even whisper beyond. No offerings of frost roses. No shade voice to tempt me. All is quiet and cold.

Shaking off the suspicion because there is no time to speculate, I step inside the Infinity Wardrobe and change into my battlefield attire: the same ones I’d donned when I first stepped into the portal to capture a ghoul. Now, I will capture Lux.

Once I emerge from my personal suite, Neo and Nita wait for me arrayed in full battle gear, though Neo will shatter his diamond suit as soon as he transforms into the Dragon. I vow that I’ll ride his Dragon tonight in nothing but my glowing, glorious skin!

It takes Neo a few minutes to shadow us beyond the Iron Walls, beyond the tent city to the boundaries of that abandoned cargo train where Mordere’s army awaits us...and Lux stands on one side of the Father and my mother on the other. The blood moon remains an undaunted scarlet circle far above our heads, cascading its beams upon the battlefield.

I cock my head to the side, and Neo allows me to step forward and challenge the Father, “I gave Neo a new heart, you sick son of Satan.”

The Father grins, point blank. “Too true, sweet, little angel. But it doesn’t mean I can’t take it back. Or stake a claim to your former ally, Death.” The origin of all vampires taps his mouth cunningly to hint, “Unless...”

Neo growls, “Unless what?”

“A Triumvirate twist?” he proffers, hands behind his back and sauntering toward Neo and me.



Nita remains in position, eyes marking Lux and discerning for any trace of rebellion while Neo and I deliberate with the Father.

“What do we get out of it?” I wonder, thrusting my chin forward, already knowing what will happen. Because I’ll be damned if I let the Father steal Thanatos’ new heart, Neo’s old heart I rebirthed. That belongs to me, too. And I...want both. I’ll settle for nothing less than both.

The Father circles me, reaching out to finger the curls that have escaped my braid, but Neo seizes his wrist, shoving his own Father away from me. I smile up at my husband as his hand settles on my waist and wait for the Father’s response.

With his hands secured behind his back, the Father practically glides around us and offers, “I’ll forsake any claim to all hearts and even his memories and end the Scourge.”

Lux flicks her eyes toward us, startled by the revelation, but she does not challenge her maker, so to speak.

“In exchange?” I thread my brows low as the Father finishes his circle, remaining just a few inches before me.

“We all know I cannot take your heart, little angel. But...” he grins, feral and hellish, dark eyes like Chasm pits themselves and nothing like Thanatos and his nebulous haze housing constellations ready to burn. “I will take *your* memories this time.”

“We get everything else?” I question him.

The Father waves his hand. “I’ll let you and my son work that out since you would need to form a new blood oath ever since the dissolution of your nuptials.”

That’s when it hits me. I gaze down at the lack of a bride mark on my wrist. There is no more blood union. No more requiring me to sleep in his bed every night. No more honesty oath. No more Spitfire in exchange for Neo’s lingerie.

“I still get the wedding memories.” I stipulate just as our last bargain did.

The Father presses his hand to his chest. “Of course, honey.”

“And our one night,” I remind him, glimpsing up at Neo as if reading his mind and considering what we will do when it’s time for the Father to bend the laws of nature.

“Following the battle, yes.” I hiss, but the Father throws his head back and cackles. “Oh, you two are far too much fun. I shan’t miss out on this.” He sweeps his hand toward the gathered army of ten thousand bitten vampires

strong, his pupils dilating in eagerness. Then, the Father raises one finger to declare, “But I promise the only one I will battle will be your lovely mother.”

“You’re giving her to me as an ally tonight?” My eyes stray to my mother’s, to her ragged cinnamon brown waves, and her ever-strong shoulders, though she doesn’t meet my eyes. Instead, she and Nita are deadlocked as if she cannot wait to fight alongside her again: the Hydra and Phoenix united for a shared goal. And I know that goal is me.

“Of course,” says the Father, dipping his head low to me. “You are missing one. Unless you’d prefer to resurrect him here and now, sugar and spice.”

Narrowing my eyes, I shake my head. “Pass.”

“Do we have a deal?”

“An amendment to the Triumvirate. So, everything else is the same after the battle?” I test one last time because the devil is in the details, but lift my hand so Neo may draw a line in my palm with his fang.

“As long as you and my son hold a new ceremony and resume your blood oath, yes.” The Father cuts his palm at the same time Neo does.

“No more surprises?”

The Father cackles before clicking his tongue and wagging a finger back and forth. “There are always surprises, dear Elysia. But you’ve already proven yourself well-equipped to handle them. Does that suffice?”

Sighing, I face Neo one last time, considering how the Scourge is still ravaging the human population. He knows I can’t allow it to spread further, remembering his promise to me the first time I made the contract. *We are strong enough.* If we survived all of this, there’s nothing we can’t overcome.

“One more thing!” I exclaim, tempting the Father with my palm oozing pure blood.

“Speak your angel refrains.”

“Restore all the bodies that the Scourge claimed. Every last man, woman, and child.”

“Elysia...” Neo grips my waist, pivoting my body toward his because he understands the deeper meaning behind this request. He knows what I intend to do. There’s only one way souls can cross back over the Soul Plane and to reality.

When Neo shakes his head, I rise on my tiptoes and kiss him, invading his mouth and reminding him of how much I love him. “It’s the right thing to do, Neo. Damn the consequences. Damn whatever happens.”

“Done!” the Father agrees, and the three of us crash our palms together and join our blood, amending the Triumvirate. As if on cue, the earth shudders in the distance. Judging by the thundering jeers, I know he’s held up his end of the bargain: the corpses have been restored, and the Scourge has ended, releasing its claim on any sick. With that ravenous wolf grin, the Father announces, “Now, we battle. And by the by, I said *I* would not claim Neo’s heart. I didn’t say anything about Lux. Darling...” he swings a hand, gesturing to her.

As soon as Lux steps forward, I mirror her actions and lower my body into a crouch, my lethal eyes preying on her amber ones. Pinching my eyes, I raise one brow, confused because if the Scourge is gone, why are they still amber? *There’s more to her than meets the naked eye*, I almost hear Thanatos’ voice in my head.

There is almost no description of what happened during my fleeting reflection. Too intense of a recognition that Lux was the Scourge, I forgot about her multiplicity. Something moved beneath the flesh of her naked belly, shifting and churning. Now, it nearly protrudes through her skin.

Sickened and disgusted because it’s no budding fetus inside that womb, I unleash my Halo like a shield to protect me. Bones cracking, stabbing right through her flesh, Lux drops to her knees. She splits...no, she *hatches!*

“Demon spawn!” Nita screams and swings in front of Neo in a ferocious defense while Lux divides into multiplicitous demon vampires. I do a rapid count: one hundred and one in all, including the host. Every last one is a naked replica of her, but they swarm with amber veins and black capillaries branching out all over her flesh, crawling all over the black wings that have sprung from her shoulder blades, and twirling around her eyes like flaming snakes.

I almost retch.

When Neo tries to step forward, I jut a finger back at him and scream, “Don’t you fucking move, Neo!” Then, I cock my head toward Lux, focused on the host. She will be ten times harder to kill than a bitten vampire. No, she did not come out of the Chasm unscathed.

She grins, puckering up her lips to blow Neo a kiss while showing off her wrist mark: the horned crown. “We are still married, my husband. I gave you a new heart once. I can do it again!”

Oh, damn it all to hell. Some women are just plain irredeemable.

“You cheap, bitch-ass, silicone whore!” I scream at Lux.

Out of the corner of my eye, Nita slowly swings her head to me, smile curling up on one side, impressed. “Elysia...well, well!”

I take one more step toward Lux, one knee bent, solid boot digging into the ground. “You Father-fucking, heart-stealing, harp-thumping harpy!”

Lux gnashes her teeth but does not retort.

Instead, I fix my eyes on her and direct my husband, *my* husband, “Neo, crush Mordere’s army. Lux is *mine*.”

“Elysia—” Neo starts, but Nita interrupts him.

“Let your women protect you for once, brother.”

Bereft of a bond, I use my Halo to sink into his mind and profess over his patriarchal background that haunted us before his new heart: *a real woman may be able to do it all by herself, and Neo, a real man knows when to back her the hell up!*

“So...” Neo throws his head back and laughs, “I’m back up.”

With my eyes darting from side to side, noting how Lux and her demons have begun to close in, I tread on a little banter. “Don’t worry. You’re not a minstrel.” Rocking forward, I channel my inner Thanatos and tempt Lux, “Bring your pretty wings to me, bogie.”

The Father commences the battle. Neo charges into the air, shadowing over our heads to fly into the bitten vampire masses. As soon as he does, several demons vault into the air, but I surge my Halo whips, flagellating their wings with holy fire and knocking them back to the ground. Nita handles the ones that try to escape via the ground. Neo is the homing beacon in their blood, but Nita and I will be damned if we let one get within an inch of that new heart.

Tunnel vision strikes me, enabling me to focus on Lux and not on anything else. Instead of the whips, I transform them into two flaming golden swords and try not to consider the multitudes of weapons I could conjure!

“I’ll show you a *real* angel in the streets, and you’ll never be a devil in the sheets again!” I herald the promise to Lux, who snarls, those amber eyes dilating to molten lava.

Dozens of Lux’s demons cross the distance toward me. Whenever one gets close, I stab, I slice, I slash, I hack until the bodies pile up all around me like husks of hellfire embers and amber ash.

Lux pauses because she’s lost too many. Her eyes travel to the vampire battle behind her, to where Neo has already destroyed a thousand soldiers. In the few precious moments I have with Lux distracted, I can’t help but admire

him. Mightier than ever and still in his vampire form, with silver blood staining his armor. Countless vampires assault him, their fangs prepared to strike, but they never sink once he steels his muscles and mutilates them to mincemeat. My beautiful Warhammer. *Mine!*

Nita is far more surgical and precise with her wings, her horns, and her blades. No rage, no bloodthirst, no ferocity, she is a marvel in battle, creating blade after blade to strike at vampire hearts, burying deep. Any foes who attack her from behind meet the same end. A collective Hydra unit operating in one mind—as if she has eyes on all sides of her head. Within minutes, she’s slaughtered a thousand herself, and I get the sense she and Neo have a competition going down. Her razor-sharp focus is still on any Lux demons with laser-bullseye targets for my Neo, *our* Neo.

My mother is a wonder with how she battles the Father. How his hell flames bite her lightning, how he knocks her to the ground each time, but she rises and strikes her lightning straight into his heart. A heart that can never stop, one she can never hope to mark or brand. As long as she can create pain, as long as she can unleash a battle of vengeance for the trauma he’s caused her, that’s all that matters to the Phoenix Queen. As long as she can rise from the ashes every damn time.

One split second is all I have before Lux and all her demon clones take to the sky. I curse my grounded body and spin into vampire speed, then wraith-shadowing so I can get as close to Neo as possible. Above my head soars Lux’s amber trademark, and I shoot over a dozen fiery whips to lasso as many of her demons as possible and crush them to the earth. Between Nita and I, we must have gone through half.

As if comprehending, Lux pauses in mid-flight and charges from the sky, pouncing right on my chest, her mouth opening to betray countless demon teeth overlapping one another like a shark’s. My eyes fly open wide right until another body barrels into her. They roll and roll, but multiple serpents lasso Lux’s throat.

“Syn!” I rejoice at the demoness.

She whips her head back for one moment as her serpents constrict around Lux’s throat. “Death sends his regards.” Then, she presses her gorgeous ass down harder, cutting off Lux’s breath and pronouncing, “*Rapists* are not just male.”

As soon as Syn’s serpents strangle one more time, breaking the neck, I shut my ears to the shrill demon spawn cry. No...this one was *not* Lux.

Spinning my head, I gasp because she's approaching Neo from behind as he's slaughtering countless more bitten vampires.

"Neo!" I scream in mid-shadow. Too caught up in the blood lust of battle, fueled by my Everblood and the harvest moon, Neo doesn't hear me, doesn't turn.

I stop, crouching low when a bitten vampire flies through the air an inch from my head and drops on my other side with a blade in its heart. I nod to Nita, then focus on binding my Halo power to my greater creator power because there isn't enough time to catch up. Only one thing will buy us time. He needs to turn now.

Closing my eyes, reaching deep into my core to summon my atomic bomb, I slam my hand against the earth, launching the shockwave to roar into the ground and causing every last bitten vampire, whether flying or fighting on the ground, to fall. Every last one...except for Lux and Neo.

That one pause is all I need for Neo to turn and discover Lux a mere few feet from his chest...it's all I need to scream, "*Dragon!*"

Before her claws can land at his chest, Neo explodes into his Dragon—all his muscles enlarging and swarming, flesh bulging to those layers of scales of black diamonds, claws as long as his keen bone daggers, and glorious twisting horns the color of his black scythes. He batters Lux with wind from his mighty silver and black wings.

My Warhammer of a Dragon. My Dragon Prince of Destruction. Because it will always be part of his identity that I respect...as long as his heart is all Neo.

It will be far more difficult for Lux to get to that heart now, but I still race across the field as he unleashes his fire on hundreds of bitten vampires, dismissing his "first wife" as if she's no more than a luna moth. I understand his motivation: he's preventing Mordere's army from reaching the tent city, from reaching the humans. Half of the army has been destroyed by his and Nita's hands, but more try to reach the tent city, to feast on human flesh.

Now, I stop directly beneath that roaring Dragon...and Lux who tries to assault him like a bird swooping in to peck, but she doesn't get within a foot before one of his enormous wings assails her or before she has to swerve away from his flames. They are a hundred feet in the air. How can I reach them?

For some reason, I remember my ladder! How the humans she'd trapped in her amber pit climbed my inside joke. Now, I will take that stairway.

Shaking my head, I conjure the gold rungs and can't help but laugh while humming the Led Zeppelin tune. I climb up that ladder as fast as my muscles can carry me. Below me, Nita's blades sing as she cuts down any vampires who try to attack and halt my progress.

"Go, sweet angel!" Nita calls to me.

Tunneling into my vision, my focus, I chant breath prayers and focus on my *new* bit of heaven and the demon spawn who wants to steal him away. Over my dead body! Oh, that's right, she already tried that. I cry out when claws bite my ankles, trying to drag me down my ladder. Another Lux demon spawn assaults me. My fingers slip, but I hang on, keeping my eyes on the end goal and trusting Nita. A moment later, the claws are severed. I keep moving, noticing Syn and Nita united out of the corner of my eye, hacking away at the demons until all that's left is Lux.

I reach the final rung at the top of the ladder and balance precariously. Lux is no more than six feet in front of me, batting her wings like they're eyelashes, her silvery hair a crazed pendulum waving before Neo's omnipotent wings. Some Mordere vampires have managed to evade Neo's flames. They mount him, driving iron stakes into his diamonded armor, stabbing again and again. My Prince, my Dragon rears up, chest exposed. Lux will take her chance.

But I take a leap of faith!

In mid-air, I create my flaming sword. With no words, I bring it down and drive it so deep into her back that it pierces her heart! She freezes, and Neo's black Dragon eyes lock with hers right before she falls with me still on her back. Above us, he growls. Bitten vampire bodies tumble around us as Lux and I fall—our bodies ready for the breaking. As the ground rises to meet us, I slam my eyes shut until something solid, something hot and diamond-sharp catches me! The inertia drives my whole body forward, and I tumble against Neo's Dragon neck. All reflexes, I reach out and grip his arms, clinging on for dear life!

He lands on the earth, rupturing it beneath his destruction and weight. Hundreds more of Mordere's soldiers charge for us. I bury my head in his scaled shoulder, behold Neo's wings flicking up in one beautiful sweep to shake up my curls and protect my form. The arousal of his fire reverberates beneath my body right before he unleashes one omnipotent roar and an indomitable force field of fire, burning every last vampire to ash and husks. Nita and Syn take care of any remaining stragglers who are too ignorant to

retreat.

Scooting up along his neck, I lean over and press my cheek to the scales on Neo's dragon face, loving the same high cheekbones that mirror his vampire face, the same silver mist eyes, and his nostrils puffing smoke. "I am fire! I am Destruction!" I tease, squeezing his scales, marveling at how they are sharp as diamonds, but also soft as silken shades.

Just then, a lilting moan echoes behind me. Lowering my brows, I swing my head, my jaw dropping because...Neo caught Lux!



## CHAPTER 32

# BEFORE THE BLOOD MOON SETS AND THE SUN RISES

On the ground now, I kneel over Lux with Neo slowly transforming back to his vampire form, clothed in robes of shades and flames. Lux's breath is shallow, her face pale and spectral-like. I can sense her soul clinging to her body by a frail thread. Her flesh and skin burn from my sword, amber blood dripping from her back and chest. Neo's hand settles on my back, and I turn to behold his eyes, urgent and prompting me to remove it.

Nodding, I place my hands upon her flesh, staining my palms with blood to evanesce the sword until all that remains are glittery embers. Whatever else she has done, even if she was the Father's pawn, she is still my ancestor...and Neo's first wife.

As soon as my sword is gone, a cold caress of metal greets my palm. While Neo slides his hand beneath Lux's neck, bearing her up, I curl my fingers around that metal and pluck it free of Lux's heart. Coated in amber blood and flesh, I gaze down at the silver object: Neo's wedding ring and the second piece of the Grail!

I stare up at my husband, but his eyes are downcast as he observes Lux, observes how she opens her mouth, coughing up blood, how she *smiles* at him before riveting her eyes upon me. They are not amber anymore. Now, they are gold as honey crystallizing in the sunlight. No more Scourge. Did it plague her as much as it plagued all others? As much as it plagued me?

"Thank you, Elysia," she rasps to me, blood pooling from her mouth.

A shadow eclipses Lux's form just as my ancestor's eyes turn vacant, dead.

"Elysia..." Nita's familiar voice chants behind me.

When I glance up at Nita, I scramble to my feet, jaw dropping, lips parting because Nita has captured Lux's soul! In her dark, cupped hands is the most ethereal light I've ever witnessed. Her soul strands twinkle like the kite-tails of stars and spiral like DNA. When Nita approaches with Lux's soul and bids me to open my hands, all I can seem to do is hold my breath.

"She has a message for you," Nita informs me, and my hands tremble, fingers quivering as I accept Neo's sister, my sister nestling Lux's soul into my palms.

I purse my lips and bore my eyes into Lux's soul, like peeling back the very skin of the moon! Inside that soul, I read ten thousand different memories—of her trials and guilt with the child crusaders, her training with the templars, and her time with Neo. Lux's soul strands covet my face, prompting me to lower my head until they tickle the sides of my head like kisses of frost. And suddenly, she reveals one vital memory, tethering me and drawing me into its depths until I'm kneeling before the multitude of eyes robed in wings once more.

*Your soul will be called for, first-wife of Destruction, the Goddess tells Lux within the memory in the desolation of the Chasm. You will become the vessel for great evil. Through your sacrifice, you will shake the faith of the Everblood with a poisonous Judas kiss so she may prove her love and strength and pave the road for her to defeat the Father of Vampires.*

Trembling in that sulfuric darkness, Lux's silvery soul nodded her acceptance.

Within the vision, the laws of heaven apply just as they do anywhere, and the Goddess turns to face me. Radiant light scintillates from her presence, shimmering all around my mind as the celestial creature prophesies to me, *Everblood, you will lose part of your heart in your next trial. Only with the ascension of the blackest of hearts may your light shine.* Oh, heavens preserve me! *You will be broken but not shattered, perplexed but not driven to despair, struck down but not destroyed.*

On my knees, I take the familiar words, this biblical truth, deep into my heart, wondering if I will remember them tomorrow, wondering how I will possibly overcome Mordere: the blackest of hearts.

*Even when you are hunted down, you will not be abandoned. You will learn to hunt, and you will be protected. And like a bride leaving her chamber, you will run your course and win a circle of joy and feast with another warrioress of light.*

The Goddess narrows her eyes upon mine—golden soul blood weeping down the almighty feathers like tears from a Grail. I force my eyes to remain open, force myself to listen, and brand all the words like holy scars into my mind.

*Two beings will battle for your heart. Two empires will wrestle for your soul. Only once they unite will your heart find the strength to become whole. And once it does, the purest of hearts will vanquish the blackest of hearts and rise in victory to the glory of the angels.*

I drop to the ground, clutching Lux's soul, smelling the aftermath of Neo's fire, the ash clotting my nostrils. Overcome by violent emotion, overcome by the vision transcribed into my mind I know will remain even after I lose my memories, I fixate on Lux's soul, on all those ten thousand memories...and of her true love for the Prince of Destruction, her heart that was strong enough to bear with him and to recognize the *new* being he would eventually become. So...perhaps not so irredeemable after all.

Closing my eyes, shedding one golden tear to roll onto the silverscape of her soul, I lower my lips and gift Lux with a kiss. Her soul shudders and evanesces until no glittery strands remain for me to hold. History repeats itself with the release of the holy energy that causes me to arch my back and scream with the force of that kinetic bomb. Neo catches me as the heavenly foresight ignites a path deep into my soul.

Lux is in heaven.

The battle is over. Trial is complete. Mine and Neo's night has begun.

As if recognizing it at the same time, Neo combs his hand through my hair, lowers his head, and kisses my brow.

"Go," Nita urges the two of us, and I crane my neck to stare up at her, thanking her for catching Lux's soul for me. How much does she know? How much has she seen? "Quillion, Jesula, and Syn will handle all the mess. I will handle Mordere. Take your night, brother, sweet Ezer. The sun will rise tomorrow."

*And a new darkness...before the blood moon sets and the sun rises.*

I purse my lips, considering whether or not I will tell Neo what the Goddess prophesied. Knowing I will lose part of my heart, that I will be broken...it's more than I can bear. I've always vowed never to break. My Haloed heart can never possibly break. If a Scourge of Destruction could break me down but not truly *break* me, how can anything possibly be that strong?

Instead, I twist my head back to Neo and lower my voice to a deep, eager hum, “You owe me a Dragon ride.”



“MMM...” I murmur, stretching my naked body along our bed as Neo kisses the back of my neck.

“I’m not certain what I treasure more. Your moans during our lovemaking or these sounds you make when we are finished,” he confesses, lips rubbing along my jaw.

“Well,” I say and turn to face him, tracing his Halo brand to finish, “I did promise we would discuss your penance later.”

“And how do you find me, my love?” Neo banters and dips his hand lower to cup my thigh, staining it with all the gold that has gathered there.

“Lovely, darkly, and deeply penitent,” I respond and open his mouth with mine for the thousandth time. I pause to tap his jaw and add, “Your Dragon ride was the highlight of this night...” I smile, reflecting on how I’d bound myself with my Halo to his Dragon, arrayed in nothing but my glowing skin—a gold and pearlescent contrast to his dark scales—as Neo carried me far above the clouds and to a mountaintop where Neo finally taught me the meaning of how wings have uses beyond flying and painting.

“I’d hope renewing our blood oaths was another highlight,” Neo adds and thumbs the cut in my palm. “Are you certain you don’t want my silver blood to heal it and the rest of your marks?”

I shake my head, glimpsing down at all his fang marks that have already begun to fade. “They’ll heal soon. For tonight, let’s just say I’m proud to display them. But I think I owe you some.” I mount him, nudging my sex against his already hard member, lean over, and unleash my angel teeth.

“Elysia,” Neo protests at first but groans in pleasure when I sink my teeth into his flesh, lapping up his silver blood. “We haven’t renewed our vows.”

“We have time.” I bite around his nipple, twirling my tongue around it, sucking its tip.

“Not much, my love. Oh, holy wings, woman!” I grin at his exclamation when I drop lower than his pelvis and scrape my angel teeth along his

generous length.

“Forbidden fruit is so tempting anyway, isn’t it, Neo?” I laugh at my cruel irony and the power I wield over him when I stroke my Halo currents all around his vampire shaft, stimulating ever so slowly all the way to his whetted tip while pairing it with my angel teeth.

“Damn it to hell, Elysia!” He bellows deep and slams his head back against the bed frame, fracturing it in one moment, shattering a window.

“Ugh, Neo! You just restored those.” I press my body down and point an accusatory finger at him. “Now, if you can’t behave, I’ll have to use the whips to string you up. Is that clear?”

“You’re going to be the death of me.” He strokes my curls and shifts my hair back to settle his fingers on the back of my neck, pausing.

I know we will have that conversation soon, but first, I’ll distract him. “Let’s see how close we get.”



WHEN WE ARE FINISHED, Neo pulls my body closer to his and kisses my brow. “I love you, Elysia.”

“Love you, Neo.”

“You won’t love me once the sun rises.”

“No, I won’t.” I shake my head and consider how sore my insides are, how I should heal them because my tomorrow self will interpret it only one way. But maybe that’s what is supposed to happen. Is that the way to break me? To lose part of my heart? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. Just as Neo remembered in the deepest of subconscious ways, I can only hope I will, too.

“Did you ever dream of me, Neo?” I wonder, rubbing my lips along his naked skin.

He sighs and strokes his knuckles across my cheek. “I don’t know. I destroyed those memories. But rest assured, I will resurrect them soon. But we must address something else first.” I nod and shift my one leg to wind around his hip, but Neo grips the side of my leg and positions it back against him. “No distracting me this time, my love. You need to know something.

Why I was late that time in Court before I divorced you. You want to bring back Thanatos. I understand your reasons, your motivations, but it's impossible now."

"Why?" I peer up at him, my cheek nudging his shoulder.

"Because I destroyed the portal."

"What?" I sit up in bed, my lips parting.

"Back then, I didn't want to take the risk that you would bring him back. When Lux brought back my Destruction heart, I desired to have that twin bond again. And the only way to do that would be through the necromancer."

"Why?"

"Because I know Death holds my old heart."

I rake my nails through my scalp, heaving gasps from my throat because I know, I know, I *know* what this all means! My time in the Soul Plane when their tethers united, when they battled over me, confirmed it. There's only *one* way he would know that.

"Restore it, Neo," I urge him, appealing to that new heart, his better nature. "He will bring back the souls. They deserve to live again. The Scourge robbed them of their lives, and they don't deserve it. The moment I bring Thanatos back, he will bring back the souls. You know he will."

Neo searches my eyes, those knuckles like warm flames upon my cheek. "And what *else* will he do?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me."

I lower my brows in disbelief. "Why?"

"It's complicated."

"Not. Good. Enough."

He kisses me, tasting the inside of my mouth as if it's his last time—and maybe it is—then responds, "Too complicated for me to explain with the small amount of time we have left."

"I'm so confused. Why are you afraid?" I plant a hand against his chest, fingering his wedding ring that I have hung around his neck by a thin but unbreakable Halo strand that cannot be ripped from him. "I love you, Neo. You."

"You love him, too."

"Again...*why* does it matter?"

"I cannot let go of my history, *our* history, so easily, Elysia."

"If I don't bring him back, Neo, then the necromancer will, and that

history you've described will be the one written into his new heart. He won't be Natos. He will be just Death. And you will be linked again. Is that what you want?"

Grunting under his breath, Neo thuds his head back against the bed frame a few times, and it's then that I realize it *is* what he wants. My eyes burn, and I pull away from him. Neo reaches for me, seizes my wrist, but I shake my head, glaring. His gaze softens, reminding me of snow-topped trees mantled in starlight, and he relents.

"Why should I be surprised? You two...ugh!" I throw up my hands and shrug into the chemise that his shades have preserved for me. "Of course, you don't want me to bring him back. Of course, you'd rather it be Death. Because he won't love *me* anymore. And you know damn well I would *never* love him. Even though it doesn't matter, it doesn't fucking matter! I love you both now!"

"Elysia..." Neo rolls out of bed and strides over to me, but I back away.

"Don't you fucking touch me, Neo!" I point a warning finger at him.

Neo raises his hands, pausing inches before me, respecting my boundaries. Still, I recognize I'm wrestling with that scar, that sliver of darkness in his new heart. Bred from his guilt over how he treated me, fear writ into its very fabric because he knows his old heart was the first I fell in love with.

Neo drops his hands to his sides in surrender and bows his head. "You are right, Elysia." I slowly lift my chin, melting a little, rejoicing because the rest of his heart is still strong enough to overcome that scar, that darkness. "Please forgive me, my love. I was wrong to hesitate."

He extends his hand to me along with a raiment of flames to seduce me. Nodding, I welcome his hand, welcome him pulling me back to his fire and ice body, welcome his hands harboring my waist and hoisting me up so my legs wrap around his hips, wrinkling my chemise up to my thighs. A burst of Halo heat erupts when I realize he's carrying me back to my inner suite so he may restore the portal!

I wind my arms around his hair, remembering how I still want to braid those strands. "Thank you, Neo!" I gush and touch my lips to each of his cheeks, to his jaw, to his chin, to his eyes, to his brow.

Neo tucks his hands right under the backs of my thighs, centers my body against his, and deadpans, "I will always be Neo from now on."

I close my eyes, registering what he's telling me, what he's vowing to



me. For whatever reason, I can't help but remember what Lux said. So, I give him back his name, imagining it like a wedding gift between us. I embrace that scar, that darkness inside him. "Your *heart* will always be Neo, but there will always be a part of you that is *Neoptolemus*, the Prince of Destruction. And I'm strong enough for that, Neo. As long as you vow to me to never use Destruction against me, I give you my solemn vow to understand your darkness and *never* to return it." I raise my palm to his mouth, to his fang, tempting him with the promise.

Neo doesn't hesitate to join our blood together. And I pray it wasn't a mistake.

Resolved more than ever to restore the portal and have me resurrect Thanatos, Neo prepares to cross into the doorway of my suite. I curl myself into his dark chest, steeling myself for his twin's arrival.

"Stay down, Neoptolemus!"

*Oh, Goddess, no!*

Neo crashes to his knees. And those words beat down the door of my mind like a wild, demon horse trampling me with hot iron hooves.

*Before the blood moon sets and the sun rises.*

Mordere is here.

## CHAPTER 33

# “WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME IN RETURN?”

The first thing I do is release my Halo chains to bind around his neck. “Neo, go!” I scream, but several of Mordere vampires mount him before Neo can rise. *The portal, Neo! The portal!* I scream through our bond.

What happens next rocks me to my core!

Out of Mordere’s chest arises a figure mantled in an otherworldly black fire that shifts in and out of the form of fanged skulls. All over her nude form are blood runes to eclipse her flesh and grant her the power of spirit summoning like Satan’s body paint. Hair like wild, blood serpents. Skin white as bones. Wings of black lightning. And eyes like—foremothers, preserve me—like two fathomless holes in a skull. The eyes of someone who has stared into the abyss of infinity, the end of the universe, and has reaped every last black hole. The polar opposite of Thanatos. The necromancer!

As soon as she emerges from Mordere’s chest, my Halo chains snap as if they are no more than threads!

The moment Neo breaks free from the bitten vampires and plunges into wraith form so he may repair the portal, understanding how we need it more than ever, the necromancer screams like a banshee tormented in hell. I hit the ground, and blood leaches from my ears, but I don’t close my eyes for nothing. Not when a swarm of Fallen enters the room, commanded by the necromancer. My heartbeats seem interrupted, the Halo shutting down to the necromancer’s screams while the Fallen attack Neo.

“Come, Elysia,” Mordere commands and grips my wrists, raising me from the floor. “You won’t want to miss this.”

I spit in his face, but he shoves me toward the suite entrance, where Neo

reaches the third level with the Fallen closing in all around him. The necromancer stands before me, those abysmal black eyes fixed on mine as if they can swallow, as if they can absorb—as if they can *break* my Haloed heart. I pray, I pray, I pray! Neo wraith shadows right through them, but his fingers barely brush the air above the wall before the Fallen stab their claws into his back.

“No!” I scream, prepared to release my Halo, but Mordere captures me by the waist, hand driving up to collar my throat.

Before I can do anything, he issues a low command, “Don’t move, Elysia.”

All I can do is stare as the Fallen ravage Neo. One collective unit, they lower themselves to his body and sink their fangs deep into him, injecting him with a powerful combination of venom and blood. Enough to overwhelm his heart because it slows. One gold tear tumbles down my cheek, and I try to move again.

“Stay right here, Elysia,” demands Mordere, his bone armor claws scraping my flesh once again. “Don’t worry, little angel. We won’t be killing him just yet.” He kisses the edge of my jaw just beneath my ear while he reaches his hand up to stroke my curls.

I still can’t turn away from the necromancer’s eyes. They seem to scribe mutilation on my very heart, echoing the curse of the prophecy. How I will break. How part of my heart will be lost. But not shattered.

*You will be broken but not shattered, perplexed but not driven to despair, struck down but not destroyed.*

Those are the words I bind around my heart and gird like armor for my soul when the necromancer opens her mouth. In a voice that reminds me of the skeletal carrion in the Soul Plane heralding doom before feasting on their prey, she orders the Fallen to carry Neo, *my* Neo, to the dungeons.

“My dungeons now,” Mordere growls low in my ear and combs his fangs along my neck.

“Mordere!” Neo manages to thunder even if the Fallen have paralyzed the rest of him, even though the necromancer absorbs his destruction. “Let her go, and I am yours for life!”

Mordere throws his head back and laughs. “My, my, she has tamed you, old friend, hasn’t she?” His bone claws dig into my scalp, gathering a clump of my curls to yank my throat back. “I’ll look forward to taming her tonight.”

“I’ll destroy you, Mordere!” Neo delivers the empty threat as the Fallen

carry him away.

Mordere nods to the necromancer. “Go ahead, Morgya. As long as you return to my form by the next blood moon, you will not return to the Chasm. And I did promise Elysia that she would satisfy *my* bed. Have fun tormenting Destruction, dear one. I will have his bride...or former bride, is it?” Yes, because there is no horned mark on my wrist. Despite our blood bond, despite how I can feel Neo’s pain, torment, desperation, guilt, torture, I am not his wife anymore.

As soon as they are gone, Mordere throws me hard to the floor. Thankful for Neo’s shades, which catch me and wrap around me in a protective mantle, I brace myself, emboldening my heart, refusing to let the necromancer, this Morgya, shut me down, refusing to bow before Mordere. On the floor, with my hands pressed to the glassy surface, fingers fanning out, I sense a spark, just a tiny flame of power, but it’s not enough.

Especially not when Mordere commands, “Up against the wall, Elysia. I’d like to have a good, long look at you first.”

With that masterful force battering my flesh and blood and infecting my mind, I somehow know lightning won’t strike twice. Mordere wanted to be caught before. If I try to enter his mind this time, he will know. At first, I consider surging my Halo power as much as possible, *if* I can. But Mordere is not the type to care whether he rapes me unconscious or not.

Obedient, I stand. Belly knotting the whole time, all my insides twisting upside down, I walk right to that wall, turn around, and face him. By now, he’s meandered to the end table where the decanter rests. Clutching it by the lip, Mordere tips the wine back and swallows a good and long draught, emptying it. Another hint of torture. He won’t numb my body. Sadist bastard. Exhaling, Mordere chucks the decanter to the floor to shatter the glass. I don’t flinch. He slumps into the chair and raises one hand, propping his elbow on the armrest, casually fluttering his fingers.

“I see Neo took his fill of you throughout the night,” he observes the hundred-and-one bite marks along my skin.

“Rich coming from the vampire who looks like he had a galaxy of moles removed,” I fire back, sneering at the hundreds of his fang mark trophies.

Mordere chortles deeply, gets up, moves to the bed, lowers himself onto the coverlet, then wags a clawed finger in the air, beckoning me to his lap. “Come here, Elysia.”

That uncontrollable summons. That crushing force in my veins. That

command in my head. I wince, repulsed. What I always have is my wit. My personal rebellion. I lean into that spirit I just used on him. And test. Bend the rules, but don't break them to buy me a fraction of time. I don't have long before the sun rises. Even now, the gray light of dawn betrays a hint of a flush on the horizon. Once daylight rises, this Elysia will be gone. My skin crawls at the notion, a chill gushing in my veins.

Mordere growls, dark brows threading low over his deep-set eyes. "Come here *now*, Elysia," he rephrases, understanding how I bucked against him.

Careful not to thrust them out in case he asks me any questions, I keep my angel teeth retracted. At least he seems to have forgotten my earlier promise—about what my whip-smart mouth would love to do to him. I sigh, undone by that correction, and slowly walk to his side. Grinning, Mordere taps his thigh, stating firmly, "Sit in my lap now, Elysia."

Rubbing my lips together and closing my eyes, I hold my breath and suck up the courage to sit down, cringing when his member stabs the side of my leg. I cringe more when he bands his hands around my hips, scooting me closer to his chest before gripping my jaw and twisting my face until I'm forced to stare at those smoke and ash eyes. Any moment now, I just have to suffer through his impending monologue.

"I have a mental link with my scouts, Elysia, and don't move, thank you." His hand descends, curling to snatch the ends of my chemise, tugging them up while his hand maintains its vice-like grip on my jaw. "When they first showed me what dear Neo did to you in his Court O' Destruction, I began to doubt whether or not you were his true heart. Until they described what happened at the end. Seems one of my scouts is in your debt. And as long as you *satisfy* me tonight, I will be generous and place him as your primary guard. Thank me for that now, Elysia," Mordere commands and rubs his mouth along my neck, fangs pricking.

I ooze as much sarcasm into my voice as possible when I say, "Thank you for your *overwhelming* generosity, Mordere."

"I want you to know how much I will enjoy this, Elysia." His hand roams up to cup my breast, fondling it through the thin chemise. I bite back a whimper while his fangs prick deeper, stirring righteous flames. "The Prince has inspired me, you might say. When the day dawns, I will show you off at Court. Oh, my men have been begging to ravish you. But I intend to savor you for quite some time. My vampires simply must be satisfied with Neo's harem." His fangs penetrate.

Triggered, I scream and release one fiery whip of a Halo, causing us both to fall to the floor. Pain rockets into the back of my neck. It blinds me. I miss his mouth, miss the opportunity to gag him. So, Mordere uses his own test. “Stop using your Halo power now, Elysia!” he snarls.

Invigorated, I rebel against the command. Eyes burning, teeth gnashing, I rise to my feet. Righteous fury kindled, my strength growing from the threat against Neo’s harem, from moral indignation and deep, feminine loyalty, I release fiery currents to chain him, to drag him to his knees before upending him till he’s on the flat of his back.

“Command them to *stop!*” I charge him, considering Piper and all the innocent girls in Neo’s harem. No matter what happens, no matter if it gives Mordere power over me, I won’t allow him to hurt them.

“Well, well!” Mordere latches onto that vulnerability, prepared to milk it for all its worth. “So ironic that Neo’s sweet bride has a soft spot for his harem. I love everything *soft*,” he hints, brows dancing up and down.

“What do you want?” I grit my teeth.

Mordere glances down at his ankles, where my Halo fire has already melted through his armor and breeches to simmer his flesh. “Perhaps you will set me loose first,” he suggests, and I cautiously free my flames from his legs, but I form them into a shield and frolic them along my skin in a warning.

Mordere charges to his feet and begins to circle me like a saber-toothed tiger taunting its cornered prey. Once he meanders to my side, Mordere lowers his head to mine and whispers, “Your blood oath, Halo-Bearer.” I almost retch at the thought but brace myself for his next words because I know this is what will break me. Circling to my front and exhibiting his dangerous fangs, Mordere proclaims, “If you want to protect Neo’s little floozies, then you will satisfy me in the Prince’s bed whenever I desire while you are in *my* new Court. But first...” he raises his finger and pauses.

“First, what?” I hold back the bile in my stomach, charge my anger into the flames, and launch a current or two to lash his flesh.

“First, you will dress in your finest Court gown. You will attend my all-day party tomorrow in the Prince’s Theater. You will arrive at the height of that great staircase as I learned you did on another singular night. Finally, you will descend that staircase, and with every step you take, you will tear your Court gown. Thread by thread until you arrive at my throne. Then, you will kneel before me and pledge your love for Court Mordere.”

The bile rises into my esophagus, and I must force the burning liquid

down as he continues.

“And once you do, I will remove whatever is left and bite you, Elysia. I will claim you for my bride. And then carry you to bed, my love. After all, the Prince did divorce you.” He gestures to the absent horned crown because Neo and I did not renew our vows. Our blood oath stands, but my bride status does not. What does that oath mean now that Neo is imprisoned? A shudder ripples through me.

By the time Mordere is finished, two silent rivulets of tears stream down my cheeks. It’s as if my heart cracks, preparing to break because I will agree to this. The alternative is the gang rape of Neo’s harem. And there is no way in heaven or hell I will allow that to happen. If this is a cross I must bear, a price to pay, then I will. I preach to myself that I’m strong enough to bear the humiliation because regardless of what Mordere has dictated, he will have a rude awakening in bed. After all, the devil’s in the details. He never mentioned anything about how I may also satisfy *myself*. I can only hope “tomorrow Elysia” will recognize that. I hope she will understand.

Before he can change the deal to something worse, I agree.

“Splendid...” is all he says, then creates a deep gash in my palm, licking at my blood, sucking sharp wind through his teeth, pupils bloating to cherry pools. Palms slammed together. Blood oath sealed.

The horizon awakens with the sun in the distance beyond the Father’s Tenth Court, where it only shines. Somehow, I know it takes longer, vying with the blood moon. I may have minutes.

“Now, Elysia,” Mordere grips my hand, jerking me closer to finish his command, “kiss me, my future bride. Kiss me now, Elysia, my love.”

Blood oath strong between us, with no choice but to obey, I crash my mouth against his, and Mordere cups the back of my head, bone claws twisting in my curls to draw me closer. His mouth bruises, his tongue invades, tasting every last nook and cranny of my mouth. *My love*. I should hear Neo’s proclamation, but Thanatos’ voice haunts me instead. *I love you, Elysia*.

When Mordere’s tongue duels with mine, I know I can’t miss. He pauses to break from me, but I distract him. I moan into his mouth, prompting a fresh arousal and another strike of his tongue. And however mortifying it might be, I chomp down as hard as I can, tasting a fresh bloom of silver blood and rejoicing in his scream right before I tear half that tongue right from his mouth!



*Bitch!* He yells within our new bond, cupping his bleeding mouth because he cannot hurl the insult at me with that maimed tongue. A thrill of pride surges in me, tainted by the vile taste of blood.

Spitting out the piece of flesh, I taunt Mordere as he backs away from me, the cherries in his eyes fading, “What’s wrong, Mordere? Angel bitch got your tongue?” I lurch, almost vomiting, but I spew his blood from my mouth, grimacing at his taste.

Mordere shakes his head in disbelief, but I know he’s about to walk out of here. Either it will take an hour for his tongue to repair itself, or he will go to a healer. Still cupping his inflamed tongue half, Mordere points one finger at me and promises through the bond, *I’ll see you in Court, Elysia. Then, in my bed*, he swears.

As soon as he’s gone, I don’t waste any time. I take those stairs two at a time, three at a time, until I batter my body against the wall near the wardrobe. All my hopes are in vain. There’s no portal! Utterly hopeless!

I sink against the Infinity Wardrobe and curl against it, already sensing my defeat, the new blood oath torturing my veins like cannon fire. And I weep, I weep, I weep because there are maybe just a few precious minutes left. My gut clenches. My chest caves in. Is what doesn’t kill me truly what will make me stronger? Not this. Not this time.

*Elysia...*

I almost scream when Thanatos’ voice hearkens to me. Not from the wall but from the wardrobe! Hope soars within me, and my heart leaps into my throat. Oh, Saints, Neo! He did it! He fucking did it!

Without another second to waste, I practically dive into that Infinity Wardrobe and use my Halo to rip a tooth, an *angel* tooth, right from my mouth, digging it deep into my roots to grant him the flesh. My Halo heals it instantly, so the pain is but a tiny burst of pain. Ready to raise my hand, Thanatos dissuades me, *I already have your blood and tear, my love*.

I cry more because he hasn’t used them yet. He was waiting for me, waiting for my consent.

“Hurry, Thanatos, please!” I lean over and sob, but all it takes is a moment before his frost, that prickle of frost soothes my spine. A skin and flesh snap of a shiver...just like in the Soul Plane. Except this time, it’s realer. Holy shit, it’s *real!*

***“Elysia.”***

Oh, Saints! He says my name, truly *speaks* it from his lips, from his own

lips devoid of the Spirit Plane veil. Thanatos helps me to my feet, fingertips caressing my cheeks with frost kisses. There isn't enough time for me to take him all in, to gush at his deathly beauty and the dark, shriveled roses blooming all over his robes in the deepest irony.

All I can do is cry out, "Give me your solemn blood oath now, Natos! If you can protect me from the Father, please, protect me from Mordere."

No hesitation. He obeys my very command, slashes his palm, and unites our blood. His eyes are golden seas, deep and glistening and filled with that same love I've memorized for all these weeks.

"Please, Natos, I know how the laws of the blood oath work..." I stir my blood into his and urge him, "What do you want from me in return?"

Thanatos smiles. Not cunning. Not wicked or dangerous as Neo's first smile to me. In Thanatos' eyes are nothing but celestial gold. Tempting and predictive, Thanatos lowers his brow to mine and whispers the fragrance of crystalline roses across my face, whispers his desire. Oh, Saints! His desire, his wish is a sweet relief of a promise. Praying the sun has not yet made its final ascent, I scream, "Yes, Thanatos, yes! But please...please for the love of the Goddess, answer me one question!"

"Does it really matter, Elysia? You won't remember with the rising sun."

"It matters to me *now*! I have to know, Thanatos. Please just tell me the truth. You know what I'm going to ask. What you said in the Soul Plane about my ripping you and Neo in two. In *TWO*, Natos!"

Thanatos coaxes my chin up to his, rubbing his lips across mine in a pledge of a kiss before he whispers the answer in my ear. Undone by the revelation I've now confirmed, the suspicion I've carried all these months about their origin, their identity, I crash to my knees. Undone by the secret I'd suspected, the secret hiding in plain sight before me the whole time. The same secret Neo hadn't denied, and Natos has just confirmed.

Moments pass within my deep gusts of air.

Why am I in the Infinity Wardrobe? When I flick my head up, I gaze around at the empty wardrobe and double over from the pain in my heart. From the pain in my blood that feels like projectiles shooting under my flesh.

***So much is missing!***

All I have is the prophecy like a Goddess' warning in my too-fragile heart, the understanding of a Triumvirate sealed into my mind, even if I'm missing months' worth of memories. My palm aches. Multiple lines gored in my flesh, hinting of multiple blood oaths transcribed like firebrands into my

veins. For the love of the foremothers! I can't remember what the blood oaths described. But the deep sense of what I must do haunts me because...I cannot run. I can't run from anything.

*You cannot run from Death*, echoes the mysterious voice in my head, a voice I have never heard before and one that prompts an automatic shiver. As if ice tantalizes me with its curling presence along my spine, a flawless crystalline ascent. And yet...no pain rockets the back of my neck. No Noralice prayers hover behind my mouth or in my mind. Can it be that I do not fear Death itself?

All I remember is Destruction. As I change into the finest Court gown the Infinity Wardrobe offers, ensuring there are plenteous layers because I know I will need them, I remember our wedding night. I remember Neo's pupils, so black and dilated as if they became the sky at twilight surrounded by a thin ring of crystallized silver. Like stars. I remember our compromise when he wove that strand of hair housing the ring around my neck.

I clutch the silver now. So aware of that missing bride mark. No horned crown, but for some reason, I cannot remove this silver ring. Everything in my being screams at me when I try to take it off, chanting ten thousand Goddess warnings. I will *never* take off this ring.

I remember branding his flesh. I remember going off script and proclaiming my Ezer Kenegdo. I remember he did not stop me. I remember smiling when his lips kissed my brow. I danced with him, shared cake, and he took me to his suite—so lovely, dark, and deep. He'd freed my curls of their pins and kissed the back of my head. And then...Saints, preserve me! He caught me after my shock wave, but he couldn't have broken the blood oath, could he? And what about the missing months?

There can be only one explanation. Only one explanation for a new prophecy. I failed. And the Prince of Destruction destroyed my mind—or parts of it. And the marks wrought into my flesh, the road map of truth and honor, he took them, he feasted upon me, upon that road map. He claimed my truth and honor, my history, my past. He destroyed something so deep in the process. He took from my blood and destroyed part of my heart in the process.

I *weep*, I *weep*, I *weep* because he stole Noralice! And judging by how sore my sex is, he stole something else...oh, Goddess, if it's the last thing I do, Neoptolemus will *pay* for this.

But first, I have a party to get to.

## CHAPTER 34

**TO HIM, I AM SIMPLY...ELYSIA**

## THANATOS

What I loathe is that barbarous glint in Mordere's eyes that I wish to mark for an early grave. How I long to reap his soul. But I can't interfere. *Not yet.* My chest tightens.

My only consolation is how my ultimate claim, *our* ultimate claim, will destroy and annihilate his. He is but the mere thin rim of mine and Neo's double-sided coin, balancing precariously before it will tip in minutes. What I love is how his pride has indeed gone before destruction. My claim will murder his.

The dark knowledge is my only comfort.

What I loathe more is how every step she takes accompanies her tearing another piece of fabric. As if she is breaking pieces of her throne, of her crown of gold and stardust bit by precious bit.

What I love is how her subconscious still wars. From her flaring breath from the wings of her nose to the corners of her mouth to her fierce brows plunging so low to turn her eyes to a deadly seduction. No haughtiness. No contempt. Pure righteous fire. Even if Mordere did get the opportunity to take her to his bed, I'm confident he would lose far more than his tongue. He'd lose something he could never grow back, something no healer could ever mend. It's almost tempting to permit her to emasculate him, to stab her angel teeth to destroy his member with her heavenly fire. But I would never subject her to such needless trauma.

What I loathe is how he steeples his fingers up to his lascivious mouth that dared pillage hers. My heart slams against my rib cage with the need to break those fingers, one knuckle at a time.

If I interfere now, Neo's harem girls are as good as dead. She would never forgive me.

What I love is how, with every fabric piece she chucks to the ground, her Halo light grows, breeding along her flesh and scintillating from her glorious crown-fall of curls. This is her battleground. She wields her holy Halo weapon with perfect precision. Soul hammered and tensioned. The keenest of all edges. Beautifully balanced.

*I will protect you from Mordere, Elysia.*

At the base of the staircase, she pauses in nothing—but her chemise—and peers around. She heard me. Whether she is aware of my identity or not, she *heard* me.

What I loathe is how Mordere's bloodthirsty mob surrounds her, forbidden to act, but Mordere permits them to rage, to salivate over her, to taunt her with their lust.

What I love is how Elysia treads on the eternity of a moment, her eyes circling the theater...hunting.

I smile because I know she's heard me. I know she's searching. Only Death can hide from everyone in the theater, including her.

She takes a deep breath, tears a long piece of fabric from her chemise, and makes her way to Mordere.

Once she ascends the staircase to the dais directly before his throne, I understand why she burns the remaining material from her skin. My warrioress of light will not give Mordere the satisfaction of removing anything from her body. She will not give him the satisfaction of touching her. As if she knows the claim belongs to one being and one alone. I harden the muscles in both hands and curve my fingers in anticipation.

Mordere may not touch the flames she's wrapped around her figure like a gleaming robe. Mantled in holy fire so none may view her body.

What I loathe most is how she kneels. How her lips tremble when she opens her mouth to pledge her love for Court Mordere. I can scent the undercurrent of fear, but I can also hear the breath prayer in her mind that whispers of Noralice. A distress signal—for me. Crying out to me for aid, for deliverance.

Mordere dares to touch one finger to her chin, war-smoke eyes hoping to debase her.

What I love most is how he will never have the chance.

Mordere rises.



## ELYSIA

CLOTHED in deathly frost and robed in shadows, *he* appears. He captures my hand, raises me up, and promises, “*Yours.*”

Every last vampire in the room flees from his presence, abandoning the theater altogether, knowing they will lose far more than their heads. Even Mordere has no choice but to sit back on his throne.

The entire theater darkens. Thousands of candle flames turn to frozen patterns of pure crystal. A deep and luxurious fog drapes every surface to make love with the shadows. Everything patterns in a crystalline frost. All becomes a quietude because Death silences everything.

“What?” I whisper in the stillness, lost in the explosion of stars in his eyes. Something about the simplistic word seems so different but so right when it slips from his lips, from the perfect, beautiful lips of this ethereal being clothed in an infinity of black robes.

The Prince of Death traces frost along my spine and places three icy fingers under my chin to lift it so I may face him like the equal I am when he professes, “My *soul* is yours, Elysia. My love.”

*I will protect you from Mordere, Elysia.*

It was his voice in my head. His blood united with mine in a powerful oath, one that overthrows Mordere’s command. I understand what I’d surrendered, what I’d traded, what I’d *given* for his protection. I wrestle with the bond, with that nebulous haze that surrounds his mind, and I ask, I seek, I knock. Somehow, I understand his name: *Thanatos*...no,

*Natos*, I whisper through that bond.

*I love you, Elysia*, he responds in a voice like a breath prayer.

I collapse into *Thanatos*’ arms, feel him wrap me in his outer Reaper robe, and bear me into the air to shadow me out of the arena because Death waits for no one. And I must marry *Thanatos*.

I will be his first and his last bride.





NOTHING HAPPENS like it did before. Thanatos does not give me time to prepare as Neoptolemus did. As if I require no preparation because he treasures how I am in this moment. The only similarity is the location of the ceremony—the intimate tower sphere with all its mirrored panel technology offering an untarnished 360-degree view. Just like last time, it steals my breath in whole new ways because there is no ash and no blood moon. Instead, it is silver!

A resplendent, celestial silver moon face shedding opalescent beams throughout the tower sphere, bathing it in an ethereal glow while clouds roll slowly and alluringly beneath our feet. The silver catches the light of strategically placed prisms until it's as if little stars the size of my finger flicker and dance within the sphere to compliment the tresses of fog dressing the floor.

“Consider it a wedding gift, my love,” Thanatos reveals, his breath a hush of frost behind me.

“You...*killed* the blood moon?” I breathe the words, bordering on a gasp.

“Just for tonight. It will resume its cycle tomorrow night. I must thank you.”

“Why?” What could he possibly have to thank *me* for?

“You waited.” Thanatos assumes my hand, raises it to his lips, so he may place a tender kiss upon my knuckles. “Mordere may have said you would attend his party, but he didn't specify when. You waited till nightfall, till the last possible moment to arrive on that staircase. It granted me much time to prepare for our wedding. First, would you care to see your gown?”

My gown! Oh, Saints!

I know I should revile him for this, for taking a choice away from me just as his brother had. Instead, violent emotion wells up in my heart as Thanatos' shades only remove his Reaper robe as the gown forms on my skin. A gown of translucent crystals and a waterfall of frost to create the most beautiful bridal train I've ever beheld. The most perfect gown befitting the Mistress, no...the Bride of Death.

A crown of crystals enthrone my curls. Halcyon dust and flame currents

abound all along my skin, and I weep, I weep, I weep because somehow, I know I would never want to wear anything but this gown! The tiniest trickle of no more than a trinity of liquid gold teardrops eases down my thighs to mirror the ones on my cheeks. No, I do not feel shame in my body's response to Death's beauty.

I gasp, I marvel, and I whimper when Thanatos turns my tears to roses, opens my hand beneath his, and offers me the tiny rosebuds of frost.

"Thanatos—"

"Natos please," he requests, fingertips trailing along my cheek, stealing a shiver rippling through my body. "You call me Natos."

"This is so..." I swallow, overcome by violent emotion...or the memory of violent emotion.

My chest heaves, a familiar pain creeping along the back of my neck, but Thanatos curls one hand to my lower waist, prickles frost along my spine, his fingers hovering a hairline above the skin to not quite touch. I weep all the more because he's somehow stemmed the serpents from trespassing upon my heart, from sinking their non-venomous fangs into that unbreakable muscle. Not so unbreakable, I consider the prophecy.

If there is one thing I know, I will not break tonight. He will not destroy me. Tossing my curls back, I tilt my neck to the side and stare up at him, at those celestial orbs, so I may proclaim, "You will not break me down, Natos. You will not *destroy* me."

"Elysia," Thanatos echoes in the stillness, finishing his frost trail at the nape of my neck below my curls. "I am not my brother. I am not Destruction. Nor did I simply prioritize the moon. You see, I invited some *significant* guests." The Prince inclines his head to our right, to the staircase, where multiple familiar figures ascend.

Nearly breathless, overcome with gratitude, I squeeze Thanatos' hand before I pick up the ends of the gown and crash first into the arms of my, "Uncle Heath!"

"Lyssi." I hear the smile in his voice when Heath embraces me, the silk of his long vest gliding across the frost of my dress. "Please forgive me for missing your last wedding, but I had no intentions of missing this one."

"Please give me away!" I implore him.

Uncle Heath chuckles. "Never, Lyssi. You will do that all by yourself, but I will be proud to stand as your man of honor, as it were. And Jesula as your  
—"

“Queen,” she finishes and curves one arm around my shoulder before side-eyeing Thanatos. “And I would like you to know, Halo, I did not bring my taser.”

My hands fly to my face, overwhelmed, more teardrops squeezing between the hairline gaps of my fingers. My heart is overflowing.

“Stop your fussing, sweet Ezer,” a new voice, foreign but domineering, proclaims.

My knees quiver and shudder, and I almost fall the moment I turn to behold her. Ready to shrink before her otherworldly, dark beauty and the fact that she reminds me so much of...*him*. The same silver mist hair, but it spills to her waist in a rippling waterfall. Starless ebony skin that looks as soft as satin. Eyes of pure silver song. Exalted thrones of cheekbones accentuate the illustriousness of her long horns curling from her head like twisting dark sides of crescent moons.

I don't bother to ask who she is because I know, I know, I *know*! She is my ally. More than that, my heart has swollen to infinity times infinity for her. And I did not open my heart to her. She tugged on my heartstrings like they were doorknockers, and my heart had no choice but to bow before her.

“How do you—”

She sweeps to Quillion's side, propping her elbow on his shoulder, and interrupts me, “All will be revealed in time, sweet angel. I am Nita. For now, simply consider us *allies*.”

Yes, I smile at her words. Then, I glance at Uncle Heath, at Jesula, seeking their eyes for confirmation. All it takes is one nod from each of them for me to purse my lips, to sigh, and accept the alliance.

I remember Quillion's kindness, I remember how he escorted me the first time to my wedding, how he protested to Neoptolemus once he recognized who I was beyond the Princess he respected. Everything about the ascot-wearing vampire screams trust. Everything about him reminds me of my father.

That's when I notice the momentary roaming gander of my Uncle's, how he locks eyes with Quillion, how their eyes roam across each other's garb as if assessing. And the subtle upward curl of their approving lips when their eyes meet engulfs me with such sweet relief. I knew it! If there is one vampire on this earth for Uncle Heath, it would be Quillion.

With a flustered twirl but a full heart, I face Thanatos and prepare to walk down that aisle.

The Prince is no longer behind me. Instead, he is at the end. My allies take their positions. The horned one, Nita, and Quillion station themselves to the side of the Prince with Uncle Heath and Jesula awaiting me.

*Open your hands, my love,* Thanatos prompts through our bond.

I do as he requests and gush at the feeling of the crystallized stems—the bouquet of frost roses that he creates. Exhaling a deep gasp, I slowly embark forward. As soon as my bare foot touches the mirror of clouds, chilled by the fog, the familiar melody of *Swan Lake* drifts into my ears. Undone by a vision, I close my eyes to the vision of a great lake of ice, of my naked soul like an orb of gleaming topaz—and Death observing me from the balcony of his ice palace.

Catching my breath, I pause, treading on the eternity of a moment as I angle my neck, curls eclipsing one shoulder. I study him. But all that gazes back at me is not gold that doth glitter but that nebulous haze because Death will keep his secrets. Even now, all he wears are those fitted robes that suffocate his neck and sweep to the floor, revealing absolutely *nothing*.

And yet, my hand greets his, welcoming him when he draws me to take my place before him. This time, there is no priest, for Death answers to none. He will officiate his own ceremony because all we need is to say our vows to one another.

The Halo is my inner compass. Its angel presence grants me peace, courage, and light. Despite Thanatos' frost patterning the walls on all sides, patterning his black robes, and forming the entirety of my bridal gown, I do not allow myself to numb. I grow the Halo currents to flickering ripples like flames erupting all over the curves of my body.

When Thanatos produces the ring, a silver band bearing a teardrop bud of a rose, it takes all my strength to not crumble to my knees. As if prepared, he has already bound it around a black strand of his hair, lined with frost, to join the other at my neck. A cold promise. Except, I recognize I will never *ever* brand him. Or maybe I already did?

“Elysia Elisabeth Rose.” Oh, Saints! My heart somersaults in my chest. He knows my middle name. His eyes become golden keys. And they don't have to ask, they don't have to seek, they don't have to knock. My windows are already flung wide open. “I grant you my solemn blood oath: you may trust me with your secrets, with the curse inside of you.” He lowers his chin until he presses his forehead to mine.

Thanatos' one hand grips the back of my neck, berthing upon his mark,

bearing me in place. Frost blossoms there, cold tassels that numb my skin. Like a cold tourniquet to my soul but does not inhibit blood flow.

I hold my breath and smile through tears as he finishes his groom's vow, "I grant you my solemn blood oath that I will touch your past tonight and return it whenever you desire. I grant you my solemn blood oath to *understand* your darkness."

Understand...not love. I close my eyes. I shudder. I sigh. Thanatos opens his palm, already cut. And I touch my trembling fingertips to his skin, leaning in to the trickling of blood because he's already killed the skin to release that blood, requiring no fang.

The greatest form of love is the ability to *understand*.

Thanatos whispers, feather-light, hovering just above my mouth, "I grant you my solemn blood oath to be your Ezer."

My hand sinks to accept, to nod my acceptance for him to kill my skin, to unite our blood. *Thank you, thank you, thank you. Oh, Saints, yes!*

And I recite my original bridal oath to Neoptolemus. No bindings from Quillion. No arms raised in an arch. Only our palms touch. Only our eyes meet as equals. Prince and Princess. Bride and groom. Husband and wife. Death and life.

Thanatos kisses me. Opens my mouth beneath his. I will never escape this Prince who tastes of serendipity and starlight.



DEATH CARRIES me down the hall along the wing to the threshold. Except it is no longer the Tower of Destruction. No, Thanatos has led me into the heart of the forsaken tower that belongs to him: the Tower of Death. A mirrored version with the same finery, the same Tenth Court rose designs, but all along the walls and floor on each side are whispers of ice. Enough of a chill in the air for my breath to escape in a ghostly wisp.

Thanatos' frost pirouettes along the curves of my knuckles as I touch his chest, but I cannot feel his skin, cannot feel anything beyond his thick robes betraying his Reaper sinew, powerful muscles that thicken with every trace of my fingers. Unlike Neo's flames, they do not woo my palm to bed down. No,

when my hand skims the bare skin of his neck, the spirit-white flesh, all his silver veins awaken. Under my fingers, they hum a warning, but still, I don't stop my pursuit. Not till my palm cradles the back of his neck, fingertips embracing the ends of his hair like dark silk and the *ruined* flesh—an evil brand he annihilated. Closing my eyes, I inhale a sharp gust, tempted, too tempted.

“Can you tell me?” I murmur against his neck, breathing in the lingering scent of dead roses like perfume.

“We share an oath of honesty,” Thanatos mentions as we approach the arched shadow doors, only now, they are lined with frost. “You may ask me whatever you desire, and I will reveal only what is permitted according to the laws of the Triumvirate.”

“Did you rid yourself of Satan's mark?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I cannot share that.”

Just as with Neo, the doors of impenetrable shadow wraiths bend only to Thanatos' will. No whirlwind of gasps flees my nose. Thanatos does not pause at the doorway to kiss my brow. His fingers remain at the base of my spine, kissing crystal buds along the skin of my vertebrae to hush my nerves like a dark lullaby. Death holds my gaze the whole time when he carries me into the suite.

After setting me down on the floor, Thanatos' hand does not depart from my spine...as if sensing I may need that prickling to ward off another panic attack. Everything is reversed. A smaller personal suite rests to my right while arched doorways with a long hallway lead to multiple other rooms, including the main hall and dining room to my left. For some reason, I wish to claim that smaller, personal suite to my right.

Unlike Neo's suite with his shades, this one bears a phantasmal fog spiraling and curling around my bare feet and ankles and twisting upon the walls and mass of windows that comprise the back side of the suite. Thanatos sweeps his hand to the illusionary fog.

I gasp. Similar to Neo's, the floor is transparent crystalline, but I recognize it is not glass. Instead, Natos' floor is pure, unbreakable crystal. I startle at the sight of the sheer cliff-like drop-off with the same crystal walls bestowing an all-consuming expanse of night sky laden with the lustrous face of the moon he turned silver...for me.

The absence of a bone door causes my lips to part in awe. I nearly fall back against Thanatos. No skulls. No Destruction. A door of pure ice stands in its place, bearing the rose designs of the Tenth Court. Colder than snow-buried corpses, but I do not step toward it. The door could never open to anyone's hand but Death.

One frost bud on the base of my spine summons me. "What do you think of the room, my love?"

There is the bed nudged against one crystal wall—large and luxurious but not dark, and no black diamonded coverlet wreathed in slow, sensual lovers of shadows and flames. Thanatos' bed is a wintertime dream of white drapery, sheets, and a coverlet of crystalline rosebuds. To the left of the bed is the fireplace, alive with a warmth that casts a blush on my cheeks. No ash. A white diamond chandelier engulfs the room with a seductive light. To my left is the massive-raised bath canopied with an arced skylight, stabilized by four great pillars, and filled with steamy water and dead roses. Thanatos' fog caresses the curves of my body.

"*Serendipitous*," is all I can think to breathe. "Like a dream..."

"Or a dream within a dream."

I curve my chin to search his eyes because the phrase is familiar for more than one reason. He shakes his head, hand to his chest, bowing to me in apology. The Triumvirate.

"Please..." I turn to face him with both hands pressed to his chest, my breath coming in waves, in pants as I beg him to answer what I want to know more than anything. "Did Neo—" I force back my whimper, swallow it down so I may finish, but Natos captures my chin, fingers like a tender pedestal to my throne.

"No, Elysia. Neo did not violate you."

"So, I...?" I lick my lips, considering the ache in my sex I'd felt this morning. I survey that bed, the way the sheets are pulled back to a multitude of scattered dead rose petals. He must have manipulated me, coerced me somehow.

"Elysia." Thanatos summons me, his voice like ice right before he roots me with the gold swelling starlight in his eyes. "You may not ever be able to hide from Death, but I hope I never give you just cause to wish to hide. You are safe, my love. Nor would I ever violate you."

Relieved. My shoulders sink, relieved.

Thanatos removes his hand from the small of my back, flexing his fingers

and gesturing to the personal suite on the right. "I have a honeymoon gift for you." He bids the door to open, and a dark figure emerges.

At the sight of the enormous feline creature, I suck cold wind through my teeth, but Thanatos comes alongside me before I can take to flight. "Don't be alarmed, Elysia. He belongs to you. And he will obey your every command. As long as you feed him."

Tiptoeing forward, I dare to stretch my hand to the powerful cat with its dark hide betraying a hot belly. His long ears prick at the motion of my hand. Something like a deep purr rumbles from his throat. My fingers tremble, but as soon as the cat shifts his massive head into my palm, purring deeper, tongue lolling out to my scratching, I can't help but smile.

"I've always liked cats. He's perfect, Natos," I respond with my gratitude as another glimmer harnesses my vision: of binding my Halo ropes around the hellcat so I could ride him, of feeling the heat of his belly, of welcoming his warmth in bed next to me, of creating meals of flames for my...

"Spitfire," I proclaim his name, and the hellcat's tongue strokes my hand, lashing warmth but not fire. Because he is hungry.

I don't know if it's what he wants, what he's used to, but I forge a meal of rippling flames and liquid fire to give to the hellcat, to my *daemon*, and position it within the suite where he will remain for quite some time, lapping slowly at his meal. I smile when he spins around, arrow tail swinging madly before he pounces for my flames.

"Now, if you wish to bathe, I will retire to another room." Thanatos indicates the bath of dead roses, the water still steaming through the petals. "I have some business to attend to soon, so I apologize for leaving you on our honeymoon. Death deals mostly at night, but I will join you for the border and supper tomorrow."

"And Mordere?" I wonder, approaching that bath, sitting on the side to dip my hand and caress the dead roses.

"He cannot touch you in my tower. My claim is greater than his."

"And in Destruction's Tower?"

"With Neo imprisoned, Mordere may test his boundaries. If I am at your side, he would not dare. But between your allies, including your daemon, and your superior intellect and power, I trust I will not always need to remain at your side." I hear the proud grin in his voice and turn to observe him standing a foot or two behind me, hands clasped behind his back. "But you may hide here if you wish, my love," he finishes and prepares to retreat to one of the



other rooms on the left, assuming I want to bathe.

Instead, I rise. I hardly know what I'm doing. Except that, I know I don't want to run. Even if I could run from Thanatos, from Death, everything in me screams to stay. No running. No greater power. No Halo. Because to him, I may be a Princess, the Everblood, and the Halo-Bearer, but...

"Natos?"

Back to me, he pauses at the entrance of the arched doorway. As soon as he turns his chin until one side of his face is revealed to me, I stand before him and confess, "I don't want to hide."

To him, I am simply...*Elysia*.

I slip the bridal gown straps from my shoulders to slide down my arms and let the waterfall of crystals and frost pool to the floor like a lake—a lake of souls!

Another glimmer invades my vision. Arrayed in the splendor of my Halo, I ascended ten crystal steps to a throne, *my* throne of hundreds of crystallized roses with elaborate, curling ice vines and skeletal patterns that had tempted me while Thanatos remained lower on a pedestal. Higher than Death in his own realm!

When the vision clears, Thanatos stands before me, his dark shadow overthrowing my face. Gold dust showers my skin because I can't control my Halo's response. No butterflies. Just this lingering heat and violent emotion. Gold roses, like goosebumps, erupt upon my skin when Thanatos slides one hand around my naked waist, stationing like an early winter on my spine and drawing me closer. I cage a whimper when my naked, golden body meets his Reaper robes. My heart sputters.

"Natos?" I whisper a plea that escapes like a waft of December air.

He kisses me. Oh, Saints! I moan as he folds my lips back so I may taste his serendipity and starlight. So I may taste every fantasy of bliss and romance and rapture and euphoria. His hands explore my back, fingertips pressing on every vertebra of my long spine. He massages my shoulder blades, gathers a host of my curls, and cups the back of my head to draw me further into his mouth. He claims my tongue in a beautiful waltz that reminds me of ice and fire dancing, of my gold dancing with his frost to the melody of Swan Lake. His fog travels up my legs, billowing into my sex, coaxing and hinting. Gold drips down my thighs freely.

How I long to touch him and for him to touch me!

However, as soon as my fingers light on his collar, Thanatos seizes my

hand, shifts it away, and breaks from my mouth. “No, Elysia. Not tonight.”

My lips are swollen. Deep desire kindles within me, but Thanatos does not surrender. Instead, he lifts my naked, glowing body into his arms and carries me to bed, tucking us inside the blankets with the dead rose petals under my skin.

“I can’t sleep with you behind—”

“Yes, you can. And you will,” Thanatos professes, kissing the back of my neck and sliding his arms around my waist, luring me closer to his body.

“Triumvirate?” I question, wondering what could have possibly happened during those months to make me long for *this*.

“Triumvirate,” he confirms, sweeping aside my curls.

I sense him. I sense his lust, his passion. His *arousal*.

“Why, Natos?”

“You do not wish to hide, Elysia. But I do. Death will keep his secrets. And you shall sleep, my love. Sleep.”

Somehow, I manage to settle my head against the pillow. With Thanatos humming the melody of *Swan Lake* in my mind through our bond, I close my eyes and slip into a blissful slumber that is loveliest, darkest, and deepest.

# EPILOGUE

“AFTER THIS IS OVER, BROTHER, YOU CAN KISS YOUR  
KNEECAPS GOODBYE.”

**NITA**  
**Sunrise – Pre-Wedding**

**A**fter Mordere departs from the room clutching his bleeding mouth and squealing like a stuck pig, I blow my girl a silent kiss of approval. Serves the swine right. A proud warmth floods me at our sweet girl’s defense.

Now, I rejoin my alter I’ve dispatched to shadow-track the necromancer, who is escorting Neo to the dungeons. Once the sun rises, I imagine I’ll be keeping two eyes on Elysia, but this blood oath that she’s agreed to will make it far more difficult to intervene.

Somehow, I must release my brother so he may usurp Mordere’s claim. Even if it means wrestling with the necromancer. Let’s see how it will do against a Hydra Creator when it’s *outside* Mordere’s body, considering I spent hours trying to summon it *before* the battle, but to no avail.

As much as I desire to comfort Elysia, I must focus on the end goal. Besides, in another few minutes, she won’t even remember my name.

Due to such a short amount of time, the alter I created is far more like a wraith. One that tracks whatever I desire but has none of the five senses. So, when I follow its trail like shadowy breadcrumbs and arrive before the arc bridge that leads to the Court O’ Destruction, I understand the Under Circle will be my brother’s dungeon. Of course, a mere cage is not enough for

Mordere; he will humiliate Neo by taking over his Court and dispensing justice before the true Prince of Destruction's very eyes.

Mordere has been rather busy. His ten-thousand-bitten vampire army strong provided a suitable diversion, enabling him to drain all of Neo's destructive blood, ridding the Court of Destruction of my brother's essence and power...and replacing it with Mordere's commanding blood.

No trace of the necromancer yet, but I can sense its presence. Its soothsayer black magic infects the air. I wrinkle my nose at the scent of the stench of blood sacrifice and fire drifting like incense upon the air.

My brother makes a sound unlike any I've ever heard: a barbaric, blood-curdling scream that raises all the hairs on my arms and reverberates through my very horns. The Fallen have staked him with their claws to the floor of the Court. All my alters cower deep inside me—all except for Bryony, who is the bravest of us all and wants to mount her Pegasus and ride in to save the Prince.

*We will, Bryony,* I reassure her and gird myself with force fields of lightning and kinetic energy.

I prepare to liberate Neo.

"Nita."

In mid-step, I pause to greet the necromancer. "Well, now...this is an interesting development," I remark at the sight of her and the black fire skulls swarming in her wake, at the Satanic blood runes covering her phantom, at the undulating ribbons of blood ruby hair, and black lightning wings that beat wind bearing the stench I scented earlier. I stare down her black magic pits—windowless cavities like keyholes to centuries spent in the waste of Limbo where she earned her stripes from the Soul-Eater and ultimately that damned origin of mine who cursed her with the mark of Satan.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, sister of Destruction and Death," the necromancer pronounces, voice like a soprano abomination. She shifts on the edge of a moment, but I catch onto that edge, so I am facing her when she appears at my back: a failed attempt at toying with me.

"I am not that boorish bastard's sister," I refer to Death. "But I am late to an unshackling, so if you will excuse me for my incivility, I despise unpunctuality."

Once again, I mark her for that moment's edge, though she blocks my path and warns, "I wouldn't do that, Nita. Unless you wish to meet the same fate."

“Is that a threat?” I brandish my energy, my lightning. “I would thrill at the challenge of dragging your ass personally back to Limbo. I’ll keep your blood serpent hair as a trophy.”

*I’ll wear it, too!*

**Not now, Kit**, I alert her because I can’t afford any distractions.

“I would never presume to threaten the Hydra Queen. But a certain little angel—”

The necromancer doesn’t dare finish the sentence when I growl deeply and unleash a force field of lightning into her being. It reacts like a cobweb of energy, launching a tremor through her apparition, but I know it’s far more of a warning sting. It would take all my strength, nay, all my *soul*, to battle this succubus, and that is a grievous insult to all succubi.

“Surely, surely, you understand how stronger forces are at work in this game of fates, Nita,” the Necromancer hums to me, lifting her hand to cup a black skull, then snuffs it out in a puff of smoke. “Angels and demons. Humans and monsters. Light and darkness. Good and evil. Surely, surely, you have foreseen the events.”

I set my jaw, and my horns harden because my vision has afforded me a mere glimmer or two. Unlike last time with the Scourge, where I could see the end and the beginning, which granted me the strength to invoke the Right to Substitution and to not strangle Lux with her very own intestines, now I have foreseen *nothing*.

The necromancer howls, baring her teeth like dozens of scimitars overlapping one another. I sense the depth of her indignation as if she’s spewing black flaming geysers. Though I can’t yet judge the source or reasoning for her devilish temper tantrum, I still gorge on her rage. Uninhibited, I cross my arms over my chest, posturing greater than ever, thrusting out my wings to rise above her.

“Unforeseen complication?” I taunt her.

Her black fire settles, those fathomless eye holes lifting to mine as she seethes, “Surely, surely, it seems I may have *underestimated* the little angel.”

I grin. “Join the club.” I wonder what my Elysia managed to do, how she managed to conquer this necromancer even while far away.

“Mordere will still have his fun. And what is life without a little *challenge*? As Father dictated: there are always surprises...on both sides, it seems.” The necromancer thrusts her head toward the Court. “Surely, surely, Destruction desires your presence, Nita.”

“And what shall I call you, bone-conjurer?” I challenge her, but I know she won’t take the bait and would not dare surrender such power. “I am very good with names, you see.”

“I am called Morgya.”

I shake my head once, just a firm resolution and one stab of my horns. “Until I learn your true name, Morgya, I will look forward to calling you a host of nicknames...” I hint, already deepening to my alters to enlist their aid in all the sea of possibilities. I’m certain Elysia will be more than happy to extend her sharp mind.

“To Destruction, Nita,” Morgya voices and makes her way to the midway point of the bridge, leaving me on the opposite side. “I am to raise a ten thousand army strong. And even if you could interfere, you will *not*.”

“We will see, Morgya. We will see.”

“Surely, surely...we will.”

Moments later, I have paralyzed the Fallen, splintered their bones, and reduced their bloodied hearts to pulp juice that sluices into the cracks where my brother lies unconscious. I press my hand to his chest, on the verge of reviving him when I hear the voice in my head.

*Stop, Nita.*

“Neo?” I speak in the desolate hall, laser-focusing on his face.

*I can hear you, sister. Mordere will be here soon. We don’t have long.*

“Precisely.” I weave my lightning into his system to grant Destruction the charge he needs.

**No, Nita.**

“Father be damned, Neo! This is madness! Think of your *wife*! Mordere will—”

*Mordere will do nothing. Elysia will be protected.*

“Your confidence in me is quite touching, brother,” I murmur low in his ear, curving my claws to his jugular to tap the silver to awaken, but it doesn’t as if...Mordere is commanding his very blood to stay *down*. “But I can’t protect her on my own. I’m damn good, brother, but not even I can go against Mordere, the necromancer, and an undead army of ten thousand. Nor is my claim greater than his blood oath.”

*No, but Death’s is.*

“Oh, hell.”

*Yes, Nita. That was the source for the necromancer’s scream. And the reason your foresight is dark. Elysia brought him back.*

“Why would she do such a thing? She must have known I would free you, brother. Your claim is greater than his.”

*Our claim is equal, my sister.*

“Bullshiiiiit!” I snarl, pricking his neck with my claws, my eyes flicking to those veins that don’t erupt for anything. All I need do is remove those Fallen blades from his wrists.

*Nita, the Goddess came to me.*

“What?”

*When I first sucked the poison from her heart, while she was still hovering between worlds, the Goddess came to me with a message. You cannot set me free, sister. This is my cross to bear. My penance.*

“And Thanatos?”

*She will be his bride.*

“Father be damned, Neo!”

*Death will protect Elysia. You must protect all those we love, Nita. There is much I need to tell you, my sister. Much I should have shared with you long ago. I cannot give you the answers you want now. But Death can. Go to Thanatos, Nita.*

I sneer and rise until I’m standing over my brother. “If I go to Thanatos, I’m going to kick his sorry ass until it’s sorrier.”

*Mordere is coming. Go, Nita.*

Tempted to drop kick Neo’s ass, I instead make him the promise, “After this is over, brother, you can kiss your kneecaps goodbye.”

*I love you, too, Nita.*

I wraith-shadow through the dungeons, evading Mordere, and teleport, following the breadcrumbs of his soul trail...or I should say souls’ trail. Why should I have expected him to be anywhere else? My chest tightens, and I brace every vertebra in my spine, harden my horns, strengthen my wings.

“Hello, Nita,” Thanatos greets me as soon as I arrive, one hand twirling in the air. “I’ve been expecting you.”

He nods but returns to his work. I pause to huff frustration through my nostrils as I witness him transporting the souls of the Scourge through the Soul Plane and implanting them into their restored bodies. Like watching a symphony of spirit wisps with their soul strands fluttering behind them like transparent, silvery ribbons. I cage any desire within me that wishes to gush in admiration. At first, I detect a pattern, an undercurrent, but not even I can hope to memorize the rhythm of Death.



All the bodies in what is left of the Quarantined Zone remain unconscious until he summons them to wake. Not black magic, unlike the necromancer, who will raise an army of spectral vampires that are little more than ghouls. Thanatos does the work of reclamation. I want to hate him for it, but I can't. Elysia never would.

"You know why I'm here?" I test him, perching on the edge of the warehouse building that faces the Spirit Woods.

"Yes..." His eyes don't dare gravitate away from mine when he professes, "You're here to ask me some questions."

I retrieve a scythe from my long coat and use it to pick my fangs. "And if I don't like your answers, I'm going to—"

"Kick my ass, I believe," Thanatos chuckles, and I pause from my picking and taper my brows, cocking my head and narrowing my eyes to study those gold orbs.

Elysia severed what was left of the twin bond on her first journey into the Soul Plane when she ripped Neo from Natos. And again when she created a new heart for Neo from her very own blood that he consumed while destroying its poison.

There is no way in...

Oh, hell!

Thanatos grins.



**"YOU KNOW, Death, brother. I just keep coming back!"**

**THANATOS**

"GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, BROTHER," I remark, circling Neoptolemus' unconscious form. "How the tables have turned, haven't they, Neo? Did you suspect during that one night you spent with her...that she would choose this? Choose *me*? Oh, that's right...you did, thanks to the Goddess."

*You don't have to rub it in, Natos.*

"She put two and two together, Neo."

A pause.

*Ha. Ha.*

“It was a beautiful wedding,” I dismiss his sarcasm. We’ve never cared for one another’s humor. “She was far more blissful than she was at yours. Would you care to see?” I offer, knowing that while Neo cannot keep anything from me, Death holds all the secrets. “Or would you care to see our wedding night where she offered herself to me?”

A low growl.

I chuckle, waving a hand, prickling frost along my brother’s back. “Don’t worry, brother. If there is one thing you and I have in common, we both prefer to *savor*. But how does it feel to know she did not run from me? To know that while she rose to checkmate you every time, she surrendered her queen to me?”

*She will run from you eventually, Death. And when she learns the truth again, because we know she will, she will leave both of us.*

“Yes, like a bride leaving her chamber. We both know what that means, Neo.”

*Natos! I would lay waste to the ends of the earth to find her.*

I grow my frost, transforming it into crystal shards to protrude into Neo’s flesh, sensing his pain, a mirrored pain I feel deep to my core. But as long as I hurt him in the process, I care not. “And I would reap every soul that dared to touch her. Neoptolemus, you believed you could sever us for centuries. You believed you could nullify the bond between us. You believed you could ignore me for a century after my physical form was taken and leave me alone to suffer in silence.”

*And you deserved to die! You deserved every fucking minute!* Neo roars, on the verge of exploding into the Dragon within his mind.

“True, but you are paying the price for your sins now, aren’t you?” I stab the back of his neck with those shards and wince at the shadow of the pain. “Consider that just payment for the mark of Satan I wore for centuries, Neo. All because Destruction couldn’t stomach doing the dirty work.”

*You will pay for your sins someday, too, Natos!*

“Of course, Neo. Even Death must answer to destiny. And you will share in my pain just as I share a lesser portion of yours.” I retrieve the ice shards from my brother’s body, revel in the sight of his fresh wounds, and dip one finger into his blood, sensing his Destruction and how the Goddess has weakened it. Clicking my teeth, I rub the blood between my fingers, suck

them clean and rise.

*She will checkmate you, too, Thanatos.*

“Are you implying that Death can’t keep his secret to the ends of the earth?” I grin down at him, tempted to add my own ice stakes to his wrists. “After all, we know you could never play me, but I will be the perfect blend of the two of us.”

*She won’t accept a mask, Natos!* I hear Neo’s protest as I walk away.

“Of course not, brother. She will accept my soul. I’ve already given it to her. Thank you for the inspiration. You gave her the wedding ring. I gave her a superior one,” I consider the twin ring, the rosebud crystal housing my soul. “Did you know Nita stood up with me at my wedding? My Hydra vampire of honor. Seems I made quite an impression on her with my new heart. Would you like to know why she truly despised me?” I make one more circle, enjoying myself a little too much with the frost whorls I write into his flesh.

*Because you’re a boorish bastard.*

“That and her inability to use her foresight with me. But truly, it was because I reminded her too much of the dungeon. Not anymore, Neo. Provided I allow her the *opportunity* to kick my ass whenever she desires, she is now my ally, as well as Elysia’s. Ironic, isn’t it? After all, she was the reason for donning all the masks of your old identity. You and I know the truth, brother. Nita was your greatest mask. The one time you came closest to understanding my burden.”

*And then, Elysia came and burned everything to hell!* Neo shouts within our bond, tremors rocking his core, scales forming on his skin.

“Indeed. And our souls are hers forever,” I point out and finish my final circle, conjuring four wintry stakes of steely crystal. “But while you conquered her heart, brother, I will conquer her soul.”

*Death...!* As soon as Neo tries to explode into the Dragon, I silence his Destruction.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk...do not forget your penance. Perhaps I’ll even escort Elysia down to see how low the Prince of Destruction has been brought.”

*Don’t you dare!*

“Little matter, Neo. Mordere has some special things in store for you beyond your Court. Meanwhile, I’ll remind Elysia of all your masks, how they will always be a part of you no matter how much she may burn them off. After all, give Death his due. Without the loss of my physical form, your heart never would have frozen. My sacrifice is the sole reason your Dragon

did not rip Nita apart in that dungeon just as you would have done to Elysia.”

*Liar!* Neo bares his fangs, rattling the mental chains.

“Oh, you know better than that, Neo. Just as Nita does. I’ve *always* sacrificed for you, brother. Just as I sacrificed my reap that fateful night of Noralice.” I suck in a deep breath through gritted teeth, remembering how beautiful her soul was, how beautifully it danced with me...just as she will again. “Your old heart would have destroyed Elysia just as you destroy everything you love. And my old heart let her go. This time, I am claiming what is *mine*. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have my own Court to get to and a rapist’s soul whose account requires settling. He may have survived you, but I guarantee he will not survive me.”

*Thanatos!...Thanatos! If you touch her, if you bite her, I’ll destroy you, do you hear me? I severed you once, I can do it again!*

I drive the stakes home, lodge them deep into his spine, and crash to my knees from the pain rocketing through my system. “You know, Death, brother. I just keep coming back!”

## END OF BOOK TWO

Keep reading for a sneak peek of book three!

**\*REMEMBER:** Reviews mean the WORLD to authors. If you enjoyed, please support by rating and reviewing on Amazon. It can be one line!

FYI: Please connect with me if this book brought you healing...

Share on your Booktok, and I'd love for you to tag me @authoremilybshore! If you're interested in seeing exclusive art, spicy bonus scenes, ARC access, please consider supporting me on [Kindle Vella](#) with your vote aka Top Fave crown. \*USA only for now\* Or find me on [REAM](#). Connect with me to learn more!

*Hunting Death and Destruction* is coming to KU/paperback **4/24**

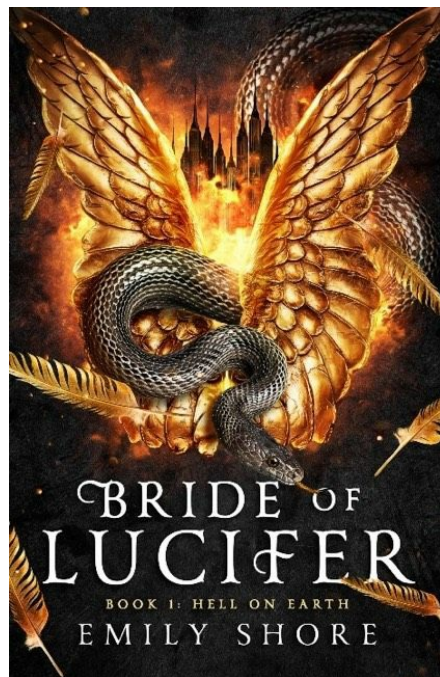
*Redeeming Death and Destruction* is coming to KU/paperback **6/24**

WANT to read the **Crossover** Series? Yes, Elysia and Neo and co. paths will cross with Astraea and Lucifer and co. and [The Sacrifice](#), a brand new release trending on KU and a Top 25 release for Dragons.

# AFTERWORD

Want to read the **Crossover** Series? Yes, Elysia and Neo and co. paths will cross with Astraea and Lucifer and co. and *The Sacrifice*, a brand new release trending on KU and a Top 25 release for Dragons.

[BRIDE OF LUCIFER on KU/paperback](#)



**Spicy dystopian fantasy—18+.**

Lucifer opens Hell on Earth—a tourist trap on steroids—then hosts Trials to find a new bride.

To end the war between heaven and earth, one sweet but psycho angel

assassin must conquer the Bride Trials, survive the wedding, and make it to the honeymoon and kill the Devil...

Unless she falls for him!

**THE SACRIFICE: A Dark Dragon Fantasy Romance –  
On KU/Paperback/Hardcover/Decorated Edges**



“Don’t you know better than to play with monsters?”

Perhaps I’d rather play with the monsters than kill them. But loving them is suicide by sacrifice. Lucky, I’m not looking for a happily ever after.

I’m looking for a dark and dangerous once upon a time...



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**For my *Roseblood* books which paved me the way for this book.** (Yes, this series is technically a prequel, but I'd prefer everyone read *Courting Death and Destruction* first to see me, my true identity which hadn't surfaced before 2020).

**For the books that triggered me so much (no, I'm not sharing, #IYKYK):** you gave me so much angst and righteous anger, I needed to write CDnD, and my heart awoke and bled all over the page. My triggers turned into healing, the courage to come out as bisexual, awareness of my strength, and my first tattoo!

**For my first Court, including the ones no longer with me:** you were there devouring the chapters as fast as I could write them. I'll never forget all the deep feels and how we made a tiny, intimate, and special community together.

**For my second Court, Court O' Crazy:** thank you so much for threatening to kidnap and torture me, to crush my legs, or to create a SIM's of me and lock me in a burning room with no doors and no locks if I didn't release this. If you still need to do the last for cathartic reasons, I give you my blessing. Thank you for becoming my sisterhood, for being the best cheerleaders and supporters in every way. I promise if I become an international bestseller, I'm getting a place where we can all meetup and laugh and cry and hug together just like we do in Messenger.

**Special thanks to two significant readers:** you told me you read CDnD on a very dark night where you thought about ending it. It melted my heart to learn that my words saved your life and that you found your own inner halo.

**For the DID community:** I may struggle with dissociation, but you and you alters with your amazing and beautiful stories became the key for this book series, and I never could have finished it without you. To the DID sensitivity readers who fell in love with my Amanita who is truly my favorite character I have ever written. If you have DID and you or you alters ever want someone to talk to, I would be honored to connect with you.

**For the Kindle Vella Community:** From the moment I contacted KDP, and they told me I was a Kindle Vella bestseller, I was over the moon! Special thanks to this platform, for giving me the opportunity to launch with you in 2021, for those who have voted for me week in and week out to keep me in the Top 25/Top 10/Top 5 for the past two years. To the readers and authors who have supported me and fallen in love with my Vella babies. **You funded:** my husband's cancer surgery/chemo medical bills, hospitalization bills for my blood clots, daycare for our littlest daughter so I could write full time and follow my dream, professional editing, formatting, covers, so many beautiful art pieces, and of course: my caffeine addiction. (\*If you're interested in supporting me on [Kindle Vella](#), crowns help most! Connect with me on FB to see some exclusive NSFW UNCENSORED art.)

**To my husband:** for that night on the porch and then that night in the garage.

**To anyone who is struggling with their identity or with trauma:** the major themes of this book are light in the darkness, finding your voice and strength, and embracing your inner halo. Your halo might be cracked, and your wings are broken or gone. But sometimes you need to fall to your knees before you can rise! To learn more of the story behind this book I wrote in three weeks with its sequels back to back but took three years to release, please connect with me on Facebook, ["Emily's Vella Verse"](#).

# HUNTING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION SNEAK PEEK

~1~

I never imagined the deadliest vampire in the world, the Prince of Death himself, would become my very own Reaper umbrella.

Ash abandons the sky like a gray snowfall, dwelling like an omen upon my curls and Court gown. With his shades, Thanatos slays any embers that would dare singe my person, protecting me far more than any umbrella.

Despite how I shiver with him so close, heat ravages the space between my thighs more than ever. I personally blame him for having to replenish my panties at least three times a day—and make certain he knows it by chucking the liquid-gold offended thong at his chest whenever possible. I heave a sigh, feeling the rising sensation, or rather opposite of rising, but Thanatos merely smiles and lowers his knuckles to brush my cheek in a silent gesture that somehow cherishes yet taunts. Saints, I hate it when he does that.

For the past few months, he's remained a steadfast presence at my side, even if it means accompanying me to the human blood farms all over the Tenth Court territory. For some predisposition, beyond his mere protection against Mordere, I am prone to keeping him close. His presence is pacifying. Especially in bed till I fall asleep. Nor does he interfere with my Underground endeavors despite how my role has changed since my identity as the Everblood was revealed to the world.

I am no longer a Princess smuggler. The Bride of Death is afforded a more *official* role that resembles bait, but I still maintain my title of Angel Bride—a title given to me by the people.

“Thank you,” I express, curving the silvery armor claws I wear into his Reaper robe as he escorts me between the gates of the blood master’s human blood farm—gates and vampires guarding them that part before Thanatos. Safer than ever with Death at my side, no chill slithers up my spine. My skin doesn’t crawl. Over the past few months, Mordere has kept himself quite busy with the transformation of the Tenth Court, but he still maintains the same institution of the chess-based system. Apart from giving himself the title of prince, which I will never submit to calling him. Unlike everyone else, save for Amanita and Thanatos, of course, I thankfully don’t have to.

One hand skates to the small of my back, chilling my skin beneath the fabric of my gown but not imparting his frost. With him this close, his alluring scent of dead roses drifts across my hair. Everything about the Prince of Death is alluring.

“Thank you for inviting me yet again, Elysia.”

I snap my eyes to his because I recognize his wry humor from a mile away and that telltale hint of a smirk. Mirth dances within his gold eyes when we share that silent knowledge, though he never uses his words as a weapon.

Mine are scythes in comparison when I pause to counter him, “Yes, you are quite the expert in accepting *all* my invitations—” I consider dinner in the Commons, touring the Tenth Court and even the Court O’ Nines’ castles to inspect how human familiars are treated, riding Spitfire up the mountain scenic route, “—except for one.” Jutting one hip out like a seductive blade’s edge, I raise my chin and stare up at him under impetuous lashes—aware of my tempting haloed eyes—enthroned and emboldened with gold-flecked nightshade shadow wings. “Are you waiting for an engraved invitation, Thanatos? Or one written in blood?” I bait him, considering the previous night I’d programmed the Infinity Wardrobe to paint my skin in my own blood before issuing out of my personal suite. His expression was worth its weight in gold. But the pretentious bastard still refused to touch me beyond that familiar spinal cord path that he knows will always put me to sleep. I’ve exhausted all my options. He escapes me every night.

What’s a girl gotta do to get some Death dick around here?

Pausing in the gateway, undaunted by the gathering crowd, I dare to spar with Death.

“If I’m not your *type*, Natos, you can just be *honest*,” I dig the scythe in, reminding him of one of our blood oaths.

Thanatos lowers his head to my cheek with that sardonic upturn of his

mouth growing. Shit! He's going to one-up me again. Capturing my hand, Thanatos murmurs a prickle of frost in my ear, "Though I love your desire to be joined at the *hip*, Elysia, I hardly think this is the time or the place to discuss how you are exactly my *type*, from your blood to your flesh to your tooth to your hair to your tears and everything beyond that I adore, my salvation and my love," he concludes and checks me with a single kiss to the back of my hand.

Shiiiiiiiiit.

My cheeks mirror my burning eyes because I should know better than to tangle with Death. Other than Mordere, I must have had one damn good reason for resurrecting him. Other than all his...his sexy godhood Reaper-ness. He is Neo's twin, but Death carries himself differently.

From those silky dark skin, cliff-high and blade-sharp cheekbones I would love to lick if he ever gave me the chance, the gold constellation seas of his eyes that I could bathe naked in forever, the full and voluptuous mouth—oh, Saints! Whatever moron says women are not visual! What the fuck is happening—

Thanatos' lips linger just above my hand so he may add, *It's the Rite of May tomorrow, Elysia. The spring blood moon cycle tends to awaken all sorts of violent emotions. Perhaps you should gouge out your eyes till then, my bride.*

*With all due respect, Thanatos, bite me.*

*It's Natos to you. And not yet, Elysia.*

*Fuck you.*

*Nor that yet either.*

Clenching my teeth, I refrain from another smart remark because he is right. He's always right. So, I bite back a huff, ignore the dampening sensation in my panties, and continue.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emily used to be the good little church-going girl who snuck peeks of smutty romance books at the store. Now, she proudly writes smut into fantasy and has forsaken the religious cult of her past.

In 2020, Emily found her voice while writing dark fantasy romance. In 2021, she rebranded on Kindle Vella and has been a Vella bestseller for two years. Her writing always features enemies to lovers featuring heroines who don't need a sword to be strong, "touch her and die" monsters and villains, and trauma healing.

An abuse survivor and trained advocate, Emily has worked as an awareness speaker all over Minnesota. Identifying as bisexual and feminist, she loves to showcase sex and kink positivity, trauma-overcoming themes beyond stereotypes, and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity.

When not writing enemies to lovers, Emily is addicted to the Enneagram, rewatching Schitts Creek, cuddling with her kitty, and spending time with her online sisterhood where she can exercise her big empath heart.

Emily lives in Saint Paul with her husband and two daughters. She loves to write at her local coffee shop where all the baristas know she's an author and have memorized her order. Emily is thankful she's far-sighted and can write her spicy scenes in small print while hiding her screen.