



THIS
WICKED
BOND

AMANDA AGGIE

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To those who love the sweet, tortured hero.

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains triggers! You will find some adult situations and language intended for individuals 18+ years of age. If you believe magic and sorcery is the Devil's work, please close the book now. This book is for those who like a bit of spice with their fantasy plot, but the plot comes first.

As for major content warnings, please see the list below:

Gore, steamy scenes intended for those 18+ years of age, monsters, animalistic behavior, blood, murder, death, violence, biting, intimate magic rituals, immoral science experiments, captivity, forced mating, free falling, heights, dream manipulation, and other disturbing images that might not be suitable for all audiences.

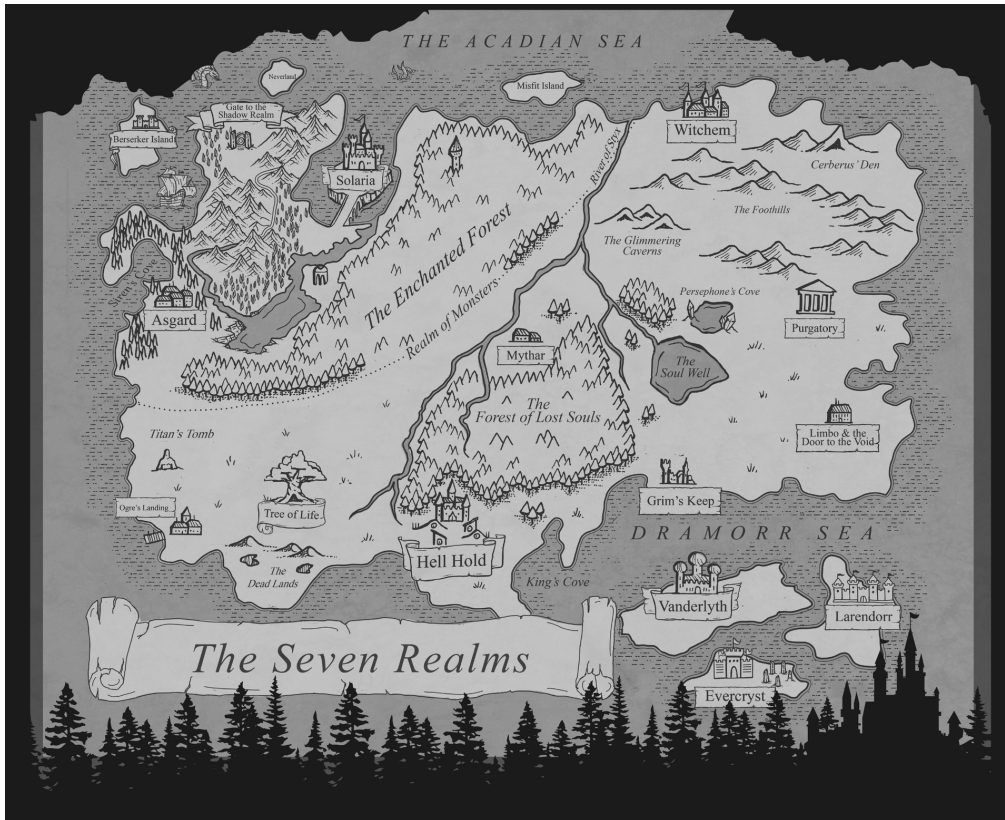
With that said, if you're family—*talking to you, Mom*—and you have to sit around the dinner table with me at Thanksgiving, you've been warned. If you can't handle the heat, stay out of the kitchen because what you're about to read might make you look at me awkwardly from here on out.

Also, please be sure to review! Honest reviews help so much with getting my books out there in front of new readers, so if you can, please leave one. Even if it's only a star value. :)

Thank you for picking up the book and I hope you enjoy the story!

Now... Be a good little reader and turn the page/scroll on. ;)

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CHAPTER 1

Calamity

“**T**his year, he dies.” My affirmation lingers in the stale dungeon air. It’s not a binding vow, but it feels like I can’t take it back now that the elements know my secret— *that I plan to kill the king.*

This has to end. I’m tired of the false promises and the broken dreams of a life outside grungy dungeon walls. There’s only so much the paint and charcoal can do. My drawings will never hide the barred windows or the locked gate, just as they’ll never compare to the real thing, but these brush strokes help me pretend.

Sure, my living conditions could be worse. The other prisoners have nothing more than hay-covered stone floors. Mine has a bed. I have a shelf full of books that Asmo has procured for me over the years, clean clothes, and linens. I’m given three meals a day and have plenty of water. The other prisoners die in the scraps of cloth they came here wearing, and most don’t get a single meal before their execution.

Meg was the only exception. She was taken care of and like me, she was treated well by the dungeon guards. If it weren’t for her vivid descriptions of the outside world, the murals on my walls wouldn’t exist.

Gods, how I miss her.

Setting down the paint brush, I wipe my hands on a cloth rag and take a step back, admiring my work. Meg always wanted me to paint the crystal castle. It's from one of her stories about a realm full of dragons.

She claimed the blood red crystals that peeked through every stone crevice made it magical, but it was the three sisters who lived within it that intrigued me. They could turn into dragons and each was blessed with a different gift but together they breathed life into the realms, allowing them to flourish.

The one blessed with an affinity for hellfire gave us the hell flame, a ball of light in the sky that never goes out. The one blessed with lightning gave us storms and everywhere her power struck crystals formed, bringing magic into the realms. The last was blessed with ice, and she created the triplet moons—modeled after herself and her sisters. Thus, every three days when the moons block out the hell flame, our lands experience nightfall.

Meg loved to tell me about them, and thought their stories would guide me to make the right decisions, to admire honor and sacrifice. She called them the furies—the first dragons.

It's been three years today since she vanished. The woman raised me within this very cell. She braided my hair while her voice filled the dungeon with song—with hope. She brought life to this place, just as the furies did to our realm, and loved me as if I were her own.

It's about time I found a way to honor her.

I never knew my biological mother and my father—the King of Solaria—banished me to this forsaken dungeon at birth. He only visits once a year, but it's not to check on me. His only interest is to study my magic. Meg and Asmodeus, the dungeon warden, filled the void. They took care of me.

Since Meg disappeared, things haven't been the same. I don't even know what happened to her...Asmo knows. Whether he's been commanded not to share the details with me, or if he's just trying to protect my heart, I'm not sure. All I know is his lips are sealed on the subject, and Meg isn't coming back.

“The king will be here soon.” Asmo leans a shoulder against the bars, his black hair catching the light as he brushes it out of his face. Dark circles have formed beneath familiar mismatched eyes, one golden amber and one pure white. He’s hundreds of years old and barely looks thirty, but being immortal tends to have that effect on people. However, what he doesn’t show in age, his scars make up for it, telling the story of a man who’s survived complete and utter chaos.

A weak smile tugs at the corner of his lips. He’s always weary around my birthday. It’s the only time the King of Solaria comes to see me. It’s also the only time I ever leave my cell. My father has me brought to the white room so he can run his tests.

“You shouldn’t worry about me, but perhaps you should worry about yourself.” I inch closer to the bars, nodding once in Asmo’s direction. “When’s the last time you slept?”

His lips falter into a thin line. “I’ll sleep tomorrow once I know you’re safe.”

“As if you’d be willing to go toe-to-toe with the king.” I shake my head. “We both know it’d be suicide for you to attempt to stop him.”

He follows my gaze to his wristband. The golden metal has been set with jewels, a sign of his status, but as pretty as it may be, it’s far more deadly. The cuff has been enchanted to stifle the wearer’s magic, and from what I understand, the king has forced them upon all of his subjects. They give him complete and utter control over everyone and with a single whispered command, the cuff will detonate like a magical bomb, leveling the wearer to ash.

It’s a death not even immortals can survive. Which means if Asmo steps out against the king, it won’t matter that he’s family. He’ll be incinerated before he even knows what hit him.

“Just be glad they don’t work on you.” Asmo crosses his arms, hiding the metal band from view.

I scoff. “Maybe if they did, the king wouldn’t be so paranoid. Maybe I wouldn’t have been locked away in the first place. He wouldn’t fear my magic—”

“You would still be a prisoner, Calamity. Inside the castle is prettier, but it’s still a cell. He’d never let you leave. Your gift is too rare.” He twists, gripping one of the bars. “You were a prisoner in his eyes before you were ever conceived. He created you on a quest for power, nothing more.”

“Not true. Had I been normal, he might’ve married me off.” My voice is nothing more than a whisper as I hold his gaze.

Asmo scrubs an open palm over the length of an old scar that bisects his right eyebrow and runs down to the apple of his cheek. “Regardless, you’re not. In a way, it’s a blessing, because unless he figures out how to replicate your gift, he needs you alive.”

He’s right. This conversation has only confirmed what I already knew. No more waiting on Asmo to come up with a way out or for someone to rescue me.

“Promise me something.” When he doesn’t answer or so much as flinch, I continue, “If today ends badly, promise me you’ll stay out of it. I don’t want you to die for me.”

“What does that mean?” Asmo narrows his eyes into slits and his voice takes on a grave tone.

The air crackles with power as it flirts with my skin, radiating off him like a furnace. The amber ring that encircled his only pupil is gone, the pure white of the other eye is too, drowned in the darkness that consumes them both. Power streaks across his face in jagged, inky lines, like poison dripping from demonic eyes. His gaze never leaves mine as if he can read my mind.

“I can’t do this anymore. The needles, the lightning he shoots through my veins to get me to change... I don’t even know what he thinks I’ll change into. I remember everything from last year and I wish I didn’t... When the king asks me to make him young, instead of giving him life, I’m going to take it.”

Asmo steps closer until his face hovers just in front of mine. The barred wall between us is the only thing giving my backbone the strength when the very sight of him makes me want to shrivel away. “Don’t you dare... I’ve told you about my visions of the day he dies. It’s not by your hand. You can’t play with fate, Calamity. Trying to do so will only get us both killed. Do you understand?”

“When? You’ve been telling me about this woman that’ll come and take his heart for years. Where is she?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” he says, shaking his head and taking a step back. “I don’t know when, but I know what I saw.”

“What if what you saw in your premonition was from the past? The king is a druid. He has nine lives. Surely he’s died before and come back.” I arch a brow, crossing my arms over my chest in challenge.

“It’s not. I’ve seen her other times, too. In one, I nearly kill her when we go to war with Hell Hold. That hasn’t happened yet, so it has to be the future. The king will die, for good. He’ll get what’s coming to him, but knowing what happens and trying to change it never ends well. You could alter one tiny thing and set the realm on an entirely different course.”

“I have to... Something is already different this year. He didn’t send you to come get me and take me to the white room. He *always* sends you. For all we know, he might’ve already figured out how to mimic my power, and if he no longer has a use for me, what’s keeping him from killing me today?”

“Why do you think I haven’t been able to sleep? I’ve done nothing but think about that for days.” His eyes return to their normal state, the dark streaks fading away as he takes a step back.

“Then let me try.” I reach through the bars to grip his hand. “I might die, anyway. At least this gives me a fighting chance.”

The clapping of shoes against stone steps continues to grow louder as one of the guards make their way down the stairs. By the sound of it, they're not too far from my floor.

Asmo must hear it too, because when he speaks, the words rush out of him. "The king has two lives left. That means you'll need to kill him three times. The first will be the hardest. When druids lose one of their lives, they have to relearn how to use their magic when they come back. It takes time, but he won't be powerless or defenseless. He'll still be able to cast, just not as well as before."

I can't help but glance at the opening to the stairwell. As distant as it may be, it feels like the world narrows around it, awaiting whatever comes next.

"Calamity..." Asmo whispers, drawing my attention back to him. "Don't die... Please."

"I love you, too."

His eyes round as he pinches his lips between his teeth. Right before the guard can exit the stairwell, he reaches through the bars, pulling me toward them so he can kiss my forehead. As he draws away, I catch a metallic shine as a man steps out of the stairwell. Only it's not a reflection of light off armor, it's off a golden crown. My father stands at the mouth of the dungeon hall. We're in the presence of the King of Monsters.

CHAPTER 2

Calamity

Every heartbeat is a relentless drumming in my ears as the king directs me down the dim hallway. Somehow, the air seems thicker. It's the same air it's always been, but now it's almost too dense to breathe.

My lungs burn, tensing as we get closer and closer to the stairwell. I could walk this path with my eyes closed. I've completed this same trip over two dozen times. It's seared into my memory, every footfall, even the number of stairs.

One of my father's hands is pressed firmly against my back and the chains attached to my shackles jingle. I'm so hyper focused on putting one foot in front of the other that I don't notice until it's too late that Asmo has fallen behind.

He jogs to catch up, but I'm jerked to a halt as my father whirls us around, glaring daggers into him. "I told you; your assistance isn't needed today."

"I'm sorry, my king. It's not safe for you to be alone with a prisoner. Someone should accompany you and wait outside the door." Asmo's gaze flicks to me for a split second, but every ounce of the loving man I know is gone. He's wearing a face, the mask of the dungeon master who lives for his duty, but that's all it is. If the king knew how he really felt about him, Asmo would be dead. The man hates my father more than I do

and that's saying something, but he knows how to act, how to *survive*.

“Your *services* are not needed. You've grown too close. I have someone else waiting for us in the white room. Keep pushing and you'll get to live in the cell next to her. Understood?”

The lump in Asmo's throat bobs as his eyes once again meet mine. His pause is momentary, like he might challenge the order, but then he dips his head. “Understood, my king.”

“Good.” My father yanks on the chain connecting my wrists, and speedwalks out of the dungeon.

Gods, it's happening. Heart pounding, my feet fight to keep up with the king's pace. We wind through floors of stairs, reaching the base of the castle and wrapping around the garden grounds until we reach a hatch in the dirt. The door to the white room. My stomach flips as my father tears it open and we descend inside.

I spot two guards sitting at a small table. They glance up at us but quickly return to their business. There's a long hall, lined with orange-hued mage lights. I've never known what's behind the other doors. Only the one at the end.

The obsidian stone walls and wooden doors feel far less civilized than the well kept gardens just above us. Even the castle is more modern, showered in gold and intricate archways. The torches that line the outside of the castle are even more sophisticated than this place. At least from out here. Beyond that door, however, is nothing but white, shiny surfaces.

Wood groans as the king waves a hand at the end of the hall. Locks, invisible to the naked eye, click and screech until the entire thing shudders and slips inside the wall, revealing a light so bright I have to squint to keep from going blind.

“Here we are,” my father says, casting me a closed-mouth grin as he leads me toward what he refers to as the examination table.

My legs connect with the stone, it's elevated from the floor like an altar. Had I not been here before I'd be worried I was about to be sacrificed to a god. Although, a part of me wonders if that would be better.

The walls are clad in pure, white scales. It's been this way for as long as I can remember, but I've never had the courage to ask what creature the scales once belonged to. Their spaded shapes catch the light, reflecting a prism of colors around the room, like ghostly flames. Multiple large bookcases are lined with the same material, their shelves stocked full of ancient-looking tomes, amber vials, crystals, and bright-hued potions, and tonics.

A long, wooden table stretches across the opposite side of the room, holding up bulbous glass jars and coils. Liquids all the colors of a rainbow drip and loop around, changing as the fluid moves down the line. I breathe in deep, tasting the magic in the air. It's syrupy sweet, but it's not the taste that makes me grimace, but the implications of what that magic will do.

My stomach flips, remembering the last time I was here. When I was younger, I'd do just about anything to make my father happy. I'd jump if he asked me to, knowing jagged rocks awaited my feet, that it would hurt when I landed. I craved the man's attention more than I valued my own life.

The king used my naïve heart to get what he wanted, promising freedom he had no intention of giving me. All I had to do was cooperate, listen, and indulge his curiosity. He's obsessed with magic, primarily the science behind it, and he's taken me to the brink of death and back again in search for answers.

He's a mimic druid, a magic user with the power to mimic the gifts of others like they are his own. All he usually needs to do is touch someone, but the ability fades with time. It's how he's built an empire in a realm full of monsters and chaos. Yet, my gift is the first he can't replicate. It's driven him into madness, hellbent with the need to know why. It's like I'm immune to his form of magic.

Meg was too. Honestly, I think that's the only reason he let her live for as long as he did. He needed her alive so he could understand why and run his tests. A part of me wonders if that's why she disappeared. He cracked the mystery, and as a result, he didn't need her anymore. It's why I can't sit here and play the part he's asked me to for so many years.

I don't want to be next.

The king bends across my legs, grabbing the leather straps that run through carved holes in the base of the altar. He wraps them around my middle, cinching the belts one at a time. They're not tight but they're constricting enough to keep me on the slab if I try to jerk away.

"Comfortable?" he asks, giving me his back as he retrieves something from the wooden table.

"As ever." I let my head rest against the stone, staring up at the circular ring above me. Eight candles are lit with magic. The wax never burns, and the lights never go out.

"I think this is our year. I've already had the maids get a bedroom ready for you. Wouldn't it be nice to finally eat breakfast with your sisters and I? To have a real room?"

"Yes." I do my best to muster up a sincere smile.

It takes everything I have not to roll my eyes. He always says that, right before putting a mask over my face. He puts something in it, and the room becomes blurry, my limbs too heavy to lift, but it doesn't numb the pain like he says it will. Every year, I feel whatever he injects into my body burns through me like it's turned my veins to cinders. Then nothing...I'm there one moment, then waking up in my cell the next. And the king is nowhere to be found, as if the promises he made never existed.

I'd started believing I imagined it all—that maybe, I was asleep the entire time and conjured fantasies of a shitty version of father-daughter time... I even babbled about it to my father, but he claimed the liquid hell flame can cause hallucinations, that the flickers of incomplete memories were nothing more than nightmares born from fear. But I've experienced

nightmares for years, and these were different. In my nightmares, my father doesn't have a face.

That was the year I figured it out, that he was somehow making me forget the worst parts of our visits, as if omitting it from my memory would keep me compliant. In a way, it had.

I was prepared last year, and when my father shot the fire through my veins, I used the claws that formed at the ends of my fingertips to wound my thigh. It healed, but it was enough for me to know what was real, that they weren't nightmares and I'd endured far worse things than the green liquid he pumped into my veins.

Even if the only thing I remembered were choppy glimpses, what they revealed left me horrified and raw, betrayed in the worst way possible.

"Alright, let's get the drip started, shall we?" The king inserts the needle into the top of my hand and within seconds I can feel the liquid burning through my veins.

I grit my teeth as he gets the mask, ready to place it on my face, but not before I use my magic on him. He won't risk me not being coherent enough after he's done to reverse the years of his life.

"Okay, princess. Your turn." The king extends his hand, palm up and I have to cross my arm over my chest since the other has the needle in it. The gold of his ring gleams mockingly and it's cold to the touch. "Make me young again," he commands, his voice a raspy whisper.

For a moment, I stand still, gathering the nerve to do what must be done. My power surges to the surface as I close my eyes, focusing on our connection. I start to give him life, doing as he asks, and his body relaxes and he lets out a deep breath.

Then I take my chance, snatching it back as fast as I possibly can. My eyes flare open to find black tendrils erupting from his skin. They slither onto mine and vanish only for more to appear. My father tries to jerk away, his lips parting on a silent scream. He lifts his hand, writhing in my grasp as he casts. Invisible ropes tighten around my throat,

locking the air in my lungs. My body screams as the pressure builds in my face, but I don't relent.

The more the tendrils consume, the more shriveled he becomes. His teeth form small blades, as he drops the spell, incapable of holding it any longer and I gasp for air. Then pain explodes up my arm as his teeth sink into my flesh, scraping against bone.

I cry out, jerking against the leather straps. No longer caring about the needle, or the fact the tube connected to it is too long to reach, my fist connects with his face. The burning in my veins recedes now that the needle is no longer dripping liquid fire into me. Still, I don't let go, I drain him dry until his once strong frame collapses against the stone altar. His muscles are too weak, and his skin stretches thin over brittle bones.

"Stop! Stop this instant!" His raspy pleas for mercy are too quiet for the guards at the end of the long hall to hear. A smile touches my lips as his eyes grow vacant and the light goes out of them.

The inky veins connecting our hands retract, fading back into my skin like they were never there.

The king is dead. For now.

"One down. Two to go." I get to work unlatching the straps the king placed across my lap and over my legs. Once free, I search the room, looking for something to use as a weapon for when he wakes. The table is first as I shuffle through the scattered parchments. Not even the shelves have much besides a book I could wake him with. The only things here of worth are needles, which would likely inflict minimal damage alone, or glass beakers. I could break one, and maybe use a shard of it.

I whirl as the locks on the door begin to move. *Someone's coming.*

Glancing at my father's motionless body, I shake out my hands, desperate for a plan or an idea to come to me. I have to do something, but there's nowhere to hide. The best I can do is hope to catch them by surprise when they enter.

My heart races as I try to breathe, darting my eyes around the room until I spot an almost empty beaker. I knock it over in haste, watching the fluorescent liquid within spread rapidly across the cold stone floor. Snatching the largest shard of glass, its sharp edge nips at my skin, and I press my back against the wall next to the door, waiting.

The door slides open and a small man pushes a squeaky cart into the room. The glassware it carries rattles, and for a moment, I ponder bolting out the open door. Only, if I run, the king's shadows would find me. His assassins are trained to sniff out and kill the king's targets. And if he doesn't send them, Asmo might be forced to find me for him. He'll either die denying the king, or be forced to do the unspeakable.

Running isn't an option. The only way I'm free is in death, be it mine or the king's. My decision crystallizes as my father's assistant comes into the room. He's mere feet away from seeing my father's body on the opposite side of the altar.

His assistant doesn't always come in while my father has me here. If he does, it's usually while I'm asleep, since I've only seen his face twice in the last twenty-six years. It was a risk—attacking the king, knowing he might walk in—but one I was prepared to take.

The man's sharp, angular features twist as he sniffs the air. His gaze locks with the spilt potion on the far side of the room. His body freezes as I lunge. He turns as I strike out with the glass, his horrified face meeting mine. Before I can fully register his transformation, the man is gone, replaced by a hulking creature. My shard is buried into the creature's fur, dark as midnight, and it whines as the bristles on its back stand on end. A snarl tears through the air and amber eyes, wild with rage, fixate on me.

The beast snaps at the air and I twist, barely escaping his long, sharp teeth. I can't outpace a wolf—or whatever this thing is—nor can I outmuscle one. My only chance is to drain it the same way I did my father, and I have to be close for that.

Feinting a step towards the door, I pivot as the beast lunges. My shard of glass meets its flank, but the minor wound only

seems to enrage it further. It snaps its jaws at me again, and I narrowly dodge, feeling the rush of air from its missed attempt.

My heart thunders. The creature circles me, snarling, waiting for an opening, and I do the same, glass shard ready, skin tingling with latent power. He lunges and I hurl the glass shard at him. It scrapes down its side, scalping off a chunk of thick fur. The damage isn't fatal, but it's enough of a distraction for me to latch onto its neck.

We crash into the walls as the creature tries to rub me off of him, sending vials and beakers, and tubes shattering across the floor. My power surges. Black tendrils burst forth from my hands, leeching his strength. It howls, a sound of pure agony, and desperate to shake me off. But I cling on, channeling more and more energy into the drain.

The beast's struggles weaken. His massive form begins to shrink, the fur receding, revealing the man beneath. I pull back, breathing heavily, the use of my magic taking a toll on me as well. I'm not sure if it's whatever was in the green liquid or just me being out of practice, but it's hard to catch my breath. Holding the man with one hand, I fumble my hands over the floor, searching for the shard. The moment the sharp edge of the glass is within reach, I drive it deep into the man's neck.

If the guards are still down here, there's no doubt they heard the chaos. The king could wake any moment now. I'm running out of time.

Glancing at my father's body, I breathe a sigh of relief when I find it lifeless, still in the same place I left it. Serves him right. From the things I've been told about him by other prisoners that have come and gone over the years, from Asmo and Meg, he deserves it. Hell, he deserves to rot down here.

The open doorway is void of guards. Maybe it's my lucky day and the assholes went up for air or something. Pushing the dead man off me, I rise to my feet and quietly move toward the doorway to peek down the hall.

There's no one coming, so that's gotta be a good sign, right?

Spinning on my heels, I only make it a quarter turn before something jabs into my neck. My eyes flare open wide as I catch a glimpse of a gold ring. My father's.

“How dare you?” His voice is scratchy, like he's dying of thirst. “I've given you so much. This is how you repay me?” The needle is ripped from my flesh, and I'm pushed forward. Every limb is heavy, and only growing heavier as I struggle to push myself up from the floor. The room begins to rock like I'm floating in the jagged waves I've watched for hours through the barred window of my room. I've always wondered what it would feel like to be in those waves, I guess now I know.

“You gave me nothing but lies,” I grit, slowly losing control of my tongue as my muscles give away.

“Lies? I gave you life.” His words drip venom as he crouches down, fisting my shirt and wrenching me up into his arms. “I let you live when I could've had my answers years ago by simply killing you. You don't need to be breathing for me to study you, little girl.”

“Then why...” Fighting to keep my eyes open, I'm dropped onto the altar and my father wastes no time strapping me down, arms, legs and all. I try to lift my limbs, desperate to do something—to kick or punch. There's no point in screaming. No one will hear it from down here. “Why did you?”

He laughs dryly. “Because I had some absurd notion that perhaps if I raised you right, you'd serve me.”

My head rocks as I attempt to tell him no. “You... wanted... immortality.”

“I do, yes, but what good is having you make me young, if I have to worry about you killing me instead? I'd be better off running my tests, whether it kills you or not. Once I understand your power, I'll live forever, and best of all, I won't need you to facilitate it.”

A chill runs up my spine as the king lowers his head, putting his face near mine. His lips split into a grin that's far too wide

to be natural, and the ivory blades of his teeth are still stained from my blood.

“Now the real fun starts,” he says, patting my arm as he stands back up.

The king might’ve made a plethora of false promises in my lifetime, but this one I fear he plans to keep.

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CHAPTER 3

Calamity

A dull ache courses through my body as I open my eyes. The familiar stone walls of my cell greet me, as I blink into focus, and Asmo's wide eyes come into view.

It takes every ounce of strength I can muster to sit up, and my muscles scream in protest, but I grit my teeth and push through the pain. Even then, I only make it halfway before he's helping me.

"Careful. You're still healing." His voice is thick with emotion, it's hard to tell if he's pissed at me for trying to kill the king or more worried about my current condition. Perhaps it's a mix of both.

Asmo grips my chin, just enough to turn my face so he can see my eyes. I'm still too groggy to fight it, and after a moment his hand drops, as if he's satisfied or found what he was searching for.

"Thank the gods... You might actually live. What were you thinking?"

He probably shouldn't get his hopes up just yet. Everything hurts, and I'm not sure how much longer that'll be true, considering what I just attempted. I thought for sure the king would kill me in the white room, that he would've made true on his promise to dig until he got the answers he craves.

“He...” I swallow, trying to wet the sandpaper in my throat. “He let me live...”

“For now. He said if you survived, he wanted you executed to the riff by the end of the week.” Dipping his head, I watch him twirl his thumbs in his lap. The fact he couldn’t look me in the eye as he said it tells me everything I need to know. I’m not making it out of this. And if the king wants me sacrificed to the riff, that’s worse than death.

The riff is a crack so deep, nothing dropped inside of it ever gets out. Well, besides the king’s first born. It’s a monster so deadly, even my father is scared of it. The dungeon master is responsible for keeping it fed, shoving prisoners inside the riff every so often to ensure it stays deep within the darkness. It’s Asmo’s job and not even he has witnessed its entire face, just the slew of fluorescent eyes that stare up at him at mealtime.

“Is this... Is this what happened to Meg?” The words tumble out before I can stop them. Asmo’s gaze darkens, but he doesn’t answer. “Please. If I’m going to die, I want to know what happened to her.”

He nods solemnly. “In a way. The day you showed the king your gift, he decided he didn’t need her anymore. He stopped being careful and couldn’t care less if his tests killed her. She died in the white room. Unlike you, she didn’t survive long enough to be thrown in the riff. The creature he feeds down there prefers its food alive.”

I got her killed... All I wanted was for my father to be proud of me, to show him I’d finally figured out what my gift was. If I’d kept my magic to myself, Meg might’ve never gone missing. She’d still be alive.

“It’s not your fault, Calamity.” Asmo smooths my hair with a scarred hand, brushing it out of my face. “You didn’t know. Meg didn’t blame you, either. The king learned a lot that day, but it wasn’t enough. Now, after studying you, he has everything he needs. He got his answers and you’ll never have to go back in that room.”

My eyes water, and I do my best to blink the tears away, to keep them from falling. “It’ll just be the riff I go to instead.

I'm not sure getting eaten alive sounds much better."

"I have a plan. It's a long shot, but in the days you've been asleep, I've had plenty of time to think." He stares down at me, running his fingers through the dark strands of my hair. "I can't promise it'll work, but we have to try right?"

"Tell me," I demand, knowing I don't have any other options.

"I have a friend from the outer realm who owes me a debt. I've reached out to him and—"

Sucking in a breath, I push up to my elbows, ignoring the searing pain that stabs through my middle the moment my muscles flex. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for you to go there? And since when do you have friends there? What if the king finds out? You'd be lucky if he didn't display your bones as a warning to others."

"I was quick, and I went straight to him. The king was too busy in the white room to care where I was." Asmo's eyes flicker with uncertainty. "He's on his way here, well to the mountains, anyway. I've arranged for him to get you out of Solaria."

"That'll never work. We've talked about this. Running away isn't an option. The king's shadow shrouds will find me on the mainland and if they can't, he'll command you. You won't be able to defy him without dying."

"And I'd be happy to do so if I knew you were safe, but if things go to plan, he won't know to look. He'll see someone executed. It just won't be you."

"What living person in their right mind would volunteer to go into the riff?" I ask, skeptical. "You can't pretend to be me and push someone in. The king is going to want to be there."

"The king never risks getting close to the riff. He always watches from a distance, and I didn't say it was a living person." Asmo arches a brow at me, leaning back in his chair with his arms folded over his chest.

"What do you mean?" My brow furrows as I try to make sense of his plan. How could he possibly convince the king

I'm dead without someone walking into the riff? They won't kill me first. The creature inside it prefers its food alive.

He drags in a deep breath, letting out little by little as his eyes meet mine. "I'm going to raise someone from the crypt."

"One of my sisters? That won't work. Even the dead have hair, Asmo. The king is going to know it's not me when the person walking off the ledge has white hair and not black." I'm the only one of my sisters who didn't get the Midicious family trait. My father never understood why, since the mutations he makes to give us our unique gifts causes it. Just like his mimicking ability, the magic didn't work on me.

"Not one of your sisters. I'm not even sure there's an intact body for me to use in there."

Asmo has told me about them, that he's responsible for placing my kin in the crypt. Most die the moment they're married off to monsters. Had I not been trapped down here, I might've shared their fate on my twenty-third birthday.

"If not one of them, then who?"

The lump in his throat bobs. "Meg. The king asked me to place her in the crypt. I don't know why. Maybe she's sentimental to him because of what he discovered. Maybe it was to know where to find her should he have more postmortem tests. Her hair is just as dark as yours, and if I put her in a cloak, the king would never see her face. He'll think it's you."

I shake my head, feeling the sharp pain take hold between my shoulders, like my spine has been stretched too far. "Not her... No."

"She's dead, Calamity! She loved you and would want to do this if it meant keeping you safe." He pushes up from his seat and begins pacing beside my bed.

Tears spill from my eyes, rolling in streams down my cheeks. I know he's right. Meg is gone and has been for awhile now. She'd have done anything to buy my freedom, but after everything she's been through, she deserves peace. She didn't get it in this life. She should get it in what comes after.

“Look at me,” Asmo says, crouching down at the edge of my bed. “I wouldn’t do this if there was another way. The king believing you’re dead is the only thing that could get you out of this cell with both our lives intact. It allows me to be here, so when vengeance comes for him, he’ll die, and it allows you to live.”

I lift my chin, clenching my jaw to keep my lower lip from trembling. “You trust this man? This friend of yours?”

“I wouldn’t be giving the most precious thing in my life to him if I didn’t.” His eyes never leave mine as he cups my face. “It doesn’t matter what blood runs through your veins, you’re my daughter—Meg’s daughter. Let us make sure you get the life you deserve.”

Dropping my gaze, the tears stream faster than ever. My voice is barely a whisper when I speak again. For a moment, I’m not sure I even say the word out loud. “Okay...”

His lips pull at one corner, and he lifts just enough to kiss my forehead. “Okay... We don’t have much time. As soon as you feel strong enough, you need to pack anything you want to take with you. I’ll be back at nightfall.”

“Nightfall? You said the execution isn’t until the end of the week.” My spine straightens as the panic takes hold. That’s not enough time.

“You’ve been asleep for days. We had a week. Your execution is scheduled for tomorrow.”

Asmo grabs a canvas sack off the shelf and holds it out to me. My fingers tremble as I take it. Heart hammering, the enormity of it all threatens to crush me.

“Thank you... for everything,” I whisper, my voice raw with emotion.

“We’ll get through this.” His eyes meet mine before he slips through the barred door. “I’ll see you soon.”

With those parting words, Asmo leaves the cell, locking it behind him. Alone once more, I clutch the sack tightly, determination running through my veins like fire. Tonight, I’ll

leave this place and create a new future – one where I am no longer a pawn in my father's twisted game.

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CHAPTER 4

Calamity

My heart races as I clutch the dark canvas bag to my chest. It's filled with my most treasured possessions, but even that's not much. My charcoals and sketchbook made the cut, since my drawings keep me close to Meg, and the book of fables Asmo hand-penned for me. Otherwise, I limited my things to essentials only.

"Are you ready?" Asmo asks, his voice gentle yet urgent.

I nod, swallowing hard. "As I'll ever be."

He reaches into his pocket, retrieving a necklace with a red crystal pendant. It's small and feminine, with the chain thinner than most modern jewelry. It's the kind of intricacy reserved for those of high status, especially with the way the crystal is wrapped. The edges of the stone are kept raw, allowing the magic to remain within.

"This was Meg's," he says quietly. "The day she was imprisoned, she tried to hide it, but one of the guards saw her. I held onto it and planned to give it to her as a gift on the day she was freed, but that never came." He hands it to me, fingers trembling slightly. "I think she'd want you to have it."

My breath catches as I accept the necklace, feeling its power vibrate against my skin. "Thank you." My voice comes out

quieter than I meant for it to as I fasten the clip behind my neck, letting the pendant rest over my heart.

Asmo offers a sad smile, and there's a vulnerability in his eyes that I've rarely seen before. "I wish things could be different, but this is the only way to keep you safe."

I know he's right. It still doesn't make it any easier to leave him behind. My chest aches with the thought of never seeing him again, but I have to be strong, for both of us.

Asmo's gaze locks onto mine with unwavering intensity. "I need you to understand that after tonight, you can't return to Solaria. Not ever. If the king ever discovers you're alive, all of this will be for nothing."

The weight of his words settles on my chest and my throat tightens as I blink back the tears threatening to overflow. "I won't." Those two simple words feel like shards of glass scraping against my vocal cords, but I force them out. This is life or death.

Asmo's arms encircle me in a tight hug, and for a moment, I let myself be enveloped by the warmth and security they provide. "You're the strongest woman I know. If anyone can make it through this, it's you."

"I don't know how to do this without you... I've never even been outside the castle grounds." I breathe him in, hoping this isn't the last time I'll get to hear his voice or hug him.

"You're more ready than you think. And I've made sure someone will be there to protect you." He hesitates, as if considering his next words carefully. "Loric may not seem like it at first, but he's honorable. He'll ensure you're safe."

A thousand questions bubble up inside me, but I swallow them down, knowing now isn't the time. Stepping back, I peer up at him, silently letting him know I'm ready.

"Take my hands," Asmo says, his voice steady and reassuring. Placing my hands in his, a blinding white light engulfs us, drowning out the world until it fades into deep green trees.

The dungeon is gone.

I've seen Asmo teleport many times, but never once have I gone with him. The castle seems so small from here, but I've seen this place from my cell. We're in the mountains east of the castle, and from our vantage point, I can see the entire bay. The castle rises tall off the surface of the water and a bridge connects it to the mainland. The bone bridge... Meg wasn't kidding. It really is made from skeletons, but it's too far away to tell what sort of creature they belong to. Somehow that fills me with awe and has my stomach churning at the same time.

The cold wind bites at my skin, making me shiver, and when I turn around I find a small campsite... *and people*. A smokeless fire is nestled among the towering trees and five figures gather around it, all of which are staring at us.

My gaze is immediately drawn to one in particular who's piercing, silver eyes nearly glow in the night. It's a man, leaning against one of the thick tree trunks. His unruly brown hair blows gently in the breeze and despite knowing these people are meant to protect me, I can't help but feel a twinge of unease. It's like I'm being scrutinized from the inside out.

"Calamity, I'd like you to meet Loric," Asmo says, gesturing toward the group by the fire. "He'll be seeing you out of Solaria."

The man near the tree tilts his head slightly, a ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his lips as his eyes catch the firelight, making them glow brighter. "And you must be the princess. I hope you don't expect me to bow."

"I don't think anyone has ever bowed to me, so no. I don't," I snap back, which only seems to make his grin spread wider.

Loric's gaze shifts between Asmo and me, his eyes widening with skepticism. "I thought all of the princesses had white hair? Who is she really? Don't tell me you've gone and fallen in love with another servant girl." The man's voice carries an edge, but his comment does little to settle the nerves clawing up my spine. If anything, it just brings more questions.

Asmo has told me of his past, how he was banished to our realm. Yet, not once has he mentioned being in love.

Reaching into his pocket, Asmo tosses a pouch full of coins toward Loric. “You’ll see. Her hair isn’t always dark. Now, if you’re done, there’s enough money in there to buy passage to the outer realm and for anything else you might need along the way.”

Loric catches the pouch effortlessly, but his gaze remains on me, curiosity and something else flickering in his eyes.

Asmo snaps his fingers. “Are you listening?”

“Yes.” Loric finally looks away, refocusing on Asmo.

“Calamity is very dear to me. I trust you to treat her as you would’ve wanted me to treat Elaria. Can I count on you to do that?”

Loric arches a brow before replying, “I don’t think you’ve given me much of a choice in the matter. Though, you didn’t have to blackmail me. And let’s not forget, I apparently owe you a debt.”

A long pause passes between them and the tension thickens with every second that passes by.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable with this? That they’re safe?” I ask, stepping between the two and facing Asmo. I shoot a weary glance over my shoulder, eyeing the group around the fire.

“You’ll be just fine. I know it.”

I nod, swallowing hard, but Asmo pulls me against his chest, hugging me tight.

“This isn’t goodbye for good, just for now. Once the king’s dead, I promise, I’ll find you. I’ll find a way to remember.”

My lungs seize as I glare at him, letting his words soak in. *What does that mean?* “Why wouldn’t you remember?” I search his face, desperate to make sense of it.

Asmo doesn’t answer me, just looks over my shoulder and says, “I’m ready.”

“Mira, Vik, take the princess to the woods. I’ll catch up.” I don’t need to see him speak to know it’s the silver-eyed man.

He must be their leader.

Panic settles into my bones as the man nears. His footsteps crunch louder in the grass the closer he gets. Something is wrong about this. I can feel it, a pit in my stomach that won't go away. "Ready for what? For me to leave? Why won't you remember?"

A tear slips down Asmo's face as he cups my cheek. "Promise me that you'll go with them—that you'll stay away."

"Answer my questions first." I step closer, but he matches mine back.

"If the king found out you're alive and I remember you, he could exploit it. Loric is going to make me forget." Asmo traps his bottom lip to keep it from trembling. "He'll let me know what he's done and that I need to fake your death, but I won't remember your face. It'll keep me from being able to track you."

"What if you never remember? There has to be another way," I protest, but I can sense the man's presence. He's likely standing directly behind me, ready to haul me away... but I don't want to go. I can't. I need more time.

"Trust me, if there was another way, I would've gotten you out a long time ago." Asmo glances up, his gaze locking on something above my head before returning to mine. "I love you, Calamity. You can do this." He wipes at his cheeks before nodding.

Spinning around, I lock eyes with Loric. He's taller up close, his very stare more daunting. It's not until he reaches up to wipe my cheeks with the sleeve of his shirt that I realize I'm crying. I shouldn't be letting him touch me at all. I should be fighting like hell to make Asmo stay, or at least remember our time together. All the memories of my childhood, of him reading to me when the nightmares started... The times he and Meg sang, just because I wanted to learn how to dance, to feel like a real princess for once... The pastries he'd sneak me, claiming that he just wanted to see me smile.

He can't forget those. He can't forget *me*.

Loric's eyes search mine, and before I can wrap my head around what's happening, he breathes in deep. He exhales a frigid blast of air, and it fans over my cheeks. The world spins and my head lolls. My body goes numb starting at my feet and working its way up until my legs give out. Loric circles my waist, and I'm certain if he hadn't, I would've hit the ground.

"What did you do to me?" I whisper, but I'm not sure the words come out right.

His mouth twitches into a wicked smirk. All I can do is focus on it as I fight to stay conscious. "Nighty night, princess."

Two sets of hands, take me from him, carrying me away from Asmo. My eyelids feel as though they're weighed down by anvils and the world fades in and out. No matter how hard I try to stay away, sleep continues to drag me under and I'm plunged into darkness.

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CHAPTER 5

Calamity

The sounds of birds chirping filter into my mind, which oddly enough, isn't spinning with nightmares.

For years, I've been plagued with dreaming of the white room. It's why Meg would read or tell me stories to get me to fall asleep. Without them, I used to force myself to stay awake until I couldn't any longer.

After she disappeared, I turned to drawing or painting, trying to imagine her voice reiterating the same stories I've heard dozens of times. Putting them down into something tangible made them harder to forget and before I knew it, I was surrounded by fragments of her. Even though I was in the dungeon, and she was gone, I'd see them when I startled awake, and they helped put the nightmares to rest.

Not once, that I can remember, have I dreamed of nothing. The empty darkness that surrounds me is almost peaceful... and the birds singing makes it that much better. The birds never come near the castle, let alone the dungeon beneath it. It's like they know evil lurks just inside the stone walls.

So, why are they here now?

I shift, turning over on my side. My bed is harder than normal, too. I start to fear that I've rolled off it and onto the

stone floor when a man's voice hits my ears... One that doesn't belong to Asmo.

“Good. You're awake.”

Reality hits, along with memories of Asmo bringing me to the mountain top, of the silver-eyed man, and the last person alive who loves me forgetting that I ever existed. My eyes flare open as I shoot straight up, blinded by the light of the hell flame that was nowhere in sight when I passed out.

I blink in rapid succession and a small campfire comes into view, only a few feet away from where I'd been sleeping. All that's left of the burning wood is orange embers and the thick scent of smoke. Hours must've passed, if not days. I twist, finding nothing but forest surrounding us. We're nowhere near the cliff Asmo met them at. This is deeper in the forest. I can't see the tree line.

Only the man is present, the leader... *Loric*. He sits across from me, watching my every move.

“Where are we?”

His lips twist into a lopsided grin. “In the forest?”

“That much is obvious. Which forest? And where exactly are you taking me?”

He rolls a berry around in his palm before popping it into his mouth and completely ignoring my question. “We'll need to move soon. Are you hungry?”

Returning the favor, I don't answer. I don't need his help anyway. If I look hard enough, I should be able to figure out where we are on my own. Observing the trees, I note that vibrant green moss coats the south sides of their trunks. Asmo taught me that, among other survival tactics in case he died or had to sneak me out of the dungeon at the last second. He wanted me to be prepared if the day came where I'd have to travel through the realm on my own.

Unfortunately, Asmo forgot to inform me that he had friends amongst the rebels in the outer realm. Here I thought he told me everything about his past, but not once did he mention the

people he left me with or some servant woman. It makes me wonder what other secrets he's kept from me.

I can figure this out... Even if everything feels foreign and looks nothing at all how I pictured it in my mind, I can do this.

Scanning the area again, I notice the brush looks to have been burned down around the fire, oddly enough in a perfect circle. Maybe it was to keep the fire from running away or to create a cleared area for their group to sleep. Though none of Loric's friends are present, they can't be too far. Their footprints are still pristine in the ash.

Had they been made more than an hour ago, the ash would've moved, and the sole prints from their shoes wouldn't have crisp lines. I'll never forget the day Asmo brought a bucket of dirt into my cell to teach me that. It took days to sweep it up.

Small purple flowers carpet the ground in clumps, and beneath the canopy of trees, the flowers almost glow. They're beautiful... and entirely new to me, but all plants lean slightly toward the hell flame. They need light to grow, and since the hell flame has a fixed location, high in the northern sky, the fact each of the little flowers tip that way, confirms my north and south cardinal points.

Now, all that's left is to figure out what side of the river we're on. The west side is home of the enchanted forest—a place more deadly than the king's dungeons. It's riddled with monsters and everything within it wants to kill you. Even some of the trees.

The east side has the mountains, and it's the side I'm used to seeing from my cell. Trees spill through the valleys between the peaks and carry up part of the rocky slopes. There are more villages on the east side, which means there are less creatures lurking within the woods. It's safer to travel through.

The ground seems mostly level, though, so if we're on the mountain side of the river, we have to be in one of the valleys between them. And considering that the moss is green, we're nowhere close to the ocean or the salty air would've turned the moss vibrant colors.

I chew my lip, letting my mind wander. Asmo must've taught me something that can help. Trying to see where the moons are in the sky is impossible through the canopy of the trees. And I highly doubt Loric will let me wander around the woods until I can see through the leaves. Yet, I'm too stubborn to ask him the question again.

And if I can figure this out, then maybe that will help me believe that things are truly going to be alright, that I can survive out here.

Pushing up to my feet, my hands plant into soft velvet. It's a cloak, made from a deep, green fabric, and the hood is rimmed with dark fur. I glance at the Loric. He's watching me with such a burning curiosity, it's unnerving. It makes my skin prickle and I quickly shake off the feeling. The last thing I want is for him to know his very presence seems to electrify the air.

I'm not sure what he is, exactly. Everyone in this realm is *something* or has gifts—some call them blessings from the gods we all descend from—but whatever he is, magic irradiates the air around him. It's *powerful*.

I pick up the cloak off the ground, shaking off the leaf bits and dirt. "I think this is yours."

He eyes me, squinting for just a moment like he's trying to read me. "What are you planning?"

"To figure out where we are." My jaw becomes steel as I glare back at him.

"Sit." One word. That's all he gives me.

"Then tell me where we are."

"It's not important. I tell you, you might try to run back to get Asmodeus, and I made a promise. Even if it grates my every last fucking nerve, I'll keep it. Now, sit."

"I'm not going to go back there. Just tell me." My nostrils flare as he stares me down. It's like he's assessing me for weaknesses, but I refuse to give him any.

“Sure. I’ll just believe the captive.” He fakes a smile, but it falls an instant later, leaving nothing behind but a stone-cold, chiseled face. The face of a killer if I’ve ever seen one. “Sit.”

“Fine, but at least take your cape.”

Loric rolls his eyes as he takes it from my outstretched hand, and the moment it leaves my grasp, I book it toward the trees.

If I can reach one before he can stop me, I can figure out which side of the bark has accumulated moisture. It’ll tell me where the river is, but I’ve got to make it there...

Sprinting over the leaf-covered ground, I remember just how clumsy I am in boots. I’ve hardly ever worn them. I think I’ve only tried them on once or twice. Most of the time, I wear flats or go barefoot. It’s not like I had many places to go.

Feet pound behind me, far quicker than I expected them to be, and they’re growing closer, but I’m almost to the nearest trunk.

Just... another second... *and*...

My fingers scrape the bark as I skid to a stop. It’s wet... *I did it. The river is—*

Loric collides with me from behind, sending us both toppling over at an angle. A limb flies over my eyes—a forearm by the feel of it—and we slam into the ground. An *oof* escapes my lips as the air is knocked from my lungs and if it weren’t for his arm trying to smother my face, there’d be an impression of it in the dirt. I flail beneath him, trying to push him off me, but I can’t lift us an inch.

“Get off of me, you... you *hobgoblin!*”

His chest rattles with a silent chuckle as he slowly lifts, allowing me the chance to breathe and nothing more. Squirring between the ground and the wall of muscle pinning me to it, I twist until I’m staring at the roguishly handsome face of my new overlord. I can’t move as I register just how close he is to me. With a simple lift of my chin, I could boop his nose with mine.

I’d never do that, but it’s the fact I could that scares me.

Narrowing my eyes to lethal slits, I glare long and hard. My hands push against his chest, but he doesn't move an inch. It's like he's made of iron. Instead, he settles his hips closer, making my legs spread wider on either side of him. It traps my elbows to my ribs, leaving my hands awkwardly cupping his pecs. His very full, *very firm*, pecs.

Kill me now.

Loric stares down at me, his sterling eyes searching my face.

"You *tackled me*," I seethe.

"You ran." His glare is far more deadly than anything I could dream of conjuring up.

It's all I can do to pretend I don't wish for the ground to swallow me whole as he wraps a large hand around my wrist. He pins it effortlessly near my head, and despite my efforts to fight, he quickly does the same with my other.

"Listen close, *princess*. I have a debt to pay, and I won't be free of it if you run off into the woods and get yourself killed."

He has a point, but that's not what I was doing, and I'm still hung up on the way he used my meaningless title as an insult. The sheer fact of it being meaningless is insulting enough already. I don't need him throwing it around like a bad word.

"I was trying to reach the tree." My nostrils flare and I instantly regret it. He smells like amber and linen with a hint of something sweet—the berries he was eating when I woke up. Even the cedar from the fire clings to his skin, along with hints of forest dew. It's refreshing, and so much better than the dungeon air I'm used to. Drawing in a deep breath, I have to fight to keep my eyelids open.

"Did you just smell me?"

My eyes pop wide as I meet his sterling gaze. "No... Why would you think that?" *Take shallow breaths... SHALLOW BREATHS.*

He shakes his head, blinking hard, before he leans a touch closer. "What's so important about the tree?"

When I hesitate to answer, he searches the forest, as if I have a secret army waiting for my signal hiding in the woods. If I could smell him before, with him this close, I can nearly taste him, and oddly enough, my mouth is salivating. *What is wrong with me?*

“I know where we are now—” I start, but Loric releases one of my wrists and covers my mouth with the palm of his hand.

“If this is a trap, so help me, I won’t hesitate to send you back to your castle in fucking pieces. Do you understand?”

I blink at him, since the pressure of his hand is keeping me from nodding.

Seemingly satisfied with the fact we’re truly alone, he glares at me again. “Where were you going?”

“I told you. I just wanted to touch the tree. You wouldn’t tell me where we are, so I figured it out on my own. Now if you could move, I’d appreciate it. What I’m assuming is your dick is rubbing me in all the *wrong* places.”

Grinding his jaw at the hinge, the muscles in his face flex, and finally he moves. He sits back on his heels, still positioned between my legs. I try rocking up from the ground, inching my elbows underneath me to sit up, but clearly that’s as far as he’ll let me go.

“We’re in the valley between the mountains and likely not too far from the river. The tree has moisture build up on the bark, so it must be close.” A warm sense of pride flutters through me, giving my backbone strength.

“Came to the conclusion all on your own, did you?” He arches a brow.

“Am I right?” For the life of me, I can’t shake the feeling that being wrong might cost me my life.

“Look for yourself.” He nods to our right and I hold my breath. Through squinted eyelids I dare a glance. The land dips a few feet away from us and at the bottom of the ravine is the reflective surface of the water.

“Would you believe it if I said I don’t get out much?” I shoot Loric a weary glance. At least I was right about where the river was. It might not look great for me, considering he probably thinks I’m lying through my teeth, but it’s reassuring to know that I retained most of Asmo’s survival training. “In my defense, it’s a *really quiet* river.” My books never described rivers as being silent but deadly. The stories had terms like *roaring rapids*.

How was I supposed to know?

“I don’t trust you.” His voice is low and sends a shiver down my spine. “Just as I’m not blind enough to believe you have some fucking tree fetish.”

Does he think... Why? Who would risk their hide to... Nevermind.

“If anyone should have trust issues, it’s me. You *drugged me* with your magic chloroform breath—or whatever that was.” I lean a bit closer, pushing up until I can rest on my palms.

“I did what was asked of me. It’s been decades since I spoke to Asmodeus. We went our separate ways a long time ago when he decided to serve your monster of a father. And it’s rather convenient that he shows up, blackmailing me into coming to the mainland, mere weeks after your father’s ships were seen rigging dragon harnesses to their decks. The dragons are supposed to be gone. What use would he have for those, unless he knew some still existed in the outer realm. And now, the moment you’re left in my charge, you bolt into the forest.”

My lips part as I soak in what he’s just admitted. “There are dragons in the outer realm?”

Loric stares at me for a long moment, then releases a deep exhale. “You didn’t know.”

“How would I know? I’ve been locked away in the dungeon since birth.”

Loric seems to chew the information over, like he assumed I was in the castle with my other siblings instead of imprisoned

like a common murderer. I cock my head to the side. “Did Asmo not tell you about me?”

“No. All he told me was that you were a princess and then demanded I get you out of the realm or he’d tell the king where to find my people.”

My eyebrows pinch as I watch him get to his feet. “Your people? You mean the rebels? I thought it was common knowledge that they’re in the outer realm. There was a treaty that banished them from the mainland.”

Loric gives me a hand and helps me up, but he doesn’t let go. He pulls me closer and at his full height, it’s impossible for me to look him in the eye without craning my neck backward.

“I still don’t trust you. The only reason I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt is because this will go a hell of a lot quicker if I don’t have to haul your ass around in chains.” He gestures toward the fire, silently telling me to go first.

“I really didn’t see the river. From where I was sitting, I couldn’t see the ravine at all.” I speak over my shoulder, making my way back toward the fire with Loric in tow. “This place is nothing like I envisioned. I only went outside one day a year for all of five minutes and never outside the castle garden. Everything I know about this realm comes from stories or because I was taught it in theory. I was trying to use that to figure out where we are. Had you just told me, I wouldn’t have run.”

“And when you figured it out? What then? I highly doubt you planned to gloat.”

“Yes, actually...” I weigh my head side to side. “I was proud that I didn’t need you to figure it out.” Reaching the campfire, I take a seat in the same place I woke up and Loric resumes his spot across from me. “If you need more proof, I figured it out by noticing where the moss grows and which way the plants lean. I knew if the tree bark was wet, water was near, and the side of the tree would point to where I could find it, and since the trees are mostly brown, it’s not salt water. It’s fresh water.”

“You learned all of that from stories?”

“I learned it from Asmo and M—” I freeze mid-sentence, remembering something Meg told me years ago. She warned me that if I ever made it out, no one could know of my affiliation with her. It’d make me a target.

“And?” Loric prods.

“And my mother. The two of them taught me everything I know.” Meg might not have been my biological mother, but she was as close as it gets to one, and it helps that they start with the same letter.

Loric snorts as if I’ve told a joke. “You could’ve just opened your eyes.”

“Excuse me, but can you see the water from here?” I cross my arms, looking in the general direction of the river and back to him.

“Yes.” He dips his hand into a canvas pouch and pops another berry into his mouth.

“Why don’t you come down to my level and try again.”

Loric rolls his eyes. “If I do it, will you let me eat my berries in peace?”

I nod and he comes to sit next to me on the ground. Loric glances toward the river, but I swat at his arm.

“At my height,” I command, and he reluctantly scrunches his shoulders to bring his head level with mine.

“Fine, but I still don’t trust you. There are too many coincidences, and even if you’re not a part of it, something tells me Asmodeus is.”

“Asmo panicked. The only motive he had for threatening you, is to make sure I stayed alive.” I pluck the sack of berries out of his hand, and to my delight, Loric doesn’t stop me. Stealing a handful for myself, I toss the bag back into his lap.

“First of all, I would’ve given you some had you asked. Secondly, I don’t think you know Asmodeus as well as you

think you do.” He steals a berry out of my palm instead of getting another from the bag.

“I’ve known him my entire life.” Even as I say it out loud, I sense the uncertainty settling deeper inside me. *How well do I know him?* There are things he didn’t tell me, and I’d be stupid to think there wasn’t more. I just wish I could ask him... Surely, there’s an explanation. Although, the smart thing to do would be to make peace never knowing. I might never get the answers I want, or worse, they might be answers that could change everything.

“If you knew Asmodeus, you’d know I was the one who taught him how to find his way through the forests.”

I never considered that... Asmo must’ve known Loric well enough to trust him with me, but what made them hate each other? The way Asmo looked at Loric is stuck in my mind, the hatred that tainted the air on the mountain... They had a falling out and if I’m going to survive this, I’m going to need to know why.

“Come on. The others are back.” Loric snatches his cloak off the ground and stands. For a moment, he eyes me, then slowly, he offers a hand. As soon as I’m on my feet, he doesn’t waste a second taking it back.

“Where? I don’t see anyone?” I spin in a tight circle, finding nothing but trees and low-growing brush.

“Yeah, well, you didn’t see the river either.”

The air catches in my throat. “You said you didn’t see it from where I was.”

“I lied.”

“Asshole,” I breathe, looking toward the river and knowing for a fact that I can’t see the ravine even from a standing position. There’s no way he could... *right?*

CHAPTER 6

Calamity

“Absolutely not.” I halt as the horses and Loric’s friends come into view. “There’s no way I’m getting on one of those *things*.”

“First of all, they’re called horses. Secondly, you don’t have a choice. If it means strapping your body to its back, I will.” Loric nudges me forward, wordlessly commanding me to keep moving.

“I don’t know the first thing about riding a horse. Trust me, it’s better if I walk.”

He snorts, eyeing me up and down before grabbing my wrist and tugging me along. Luckily, my wounds have all healed from the king’s *family time* and Loric’s grip isn’t tight enough to hurt, but it does prevent me from falling behind... or running away.

“I’d prefer to be off the mainland as soon as possible.”

“Fine, I’ll jog,” I say, stumbling after him. It’s pointless to fight him. The only way I’d win is to kill him with my magic and I have no idea where to go. As much as I hate to admit it, being with Loric and his friends gives me a shot at surviving. On my own, I’m not powerless or completely lost, but my odds are significantly lower. There’s only so much you can learn from stories.

Loric stops suddenly, turning around to face me as he lets go of my wrist. I stop within inches of colliding with him.

“You’re forgetting that I’ve seen you run. If anything is a risk, it’s you attempting to use your feet. Now, you’re getting on the horse.”

Staring past him, I grimace. Those don’t look anything like the horses in the photos Asmo showed me. Their coats are pale with patches of fleshless bone, and beneath it, they’re hollow except for swirling, green plumes of magic. It’s like they’re phantoms, held together by spells alone. They tower over us, and my head doesn’t even reach their spines or the seats of the saddles on their backs.

“How do you steer it,” I ask, arching away from the creature’s head as it swings around to look at me, drawn to my voice.

“What’s wrong, dungeon girl? Asmodeus didn’t teach you that?” His eyes gleam as he shoots me a cocky smirk.

“My name is not *Princess*, and it’s certainly not *Dungeon Girl*.” Narrowing my eyes into slits, I scowl at him. “It’s Calamity. You don’t have to like me, but you’ll call me by my fucking name.”

Loric’s eyes flare for a moment and the silver rings catch the light as he tilts his head. Asmo did his best to teach me how to be civilized. My sisters had tutors and teachers that showed them the correct way to hold a fork, how to curtsy, dance, speak, and everything else a princess should do to uphold our family name. I didn’t, and when you spend most of your childhood surrounded by criminals, their slang becomes an innate part of you.

“You’re right, *Chaos* suits you better.” *Is this a joke to him?* Maybe it’s his form of payback for being forced to put up with me.

I take a step closer, not caring that his friends are watching us as if we’re their new form of entertainment. “For your information, Calamity means disaster, not chaos. And the very

definition is a dead ringer for my life.” I probably should’ve kept the last bit to myself... *No taking it back now.*

He steps closer, lowering his head to look me in the eye. The air between us seems to charge, and I can feel his power dancing against my skin. It’s a warning... Some animals growl to tell others to tread carefully, but the monsters who live in this realm have an aura. It’s invisible to me, but it doesn’t stop me from feeling it.

“Same thing.” Loric grips my hips and I draw in a sharp breath. I’m whirled around until I face away from him, and next thing I know, I’m being lowered onto the saddle. My hair is scattered across my face, and I don’t know where to put my hands.

Something jerks the saddle to the side before I can contain the dark wisps and I blindly grapple for anything to hang on to. It’s all I can do to avoid tipping over and meeting the ground up-close and personal.

Warmth covers my spine and my body spasms like I’ve been struck by lightning.

“Would you calm down.” Loric’s breath ghosts over my neck and his arms wrap around my torso as he grips the saddle and adjusts his seat, scooting ever closer to me.

I’m already shaking my head before I can formulate words. “Nope. There’s no way I’m sharing a horse with you. Get your own.”

“Get my own?” I can hear the humor in his tone. “Two minutes ago, you weren’t sure how to steer.”

“I’d rather die trying to learn.” I swat at his hands and arms as they attempt to settle against the tops of my thighs, reaching for the reins.

“What? Now you’re concerned about being close to me? It didn’t seem to bother you when you sniffed me earlier.”

My eyes round. “I did not *sniff you*. I was enjoying the fresh air of the forest.”

“Call it what you want,” Loric says, ignoring my demands as he adjusts his hands on the reins.

A man chuckles off to our right. I turn, intending to figure out who the boisterous voice belongs to, but the wind sends my hair swirling. Only this time, it’s not just my face the black tendrils attack. Loric gets to feel my pain, too.

A huff of air caresses my neck as he yanks my body against his chest. Surprisingly gentle fingers thread into my hair, and before I can protest, he’s gathered it into a ponytail and has started securing it in place.

“Do you braid hair too?” I ask, my lips tipping into a smirk.

Without warning, he wraps my hair around his fist and tugs back until I’m forced to stare up at his face. Loric’s silver eyes meet mine from beneath long, dark lashes, I swallow hard.

“Keep it up. There’s plenty of time to get the ropes and right now, gagging you is sounding better by the second.”

“The last man who tied me up died.” It’s probably the wrong thing to say at this moment, but it’s the truth. I might be able to taste his power in the air, but my father was one of the most powerful creatures to exist in this realm.

He makes a tsk-tsk noise with his tongue. “Remember, I’m supposed to be keeping you alive.”

“Maybe. My odds are better with you, but I’m perfectly capable of handling myself should the need arise. Besides, you weren’t exactly happy to see Asmo. How do I know you’ll keep your word? For all I know, you’re planning to cross him and deliver me to the rebel’s leader.”

He seems to ponder that for a moment, letting my hair go. “I suppose you’ll have to have faith. I’m an honorable man and my word means everything to me.”

“Honorable?” I snort. “You’re a rebel and from what I understand the rebels are all thieves. Honor isn’t the first word I’d use.”

“Says the pretty princess...” He nudges the horse forward and I jump, startled by the sudden movement. Loric holds the

reins with one hand, resting the other on the saddle. It makes a sort of cage around me with his body, preventing me from going over if I lose my balance.

“Awe, you really think I’m pretty? Thank you.” I feign adoration as I watch the forest ahead, listening to hooves pounding against the forest floor behind us.

“Had your father not become a monster, the rebels wouldn’t exist. We only take what we need to survive, which is nothing compared to what your father stole from us.”

We sway gently with the horse’s gait, and as the ground begins to dip, Loric flattens his hand against my stomach, steadying me. Butterflies erupt without warning, and I tense.

“Asmodeus believes I’m honorable,” he says as the ground levels again. “If he didn’t, you wouldn’t be here. You trust him, don’t you?”

I drag in a breath, unsure of how to answer that. Before escaping the dungeon, I would’ve answered in a heartbeat. I trusted Asmo with my life. Yet, there are things he kept from me, and the longer I think about it, the more unease swirls in my gut. His involvement with the traitors isn’t something I can just move past or forget.

I hate my father, and I believe he’s a tyrant who’s overdue for his own funeral... but two wrongs don’t make a right.

The rebels aren’t innocent, either. When they rose up against my father’s rule, they slaughtered anyone who wore one of the king’s cuffs, on and off the battlefield. They summoned the dragons, and set the villages in Solaria ablaze, not caring who burned within the flames.

If you weren’t a rebel, then you were a weapon the king could exploit. They didn’t care that the villages were homes of innocents, just trying to survive. Those people had no say in the way my father rules the kingdom. They were subjects—*victims* who suffered for one man’s crimes.

Ultimately, the war ended with a treaty, banishing those who stood against the king to the outer realm. It’s a desolate place, with islands too crystallized to grow most crops. The rebels

started calling themselves pirates, building ships so they could attack and pillage the remaining villages along the eastern shores.

My father tried to capture them and hold them accountable to the laws in the treaty, but the few he managed to chain in his dungeons refused to acknowledge their involvement with the rebels. According to Asmo, the villagers were forced to move inland, seeking refuge in the mountains, and my father manned ships to patrol the Solarian borders, hoping to ward off the pirates.

No side is innocent, and both have committed unspeakable atrocities.

Asmo was—*is*—involved with those people... I just don't know the extent of it. He'd have to be if he recruited them to escort me out of Solaria. I could justify his involvement with my father since he was forced to serve him. The things he's done were a means of survival. Yet, no one forced him to help the rebels...

For someone who raised me to believe that all life has value, it's certainly confusing.

"I don't know who I trust," I finally say. It's not until I've admitted it out loud that the words settle in. "I won't fight you as long as you stay true to your word."

"Good... See? Not all of us are monsters." One of his hands rests against my thigh and his thumb swipes over the bunched fabric of my dress.

"Yeah, we'll see. Just keep your hands to yourself." I pick his hand up, placing it on the raised bone of the saddle.

"Only if you keep your nose to yours."

I huff out a breath, letting my eyes close for a beat. *I'm never going to live that down.*

"Can we keep her?" I recognize the voice as the man who laughed while I was *indisposed*. He has long blonde hair, braided down his back and a short, well-kept beard. Conveniently, he sits on the horse beside us, his eyes glossy like he's been laughing so hard it's brought tears to them.

It's impossible not to notice the fact he's shirtless. He's literally glowing. Tattoos cover his skin from neck down, forming runic symbols. The lines glow in a bright crimson color, matching the same shade of the stone necklace Asmo gave me.

I trace my fingers over the rough surface, feeling the magic it contains hum against my fingertips.

"Only if she returns my hair tie," another man to our left says. He's letting the horse wander at will as he ties his loose shoulder-length black hair up into a messy bun, but it's the glare he gives Loric that does it for me. Unlike the tattooed man, who was stockier in build, this one has lean strength. His features are also sharp and angular, giving him an angelic aura.

"I'm Jesper, and I mean it. I'll hunt you down if you don't give it back." He lifts his dark eyebrows.

"I will... Thank you for letting me borrow it." Doing my best to muster a smile, I turn my attention back to the horse between my legs, twirling a lock of its white mane round my finger.

"If that's what you call Loric pulling it from my hair, then yeah, no problem," Jesper says as his horse stalks ahead of us. "Now, if the two of you are done bickering, we need to get moving if there's any hope of making it to Ashbourne by nightfall."

Jesper takes the lead riding ahead with the man who laughed at us.

"Who is the other man?" I ask, nodding at the one with the swirling red tattoos.

"Faelor." I expected Loric to answer me, but instead it's a younger man with short, white hair. For a moment I have to blink to ensure I'm seeing someone with my family's signature hair color. No other family line has it, since it's caused by my father's genetic mutations. It's only once I peer closer that I notice his dark roots.

Something squeaks as the horses move, but it's not the sound of leather stretching. It's metallic. Peering down, I find

a contraption around his knee, like a hinge that's been secured around his calf and thigh.

"And who are you?" I ask, meeting his dark violet eyes.

"The name's Brenn," he says, nodding to the two horses riding behind him. "And behind us, the one missing half her hair, is my mate, Mira, and the redhead is my sister, Viktoria."

I lean around Loric to find a woman with long brown hair. The right side of her head is shaved close to her scalp, and the exposed skin is decorated with tattoos that match Faelor's. A large sword rests in a sheath against her back and her dark brown eyes smile at me, even though her lips remain in a harsh line. Mira's muscles flex as she lifts a hand to wave at me.

Next to her is a woman with braided red hair. Some sort of herbs are woven through it and wrap around the top of her head like a crown. "Don't mind my brother. He can be a bit dense. I think he fell one too many times as a child."

Brenn scowls at her. They don't look like siblings. The only thing that confirms their relationship is that they share the same lilac-colored eyes. He huffs and nudges his horse to move faster, abandoning us to catch up with Jesper and Faelor. The grinding of metal on metal picks up speed along with the horse's gait. He'll never be able to sneak up on someone. Not with that hinge.

"Does he always squeak like that?" I ask Loric, trying to keep my voice down.

"For the most part." He clears his throat, leaning closer so only I can hear him. "He's sensitive about it, so don't stare at it for too long and definitely don't ask questions. If you must know something, it's best to ask Mira or Vik."

"I wasn't planning to," I say, tearing my eyes away from the three men riding side by side in front of us. The wind blows and my spine stiffens. It's not frigid, but it's cool enough in the shade of the trees to nip at my skin.

"Here." Loric pulls at the tie securing the dark green fabric around his neck.

How is it only me that's cold? Both the women behind us barely have anything on outside of leather pants and thin, loose shirts. Faelor is practically naked and none of the others seem bothered by it. Yet, I have multiple layers of fabric in my skirts and long sleeves... Every inch of my exposed skin is covered in goosebumps.

Loric flips the velvet over my front, like a blanket. “When we get to the village, we’ll see about getting you some better clothes. I checked the things you packed, and I don’t think dresses are going to cut it. At least not out here at night.”

“Thank you for letting me borrow your cape.”

I can hear his teeth grind. “It’s a *cloak*, and you’re welcome. Though, it probably would’ve been wise of you to have brought something similar instead of stories and art supplies.”

“Unfortunately, we were all out of capes in the dungeon. I’ll remember that next time I frantically escape prison to run amok with strangers in the woods.”

He releases a deep breath and I’m certain if I turned around, I’d find him shaking his head.

Loric reaches into the cloak pocket and retrieves a handful of berries. He pops one into his mouth, then offers another to me.

“I’m good, thanks,” I say, pushing his hand away from my lips.

“You barely ate anything.” He shoves the berry closer, and when I ignore it, he presses it to my lips. “Open.”

“Excuse me, I’m not a toddler who needs to be spoon-fed. You don’t—” The berry is pushed between my lips as I speak and I quickly eat it, ready to raise hell. He’s a hired hand to ensure my safety. Not my fucking master. “I can’t believe—” Another one is catapulted into my mouth. “Can you—” And another. “Stop it!”

“Stop opening your mouth and I’ll stop keeping it busy.”
Asshole.

“You’re a dick—” My face falls as I eat the berry, only this time I don’t open my mouth.

“I could do this all day, Chaos.” Loric rolls the berries around in his palm, taunting me. “What? No comment?”

Shaking my head, I watch the others on their horses in front of us.

“Awe, you’re learning. I’m so proud of you,” he coos.

Pursing my lips, I hate the way that single phrase can send warmth swirling in my gut.

Maybe the king did kill me. Maybe I never woke up and this is what eternal punishment looks like—a six-foot something, dark-haired, silver-eyed, atrociously handsome man with a knack for getting under my skin.

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CHAPTER 7

Calamity

“We’re going in there?” The question leaves my mouth before I can think better of it.

We’ve been riding in silence for most of the day, or what I’m assuming is one. Without seeing the moons, I can’t be sure.

“If you want to sleep in a bed and not on the forest floor, yes. It’ll be nightfall soon and the nearest village is still hours away. The rest of us might be able to maintain our body temperature, but you can’t. Unfortunately, this is the closest place to stay.” Loric takes my hand as I swing my leg over the horse’s back, trying to make sure my dress doesn’t catch on the saddle.

My feet collide with the ground with a jolt, my weight shifting onto my ankle, making the joint twist sideways. I don’t get a chance to throw my hands out as I go down. A strong arm loops around my middle and crushes me against a body that feels like it’s made of stone.

Loric curses beneath his breath. “Gods, woman. You’re more of a hazard to yourself than anything else in this damn realm. I thought princesses were supposed to be graceful.”

“So did I... Trust me. I’m just as frustrated as you are.” Testing my ankle, I hiss. “It’s these damn boots. I’m not used

to wearing them—or any shoes for that matter beyond flats.”

He gives my shoes a scrutinizing glance and he twists his lips. “Are you hurt?”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

“Good, because you’re going in with me.”

“I am?” I cringe as I hobble as quickly as I can after him.

My question dies in the air between us, as if it reaches his ears, and I’m thankful for his slow, leisurely pace. If he walked any faster, there’s no way I would be able to keep up. The sharp pain in my ankle slowly fades to a deep throb as we make our way from the woodline toward the cliff, blocking us from traveling forward. We’ll have to go around it come morning.

I’ve always wondered what it’s like for my father’s subjects... How they live, their hobbies, the day in, day out normalcy they’re used to. I’d be lying to say I’m not the least bit curious, and sort of excited to finally lay eyes on a normal home within our realm. I know it won’t be a castle, and the larger fortresses are in the main villages of our land. They won’t have golden cutlery or velvet curtains that are hand-embroidered, but I never truly wanted that. All I wanted was to feel safe and welcome, to sit at a table and share a meal with people besides Asmo. I wanted friends and a quiet life where the only thing I’d worry about was collecting the spoils of our garden and deciding what wall I’m going to paint.

Maybe this place, where we stay the night, will be a taste of what my future will hold—a glimpse into the life I could have one day, as long as I survive.

As we near the cliffside, I spot a round, wooden door, built into the obsidian rock wall. A silhouette of a yellow duckling is painted in the middle of it, and a curtain of vines and vegetation are pulled to either side, resting iron hooks that have been driven into the mountain. Had the vines been covering the door, we could’ve walked right by and never known it existed.

Do all the creatures in Solaria live in cave dwellings? Did I misinterpret something from my books?

It's soundless, save for the bird singing and wildlife skittering within the woods, but as the door creeps open, music spills from the crevasse. Dozens of voices blend into white noise and the heady scent of alcohol and cigar smoke floods my nose.

It's not a home... It's a gathering place? A pub, maybe?

I tilt my head, tracking the orc man who pushes through. He lets the door slam behind him, and the silence returns. A glass jug of a dark red substance—wine, maybe—is clutched in his hand as he stumbles past us without a glance and disappears into the dusky forest.

It's not until I notice how deep the shade has become, how hard it is to make out the mossy bark of the trees beyond the forest line, that I realize how right Loric is. Nightfall isn't far away. The light is already dimming, the colors becoming more muted as the moons begin to block out the hell flame. It'll be pitch black before long.

"The others didn't want to come in with us?" I glance to where Loric's friends are, resting against the trunks of the trees. The phantom mares we rode here nibble at the grass close by.

"No. We stopped here on the way to get you and Brenn and Jesper got into it with a few of the regulars and were told not to come back. I don't want them causing a scene again. Once we get our rooms, we'll figure out a way to sneak them in or they can shiver together in the woods."

Loric moves toward the door but my feet are rooted to the spot.

"Come on, Chaos. We don't have all night," he says, gripping the curled iron handle and retching it open.

Pausing to read the hand-written sign pinned to the stone wall, I furrow my brows, but I don't have time to ask questions. Loric ushers me inside and as my eyes focus

through the haze of smoke, my jaw drops. This place is nothing like I expected it to be.

It's not a cottage. I'm not sure a pub can define it either. There are small tables that litter the border of the room, and there's not an empty seat in the entire place. Barrels upon barrels of liquid and wine are stacked to the stone ceiling, but it's the people who surprise me more. Not a single person here looks friendly. Quite the opposite. I'm certain someone has died on every solid surface inside this place and I'm certain the crimson stain on the stone floor is from blood.

Having grown up in a dungeon, you'd think I'd be used to being around killers. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Everyone here is strapped with swords and daggers, and clearly, they all ignored the sign by the door, demanding they leave all things sharp and pointy outside. At least you can see their physical weapons. There's no telling what sort of magic hums in their veins, or what gifts the creatures here can command.

I've never seen so many intricate tattoos in my life. Some are made up of foreign symbols and others images that could spawn nightmares. The nearest man to us is flipping a tiny dagger that looks sharp enough to cut through bone, the blade sliding easily between his fingers, one by one. His hands are stained with blood, like that dagger made its way into someone's jugular moments ago.

The variety of scars alone could strike fear into a person. Not even having Asmo as a father figure prepared me for it. Asmo hardly ever wears a shirt, displaying the layers of scars on his body like trophies, but these... These aren't war scars. They're defensive wounds, like deep slashes from nails driving through flesh and tearing through muscle in a desperate attempt to escape, or missing eyeballs, likely poked out so their victims could get away.

I don't shy away from death. I've personally witnessed Asmo kill plenty. He once slit a man's throat for whistling at me as he was escorted to his cage. But this? This is like walking into a ring with starved, wild animals, and hoping they don't see you as food.

“What is this place?” I dare a glance at Loric.

He seems unnaturally comfortable here and hasn't given the crowd a second glance. “The Poison Ducky, and yes, everyone here has likely murdered someone. And since that attitude of yours is going to give me an aneurysm by the end of the week, you should fit right in... Assuming they look past the dress.”

“*Great...* That's reassuring.”

He's not wrong, though... Until now, I've looked at killing my father as something I needed to do. It was kill or be killed, and it was almost the latter. I suppose I do belong here, among the shattered souls. This place is passively hostile. Most wear calculated smiles, and those who don't sport stone-cold faces, their ruthless eyes following us like hawks would mice. I do my best to ignore the fact that most of their hands rest on hilts of weapons, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

Yet, it's the variety of creatures that gets me the most. In Solaria, it's typical of species to socialize within their own kind. The only time they mix is during the king's balls, and the moment they leave the castle, they go their separate ways.

Here, though, troll folk and dark elves converse while druids and orcs cheer glasses of ale. It's a melting pot of cultures under one roof, voluntarily. I've never seen anything like it.

“If you're done staring, we have a job to do.” Loric nudges me forward, driving me deeper into the crowd.

“Are you always like this?”

“Like what?” He stays close to my back, but the farther we walk inside, the more people start to notice us.

“Pushy,” I say, toggling my gaze between the dozen or so creatures who have set down their drinks. I can sense their eyes like spiders creeping over my flesh, scouring for secrets, for weakness.

“Only with you.” Loric stops short of colliding into my back as I halt, spotting the orc turning to face us near the bar. It snarls and curls its upper lip, and the nerves settle deeper, burrowing into my marrow.

“Why do I get the feeling they don’t like you? It can’t be me. No one knows me.”

Power tingles my skin, electrifying the air between us as Loric steps to my side. His jaw is set and his silver eyes glow in warning. I shiver at the onslaught of magic that ripples over my body. I’m not sure what he just did, but fuck... It felt like melting into a warm bath, like euphoria.

I force my spine straight, pushing down the sensation until it’s barely registerable in my mind.

“It’s not me,” he says, prowling to stand at my side. “They’re just not used to seeing someone like you wander in here.”

“You mean a woman?” My attention darts to the two women on my right. They’re pretty, in a roguish way, all tight leather pants and harnesses in place of boned corsets or bodices, but every available space holds knives. “I’m not the only woman here.”

“No, but you’re the only unmated one.”

“That can’t be true,” I say, scanning the women for markings. The blood drains from my face the moment I find them, hidden among the old scars is a set of teeth marks. They match, each sporting a shiny, healed bite mark at the base of their throats. The only thing different is one has it on the left side and the other on the right. “Nevermind.”

Loric snorts and nudges me forward again. I swallow hard, inching closer to the bar. “I doubt they’re used to seeing someone civilized, either. You might’ve grown up in chains and lack your sister’s white hair, but you look noble from a mile away. You walk with your head held high, at least until you stumble like a newborn calf.”

Rolling my eyes, I speak over my shoulder. “Who do we need to talk to? I don’t want to stay any longer than we have to.”

In my peripheral vision, I see the corner of his lips tilt upward.

“So, she does get scared.” He seems to say it more to himself than to me.

“I’m not scared. I just have a bad feeling about this.”

“Come on.” His fingers thread with mine and I suck in a breath as my nerves excite.

I don’t understand it. Touching him is like touching raw, unhinged magic. It’s addicting and sends a foreign feeling swirling within me at the same time, like a warning or something darker... *a desire*.

He drags me toward the bar, slicing through the crowded room as the chatter roars around us. People fall silent as we pass, their eyes tracking us through the room, and by the time we reach the stone counter, the entire place has fallen so silent that I could hear a pin drop.

“Excuse me, but we need to reserve three rooms.” Loric’s voice seems to bounce off the walls. If it wasn’t bad enough to have bystanders getting their eye-fill, now they all know where we’re staying.

The man behind the bar whips a dish rag over his shoulder and turns to face us. His amber eyes meet mine, and suddenly I can’t breathe.

I know him.

My knees turn to jelly and my legs threaten to give out as I force air into my lungs. I can’t look away. For years, I’ve wondered what became of him. Some of the only good dreams I’ve had have been of staring into molten amber eyes, feeling the tips of Gael’s auburn hair against my skin as he left trails of kisses across my body. He’s the only lover I’ve ever known, and someone I called my friend.

At least he *was* my friend. The same person who taught me pleasure made me understand a completely different kind of pain.

Everything between us changed the day Gael convinced me to steal Asmo’s keys. He’d been in the cell next to mine and only a wall of iron bars had kept us apart. They were spaced just enough that we could pretend they didn’t exist, and when

the day came that Gael was scheduled for execution, his only request was for one night with me. One night where we didn't have to pretend the bars didn't exist.

He knew that Asmo favored me, and I was too gullible to see it. The moment I handed him those keys, he didn't come to my cell. He didn't even unlock my door. He'd left me in the dungeon to rot.

Seeing him now, alive and well as ever, I don't know how to be happy he survived. It's fucked up, I'm not normally the type of person who wishes someone dead, but apparently betrayal has that effect on me.

All hints of the teenage boy I knew, the one who barely had meat on his bones, is gone. It's been replaced by a man with lean, sinewy muscle, who's void of the flirtatious aura that once surrounded him. His hair is longer and more shaggy than it was in the king's dungeon, his eyes brighter, and healthy. It's a wonder I recognized him, and honestly, if it weren't for the wide-eyed stare he's giving me, I might not have.

"Calamity..." He seems to say my name more to himself than to me. "How?"

His eyes rake down my body, a hand lifted like he might try to reach out to make sure I'm real.

"It doesn't matter." My voice is clipped and I lock my jaw. "Trust me, if I were a ghost, I would've been haunting you all this time."

"I'm... I had to. They were going to kill me." His brows tilt, feigning empathy. As if he ever cared. If he had, he wouldn't have abandoned me.

I was never punished for taking those keys. Asmo believed I was too young and naive to know that everyone's out for themselves, but he did stop storing prisoners on my floor. Until now, I had peace of mind that Gael got what he deserved. I thought Asmo hunted him down and ended his life or had thrown him into the ruff. Now it's like the wound I stitched closed, the heartbreak, has been ripped wide open. It

never truly healed. It only festered and now it's like poison dripping through my veins, ready to wreak havoc.

There's nothing more I can say... The words come to my mind in fragments. We're supposed to be securing rooms for the night so I don't freeze in the darkness of the woods, yet it's like I've forgotten how to speak. Letting out a shaky exhale, I drop my gaze, desperate to contain the fury boiling up in my chest, heating my veins until I fear they'll burn to the surface.

I can sense Loric's piercing eyes boring holes into my soul. Power invades my senses, swirling in the air around me, but it's not mine. It's his. Gentle fingers slide up the back of my arm, as soft as feathers.

"We should go. We'll find somewhere else." Even though Loric's voice is level, the way the words are shoved through clenched teeth gives away his struggle to remain so. He grips my wrist, leading me back toward the door.

The tension doesn't ease from my shoulders until the hell flame warms my skin and the cool air wisps around me. Gael might still be feet away, but it's easier with a solid door between us. Hell, I'd prefer an entire realm be placed between me and that man.

"You said no one knew who you were." Gone is the gentle tone, replaced by a growling tone as colorless eyes narrow into lethal slits.

"That's because no one who matters knows I exist. The king secluded me to the dungeons and only a few guards were allowed on my floor. The only prisoners I had contact with were on death row. No one was supposed to know me outside of the castle. Not even my sisters are aware of my existence." I take my wrist back, shooting a glare his way while rubbing at the joint.

"I can't do my job unless you're honest. That man knew you." A muscle in his cheek feathers. "I will not get myself or those close to me killed because you wish to keep secrets."

"It's not like I purposely kept this from you. I didn't know he was alive."

“Who is he?” Loric doesn’t so much as blink. His shoulders are set and his mouth is pressed into a firm line.

“He’s no one. Gael won’t tell anyone. If he did, he’d land his ass back in the dungeons. As is, he’s lucky to be alive.”

“I won’t take the risk. He tells one person and the king will know you’re alive. It’s not just you he’ll come for. It’ll be all of us and if he discovers what me and the people protecting you are, death will be a blessing.”

I never thought about what my father would do to them. Obviously, I knew he’d toss me in the riff for stealing one of his nine lives, but what about them?

“What’ll it be, Chaos? Give me one reason not to end that man’s life.” Loric crooks a finger under my chin, lifting my face. “It better be good.”

“I’ll tell you who he is, but only if you tell me what you are.”

His lips split into a grin too wide for my liking. He only ever smiles like that when he’s up to no good. “What I am doesn’t matter. I’m giving you a chance to save that man’s life.” He drops his hand.

“I couldn’t care less about what happens to him, but I deserve to know who’s protecting me. It’s bad enough you’re rebels... *thieves*. Why would my father take interest in your kind? Why wouldn’t he just kill you?”

His eyebrows raise for a long moment, then without a word he brushes past me.

“I deserve to know if I’m traveling with a monster,” I yell after him, my words making Loric stop in his tracks.

He whirls, storming back toward me and pointing a long finger at my face. Craning my neck, I try not to flinch away even though the sheer size of the man is intimidating enough.

“Would a monster have met Asmodeus on that mountain top? No. *A monster* wouldn’t have given two shits about owing a life debt, it would’ve let the pretty little princess burn.” Loric steps even closer, forcing me to match his

advance with a step back. His silver eyes darken until his pupils drown out the colored rings.

“I wasn’t supposed to burn at the stake. The king demanded I be thrown into the riff. He wanted to damn my soul.”

Loric chews the inside of his cheek, standing up straight so he can look down at me from beneath his dark lashes. “Same difference.”

“I beg to differ and would much rather burn, knowing I’ll be reborn someday. The riff, on the other hand, my soul would’ve been trapped down there.” I shrug. If he’s going to berate me, he might as well get his facts straight.

“Who. Is. He?” A muscle in Loric’s jaw ticks as he stares me down.

I breathe out heavily. He’s not going to stop. “He’s a man who took advantage of me, alright? He was a prisoner in the cell beside me and pulled my fucking heartstrings, hoping I’d help him escape.”

“Took advantage, how?”

I toss a hand out. “Does it matter? He just did, and when everything was said and done, he left me in that cell and started a new life. So, I don’t care what you do to him, just leave me out of it.” Shaking my head, I start toward the treeline.

With all the shit on fire in my life right now, the last thing I want to do is take a trip down nightmare lane with a man I barely know. Loric can do as he sees fit. Something tells me he would anyway, even if I got down on my knees and begged for him to spare Gael.

“I don’t want to freeze,” I whisper, my shoulders drooping, defeated. Leave it to Gael to ruin the only place to stay.

The noise that leaves his throat sends a wave of heat fluttering through my middle. “You won’t. I made a promise to keep you alive and I don’t break my promises.”

Tossing my arms up, I start to speak, except I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. Brenn. When did he

leave the others? I don't remember seeing him walk out of the woods.

As he inches closer, stopping a few feet away from us in the open grass, as if space is a necessity. He dips into a lazy, overdramatic bow. "Hate to interrupt..."

"Then don't." Loric doesn't look away from me as he speaks.

Arching a brow, I cross my arms and turn to Brenn. His short white hair catches the waning light. I'm ready to hear him out, even if his *leader* isn't.

Brenn holds his hands up in a mocked surrender. "The last thing I want to do is get involved in whatever sexually charged nonsense is going on here, but while the two of you argue and ogle each other, Mira is losing fingers."

"What?" Loric snaps, stretching to look over his head. I can barely see the horses and they glow. Their leads twist around the trees as they pace, hooves beating against the ground as they try to break free.

What are they scared of?

I squint, but it's impossible to make out anything in the shade. The light isn't strong enough to pierce the veil of leaves in the canopies.

"Fuck me," Loric breathes. "Stay with her."

Brenn nods his understanding as Loric jogs off, leaving us to twiddle our thumbs in the weeds.

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CHAPTER 8

Calamity

I frantically shake my head, trying to wrap my mind around what is happening, but I can't see anything beyond the forest line. *Someone is losing fingers? How? Why? Did someone from the bar attack them?*

A growl tears through the air, coming from deep within the trees. My face blanches, eyes widening as I fight to calm my breathing.

There's something out there.

"What the fuck was that?" The words leave me in a whisper.

"A never cat. There's a pack of them in the woods." Brenn purses his lips, looks me up and down, then spins on one heel and starts toward the trees. The metal hinge around his knee whines with every sure step he takes.

"And you want to head towards them? Shouldn't we be running inside? I can't believe I'm saying this, but we'd be safer hiding in the sea of murderers." I catch up to him, pleading with my eyes for us to turn around. There's no way I'll go inside that pub alone. Not with how its occupants looked at me. Yet, staying out here makes us sitting ducks and going toward the creatures is flat out stupid.

“Yes. My mate is in there and I’m not welcome inside the bar.” He brushes past me and continues toward the woods. “Stay if you’d like or go inside. I truly don’t care. Loric might not be able to go back on his word, but I can, and I have no intention of risking my life to protect the mad king’s daughter.”

Ouch... I knew my father would have enemies and that I’d be judged for the blood in my veins, but I thought after knowing about my upbringing, Loric and his friends would show some sympathy.

“What about the debt?” I stalk after him, jaw set. “Loric’s life debt is only paid if I’m safe and out of Solaria. If I die, he’ll still owe Asmodeus.” For someone with an injury, he certainly can walk fast. It’s hard to keep up with my ankle throbbing every time my foot meets the ground.

Brenn halts, but as he turns to face me, there’s not a shred of emotion across his pixie-like features. His upturned nose is snubbed high, and his lilac eyes cold. “I’d be doing Loric a favor. Asmodeus wouldn’t know you died, not with his memories of you wiped. So, go ahead, princess. Do as you please. Meanwhile, I’m going to make sure Mira doesn’t lose any more fingers.”

“That’s it then? I thought Loric was your leader. How will he feel about you leaving me to die?” I take another step forward, feeling the tall grass snag the hem of my dress. With a tug, I yank it free and meet Brenn’s unyielding stare.

“He’s my alpha, and honestly, it’s a risk I’ll take.” Brenn steps through the tree line and I stiffen, halting mid-step. Going into the woods could be like opening Pandora’s box.

Who knows what will happen... I have a head start at least if I stay in the clearing, but anyone could walk out the pub door and decide I’m theirs. My magic gave me the upper hand against the king, but that’s only because he allowed me to touch him. I’m not sure I’m willing to bet that I could beat any of those barflies on the offensive. Gael won’t come to my aid, he’s proven that much. And Brenn might very well let

whatever creatures lurk within the trees swallow me whole. No matter what I choose, I'm on my own.

At least Loric is in the woods... *somewhere*. At the moment, he's the only person invested in protecting me, even if the job was forced upon him.

I step beneath the tree canopy, letting the darkness of the woods descend around me. My heart races as I follow Brenn deeper into the treacherous woods, his long strides eating up the ground, taking with them any glimmer of hope he might have a change of heart.

It's not a shock that he can't see past my last name. A Midicious *is* a Midicious. Royalty. Even if I was treated like being born was a crime, to the people of the outer realm—the rebels—I'm the enemy. I'm the legacy of the very person they despise wholeheartedly, of the person who committed genocide against the dragons, who murdered anyone who refused to bow at his feet.

I'm the daughter of a monster.

My father's list of crimes could stretch around the realm and back, but he did those things. Not me. I was born and locked away. I had no part of them. Hell, I saw him once a year so he could torture me and test my limits. That's not my fault. I'm a victim as much as the next person, but his sins along with the blood he's spilled will forever stain my hands because we share a name.

It's not right.

Tipping my head back, I stare at the leaves above me. As the hell flame's light fades, the leaves begin to glow like shimmering crystals. I don't want to die out here. Not now, not like this. There are too many things I've dreamed of doing once I made it out of that cell. I won't give up on them now.

My teeth chatter as we trudge forward, the air chilling more the farther we travel into the forest. I grit them together to keep them from trembling. Brenn's form is barely visible, shrouded in the dark. If it weren't for his white hair, he'd be gone.

“Will you slow down,” I hiss, trying to stumble faster.

“It’s called natural selection. You either keep up and survive or you don’t,” says the man with an iron hinge on his leg. Foolishly, I assumed if anyone could fathom what walking on an injured ankle was like, it’d be him. However, I couldn’t have been more wrong.

I want to retort, but the words die in my throat when the sound of a visceral growl hits my ears. They’re close... Squinting, I can’t make out more than the occasional flint of light bouncing off a sharpened blade. A sword or a dagger maybe? As I step closer to where Brenn has halted in the thicket of brush, he lifts his hands, palms to the sky. His teeth grit as he slowly draws them apart. The trees seem to move along with him, leaning and groaning as the canopy opens up, allowing the faint light to cast down on the group. It’s like he’s bending them with his mind, with magic.

My breath catches, suspended in a moment too surreal to be true. The creatures before us prowl around Loric and his friends, outnumbering them eight to five. Their movements are made up of lethal grace, a living paradox of elegance that belies their monstrous forms. Horns twist like castle spires, bending back around the sides of their heads, and another, only a few inches long, juts out from the tip of their noses. Instead of coiling, it’s straight and the point is sharp enough to impale prey. Their lips roll back into a menacing snarl, revealing rows of blade-like teeth, bloodied along with patches of their gray and white striped fur.

For creatures that could kill with a single bite, their bodies are majestic, lion-like except for the enormous fluffy tails that swish behind them. They creep closer, crawling low to the ground. Their large, yellow eyes pierce the dusk, and they don’t miss anything, not the shifting of Loric’s hand as he palms the dagger at his hip, not Jesper slowly adjusting his footing, and definitely not the crimson blood dripping from Mira’s hand.

They see it all, hyper fixed on their prey as they calculate their next move, but if they see Brenn and I, they don’t perceive us as a threat.

The first creature lunges, mouth open. Its teeth gleam, aiming for Mira's throat, but she brings her sword up, just not fast enough. The beast's weight slams into her and pins her to the ground. Arms locked, she fights to keep its snapping jaws away from her face, her sword sideways, creating a barrier.

"Mira!" Brenn yells, taking a single step forward as if he planned to run to her rescue, but thought better of it.

"I'm... I'm *Fine*," Mira grits, her voice strained with pain and defiance.

The creature's tail, a plume of fluffiness, swishes with an innocence that contradicts the deadly spectacle unfolding before me. It's like watching a domesticated feline toy with a mouse, except this creature is a hundred times bigger.

Mira's grimace morphs into a stoic mask as she dares a glance at her hand. Her palm pressed in a death grip against the flat part of her sword, one missing a thumb.

"It'll grow back," she says, seemingly assuring herself more than us.

"Says you!" Brenn says, his jaw tight. I can't tell if he's fearful of losing her, or her fingers more.

I stand frozen, a spectator caught between the terror of the unknown and the mesmerizing beauty of a creature from my stories. At least my books got something right. I never thought I'd get the chance to see one in real life, and they're exactly as I pictured.

Mira manages to squeeze a boot between the creature's enormous body and sends it careening backward. It hits the ground and immediately scrambles to its feet.

The never cat rushes toward her and she kicks out, spinning so her boot collides with its face. The others are each battling their own creature, or like Loric, are trying to handle two at a time. Though he seems to be holding his own, it's almost like he's baiting them in equal measure.

One seems to get the better of him, getting closer than he anticipated. Talons burst through Loric's fingertips and slash through the air. They burrow deep into the creature's throat as

a low, guttural growl leaves his. It draws the attention of all the beasts, allowing Jesper and Faelor a chance to get the upper hand. The noise cuts through me, forcing my spine straight. It's feral—*inhuman*—and it narrows down the list of what he could be to one word. *Shifter*.

He has to be to grow talons like that, but it doesn't make sense for him to have other gifts too. And his chloroform breath is undeniable and *very* potent. Speaking from experience.

Loric bats away one of the creatures, taking a moment to look over the others, protectively. His eyes, or what should be, lock on where Brenn and I stand. Except where the silver rings once surrounded dark pupils, they're dark like midnight, speckled with silver. And where his cocky, absurdly perfect smile was is now lined with metallic, pointed teeth.

I swallow hard. Definitely shifter, but I've never seen one look like *that*.

There have been plenty of wolves and hell hounds held in the dungeons, and Asmo has told me enough information to form a bestiary in my head. Yet, nothing comes to mind. *What is he, and why is it such a secret?*

"You're most certainly *not* fine, Mira. Don't lose any more digits, please." Brenn paces on the sidelines with me, but I don't understand his place. *Why isn't he helping them?* Had it been Asmo or anyone else I cared about, I wouldn't be worried about fingers. I'd be worried about losing them.

"You don't see me complaining every time I have to take your sock off." Mira levels him with a glare, spinning with her sword and bringing the blade down hard against the creature's head. Blood sprays as it drops lifelessly to the ground.

"Sock? Singular?" I ask, which was clearly the wrong thing to do. Brenn snaps his attention to me, his green eyes flaring until I can feel the heat of his anger putrefying the air.

Crimson drips from Mira's skin as she closes the distance between us. "He only has one."

Brenn snarls a lip, looking away. “I’m not being hypocritical. I’m just saying it’ll be awfully hard for you to grip my cock with four fingers, won’t it? It’d be the saddest hand job the realm has ever seen.”

“Why don’t you go help her then?” I snap, knowing he has magic. He has to in order to open the tree canopy like he did. He has the ability to help.

“Excuse me? Do I look brawny to you? I’m a thinker, not a sword-swisher.” Brenn rolls his neck, casting a cynical look my way before eyeing the chaos before us. “I have a peg leg, for fate’s sake. Maybe *you* should go help.”

Before I can register the fact one of the creatures is bounding toward us, I’m shoved forward. The ground digs into my palms and the vibrations of the creature’s heavy footfalls travel up my arms. I start to push up, but I freeze the moment yellow eyes rush toward me. All I can do is throw my hands out as I tumble onto my back and large jaws half the size of my body open up above me. I gasp in air, arms recoiling over my face in a weak attempt to protect my head as rows of serrated teeth come for me.

Brenn didn’t just shove me, he pushed me into the path of certain death.

Power surges inside of me, a spark of energy igniting from deep within. It pulses through my veins, filling me with an otherworldly strength. Without conscious thought, dark wisps of magic burst from my hands, snaking through the air. They slam into the never cat, and it flies through the air with a deafening roar. Its thick body collides into a nearby tree with a sickening thud. The creature barely has time to slip to the ground before deflating and crumbling to ash.

My heart seems to cease beating, the air no longer pumping in and out of my lungs. The world around me spirals as the darkness closes in on my vision. I fight to stay awake, to stay alive, but the pull is relentless and unyielding. Somehow, I know this is it. The end.

CHAPTER 9

Calamity's Other Half

I sit up from the ground, not caring that the leaves are stuck into my long white hair. It's not often that I get to be in control, but now seems like the perfect time to be. Calamity and I might share a soul—a body—but the girl doesn't have what it takes to survive in this world without me. That much is certain, seeing as she nearly let us be gobbled up by some fluff ball with fangs.

Twisting my neck, I take in the forest around us. It's vastly different from where I usually wake up. There are no white walls, nor is their liquid fire raging through our veins to coax me out, to burn me. I suppose I have the bloody teeth to thank for that, since those beauties are what tore me from the depths of her mind, her fear of the beast having given me control.

The unmistakable feeling of being watched settles in, like a single bead of water trailing down my spine. I glance behind me, spotting the white-haired prick peeking out from behind a tree trunk. His eyes are wide like an owl, his jaw hanging open with awe.

Baring my elongated fangs, I let out a deep growl that echoes in my throat. The man's eyes flash in a fluorescent purple as his creature peers out at me, heeding my wordless command to show itself. Lifting my hands, I wiggle my fingers, eyeing the dark, obsidian talons pushing through the

tips of them. My tongue toys with the points of my incisors, and slips over the smaller two on either side of them.

So, I can half-shift on my own. And here I thought the only way for that to happen is with the king electrocuting me.

I shove up from the ground, stalking toward the white-haired man. “You pushed her. You wanted us dead.” My voice sounds like Calamity’s when we speak, but she won’t remember this. She never does.

Brenn... His name is Brenn, I say to myself, eating up the ground in seconds. Brenn doesn’t move, only twists as I round the tree trunk he’s hiding behind until his back is pressed against the bark.

“You... You’re a...” he stammers, swallowing hard enough that the knot in his throat bobs.

“Save your flattery. Considering I can taste the fear wafting off of you, I trust you won’t be doing something stupid again. Yes?”

Brenn’s face blanches as he nods. “You have white hair... And your eyes...”

Shaking my head, I drag in a deep breath. “Did you not hear me? Now isn’t the time for compliments, sheep. Go find your shepard. Perhaps he has your balls, too.” Snorting, I dust my hands on Calamity’s dress and step away from Brenn. The girl has to get better clothes. These won’t do against the elements, and they certainly won’t hold up on our journey. I won’t be surprised if all that’s left are scraps by the time we get out of Solaria.

The clang of metal on bone draws my attention back to the fight. The others are still wrestling the never cats, their faces twisted in determination as they land blow after blow. Though the cats have the advantage in sheer size alone, and it’ll take more than the pointy toothpicks aimed their way to scare them off, they don’t seem to be looking to kill. *Interesting.*

One of the men has left their flank open twice in as long as I’ve been standing here and the cat didn’t lunge for it or take the opportunity to kill its prey. It bites at the sword instead.

They're not hunting or defensive. Their tails are swishing like they're curious....

A beam of light casts through the tree canopy and reflects off the tattoo'd man's blade. Faelor, I believe, assuming I heard that right. Everything is a bit muffled when I'm not in control, but everything Calamity sees and hears, I do...but it could be Taylor? Baylor? Regardless of what he goes by, the creature facing him follows his sword with slitted yellow eyes and pounces on the ground before returning to fight off the brute.

They're playing. They're not stopping to make the kill when they knock someone down, but instead going after the next shiny thing they see.

Storming back to where Brenn is hiding, I snatch the dagger off his belt and take a few large steps backward, making sure there's plenty of space between us.

"What are you doing?" he asks, his hands still pawing at the dagger's sheath, but he wasn't fast enough.

"Testing a theory." My lips pull into a mischievous smile, keeping my teeth hidden. "Looks like the sheep has a purpose after all."

Tilting the dagger, I catch a sliver of light on the blade and twist until it's pointed at Brenn's chest. He side-steps but I follow him with it. Then again, and again.

"Stop that," he demands, his voice raising. Good... the noise will only catch the beast's attention sooner.

Using just my eyes, I watch one of the beasts abandon Jesper, and bound toward us. *It worked.*

"Oh, fantastic. Pick on the cripple!" Brenn yells, frantically stepping out of the light, only to be put back into it again. His eyes dart between the beast and me in rapid succession, his chest heaving as he draws in more air than is healthy. "Calamity!"

"Relax. If I wanted you dead, you'd be blowing away in the wind already." I roll my eyes, waiting for the beast to get closer.

He twists his head, still trying to move away from the light. “Your point has been made. I’m an asshole. Can you call off your dogs now?”

I wait another moment, watching the creature leap over the ground. Brenn shrieks my name but I pay him no mind, holding the light on him. Just as the creature passes me, I thrust a hand out. Darkness bursts from my fingertips, speeding through the air and engulfing the creature in smoke. As the plume of shadows clears and fades into nothing, the cat disintegrates at Brenn’s feet.

He staggers back. Landing on his butt as he hyperventilates, watching the ash settle into the leaves before him.

“Told you,” I scoff. “You still have all your digits, don’t you? It’d be a shame if you lost a finger, wouldn’t it?”

His eyes narrow as he lets out a shaky exhale, nostrils flaring. “This isn’t a game.”

“No. It’s not. Consider it a penance for trying to get us killed.” Giving him my back, I turn toward the others just in time to see Loric’s wide-eyed expression locked on me. His silver eyes meet mine, flashing bright. My heart flutters in my chest, but the sensation is cut short as a never cat slams into his back, pinning him to the ground. He barely manages to roll to his back between the beast’s paw before razor sharp teeth snap together, inches from his face. His hands are buried in the creature’s fur, drawing blood, with his talons burrowed into the never cat’s flesh. The pain doesn’t slow it down, not a second.

A guttural scream rips through the fog in my mind and I spare a glance in the direction it came, finding another cat tearing it’s head side to side, clamped onto the red-headed woman’s shoulder.

“Vik!” Brenn calls out from behind me, the hinge on his knee squealing as he rushes forward, stopping next to me.

I fill my lungs as power crackles around me, my veins heating with it. Dark tendrils of smoke coil around my body, thickening into ropes as it takes on an inky texture. Splaying

my fingers wide, I slam a foot down, pressing my palms toward the dirt. The wisps of darkness burrow into the ground and the wind swirls around my body, sending leaves and ashes and the scent of magic flying through the air.

The darkness bursts through the forest floor, directly underneath the remaining beasts, making the dirt rain as the dark coils bind the beasts like ribbons. They pull tighter and tighter as the beasts wail, fighting against my power with every ounce of strength they possess, but it's not enough. The darkness begins to drain them, but my power stores are nearly full. For now. Siphoning much more without the ability to hold such power or expell it would be suicide, so I need to make this quick.

Feeling invigorated, I let my magic squeeze. I let it crush bone. Then the resistance gives way and the beasts explode. I jolt back as crimson splatter paints everything around us, the trees, our bodies, our clothes, the leaves... Nothing escapes the gore.

Loric and the rest of his friends slowly get to their feet, the white of their eyes standing out against the sea of red, but they're safe—alive. That's all that matters.

Unfortunately, the rush of power recedes as quickly as it came about—exploding cats is hard work—and I can feel my strength fade. I blame years of being suppressed by the king's tests, never having the chance to push the limits or build a tolerance to the tasking nature of being in control. I don't have the practice or vigor to remain so much longer, which means Calamity is about to learn she's not the only one living in this body.

It has to happen eventually.

Soon, she'll be on her own again and I'll be dormant. It's impossible for me to protect her at all times, not without practice, not without slowly building up the ability to hold the mental door open and seize control of our body. Every second leeches my energy. She needs someone who can protect her when I can't. She needs the silver-eyed man, the one that smells absolutely delicious. I can practically taste the power

radiating off him, and according to his life debt, he's invested. Maybe even more so now that he knows I'm in the picture, and he's seen the evidence of what I can do.

He and his friends might've been able to fend off the never cats eventually, but at what cost? Two are already injured. If we stand any hope of a life outside Solaria, I need him alive and on Calamity's side... She needs him when I'm not around. The only problem is, he could very well be leading us to a slaughter in the outer realm. I need to know how much I can trust him once his debt is paid and we're no longer on the Solaria mainland.

The rebels hate the king and anyone associated with him. For all we know, he could be holding true to his word, to get us out of Solaria, only to offer us up to his people. We could be trading one gilded cage for another that'll likely cost us our life.

Calamity has already picked up on Loric's hostility with Asmo. She's sensed there's a chance of things getting worse if he goes back on his word, and she's not wrong... However, she's overlooking the obvious solution. We can give him a reason to keep us alive beyond the debt he owes.

The man might be stubborn and grumpy, but he's not *just* a man. Based on the way his eyes flash, the way they seem to watch me more intently than a mere man seeking to pay his dues would... There's someone else in there. Someone who shares his body the same way Calamity and I share this one. And if I smell as good to him as he does to me... It should be easy to win his creature over.

Loric won't be able to kill us if he mates us. His beast won't let him. On top of that, his merry band of misfits won't be able to touch us or push us into harm's way again. Shifters have an unspoken code, a hierarchy, and none of them will cross their alpha, not when it involves their mate. It'd be a death sentence.

I glance out of the corner of my eye, smirking at Brenn when he sucks in a breath and puts more space between us.

The only question is, how do I seduce a creature without knowing what or who they are? More importantly, how do I facilitate it while Calamity has control?

A whimper draws my attention to the red haired woman, Vik. Her shoulder oozes blood from a deep gash as Faelor helps her move closer to Loric. I suppose a good way to start is to make friends with his friends.

When the gods bless you with the ability to heal, you heal. You heal your way right into some mysterious man-creature's heart... because nothing says *mate me* more than that.

I don't finish taking a single step forward before Brenn opens his mouth. "She tried to kill me! The creatures were attracted to the light."

"Figure that out all by yourself, did you?" I arch a brow at him.

"You helped minutely. That is, if you consider trying to coerce one of those things to eat me, helping." Brenn puffs his chest, stalking closer toward me.

I snarl, flashing my teeth and he jumps back a few steps. "You wanted us dead and if it weren't for me taking control, that thing would be picking our bones out of its teeth." Closing the distance between us, I lift a hand, spreading my fingers wide as darkness heeds my command. I won't kill the fool. It wouldn't bode well for the courtship I'm about to initiate with the prime specimen of a man he calls his alpha.

It doesn't mean I can't scare him into submission though. He hasn't tasted power yet. Not like ours. The magic that courses through our veins is ancient and beyond anything the fake blond pipsqueak can imagine.

Darkness leaves me, rippling out over the ground like fog. Brenn starts to turn, like he plans to run away, but I whip a hand out, a rope of ink-like power cracks through the air, wrapping around his middle and holding him in place. I inch closer, my eyes never leaving him. "Do you feel that?" The darkness starts to travel over his skin, running up and down his

flesh like poisoned veins. Calamity might have to touch the person to use our magic, but I don't, not when I'm in control.

Standing directly in front of Brenn now, I tilt my head back so he can see my face, giving him a smile that's all teeth. His skin reddens, his breaths uneven as he feels the draw of my power. It's slow and steady, but more frightening than anything.

"Focus on it, the way your heart seizes, incapable of pumping with my power wrapped around it, the strain of your lungs as they fight for air, the pressure in your head..." I poke him in the chest. "Next time you want to play hero and shove me into the jaws of death, you better succeed. If you don't, this is what it'll feel like as I pull apart every cell of your fucking being. Understand?"

Brenn nods, the tendons in his neck straining. "I understand," he forces the words out, but it's enough.

Satisfied, I let the life I pulled snap back into his body and he stumbles out of my clutches. "Good."

Leaving Brenn gasping, I shoot Mira and Vik an innocent smile, deciding to start my healing rounds with them. Brenn can go last, though I'm certain the only thing he has to heal is his black heart.

"May I help?" I ask Vik, nodding to her shoulder. "I can fix it. It'll be like it never happened."

The red-haired woman casts a glance behind me, likely seeking her brother's permission. Her features are pulled tight as she tries to breathe through the pain, then her purple eyes meet mine and she gives a curt nod. Faelor and Jesper step away, but Mira stays at the woman's side as I place my hand on her shoulder.

This time, instead of darkness, it's light that leaves me in pale yellow threads, linking my hand to her body like stitches. Her skin moves, fraying at the torn edges of the wound, bending and weaving together until the gash is closed and all that's left is a shiny new scar.

Vik sucks in a breath as I remove my hand, glancing in hurried movements from me to where the beast tore into her shoulder. “Thank you,” she breathes.

“This might have started because of a debt, but you’re helping me. It’s the least I can do.” I give her a tight lipped smile before turning to Mira and doing the same to her hand. It doesn’t give her a thumb back, which I’m sure Brenn is going to be ecstatic about, but it does heal the ripped flesh and the break in her wrist and fractured knuckles.

Slowly, I make my way through each of Loric’s friends, taking away the injuries they sustained from the never cats, skipping Brenn for obvious reasons, and ending with Loric. Pursing my lips, I stop a few feet away from him, linking my hands behind my back.

“I can help you too, you know.” He doesn’t answer. With a cant of my head, I let my eyes flash bright, coaxing out the beast within him. It’s like a dare he can’t resist taking. His jaw flexes and a muscle feathers in his cheek as he growls low in his throat, but the man gives in. Silver eyes glow as they meet mine, his lips twisting into a smirk but his beast doesn’t say anything, just stares.

Perhaps his creature is a mute.

I tread closer until I’m standing in front of where he’s seated on the ground, the blood spatter still covering most of his face and body. The scent of it is too strong to know if he’s wounded beyond what I can see. There’s no way of knowing if the crimson stains on his clothes are his or the beasts I killed, and something tells me he doesn’t intend to give me the answers I seek.

Crouching down, his gaze bores into mine. It’s both mesmerizing and terrifying in equal parts.

Hesitantly, I reach for the scratch on his face, running from the top of his ear to his chin. It’s shallow, and it seems like his body is healing quickly, anyway, but this is a peace offering. A dance. If I’m to convince him to protect me, until death do we part, his beast has to want it and healing this wound is my olive branch.

I can't count on Calamity to swindle her way into matehood. She'll fuck it up somehow.

She's scared, terrified of the new world we've stepped into and yet thrilled to be free, but she's never been very trusting of others. She'll keep her mental walls up and her legs closed, which is precisely not what we need right now.

Reaching for Loric's face, I don't make it far. His hand darts out wrapping around my wrist before I can heal the mark.

"Did I offend you?" I ask, blinking at him and unsure of how to proceed.

He arches a brow.

How do I save this? We've witnessed other prisoners initiate flirting in the dungeon as a means to get the opposite sex to pay attention to them, to *swoon*. They always winked and it always worked.

I give it a go, finding it harder than it looks. I'm pretty sure I accidentally squinted both eyes.

Loric's lips tip into a wider grin as his glowing eyes slowly, methodically, descend down my body. He stands to his full height and my spine stiffens. The man steps closer, lifting my chin with a bloodied finger. "If you want to woo me, you'll have to try harder than that."

Is that a no?

Loric steps around me, and his friends move to follow him as he starts toward the woodline.

"Where are we going?" I call, using hurried footsteps to catch up to them.

"To try again to get rooms for the night," Loric says, stopping to wait for me. Except when our eyes lock, it's the man that stares back, not his other half. "Can't have you freezing, especially now that you're all wet."

I'm what? Giving myself a once over, I find that my bloodsoaked dress sticks to my skin, soaked through. "Oh..." I'm not sure how to react to him telling me to try harder. I

killed multiple beasts that nearly ate his friends alive. Yet, that's not enough? What *is* enough?

The ground begins to shift and the trees start to close in as my steps waver. *Shit. No... I'm not done. I have to woo him. I have to for both of mine and Calamity's sake.*

The ground meets my face and I'm not even sure when I began to fall. Then it's out like a light and I'm shoved back into the depths of Calamity's mind.

Fuck.

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CHAPTER 10

Calamity

Coming to, the world around me is a blend of shadows and whispers—voices I know, sort of. One in particular stands out the most. Loric's.

His heavy timbre cuts through the silence, a sudden, powerful presence that wraps around me, unasked for yet impossible to ignore. It's deep, resonant, speaking with authority. It's the kind of voice that stirs something primal within, tugging at the very core of my being.

I pause, hesitating to crack an eyelid. He's not talking to me, but my heart skips a beat when I hear him say my name. I'm drawn to him, irrevocably, yet part of me rebels against the idea. A very *large* part.

Something warm is pressed against my side, my face, my everything. I curl closer, desperate to ward off the chill in the air. I'm not sure how long I was out, or whether I've died, swallowed whole by that *thing*. Perhaps this is what comes after. Yet the frigid wind nipping at my flesh says otherwise.

I doubt I'd be cold in the afterlife. I likely wouldn't feel anything. I'd be a ghost or another soul in the well waiting to be reborn. No. This feeling, the goosebumps layering my flesh, is that of night. It's why the dungeons used to smell of

fire and coals when the hell flame was snuffed out by the moons.

“Wait,” Loric calls, his voice rattling against my left ear. It’s now that I notice the gentle rocking of my head—the cadence of inhales and exhales as lungs expand. The echo of a beating heart.

“Yeah?” I recognize the voice as the tattooed man, the one with the red swirls and symbols covering his skin. Faelor.

“You and Brenn stay with the horses. Tonight’s the blackout.” There’s a steely edge to Loric’s tone. “Assuming the bastard at the bar will give us rooms, we’ll likely be here a few days. I’d rather not travel in the dark if we don’t have to.”

If he’s right about the blackout, then the cold I feel will only get worse from here until the hell flame returns and casts the lands in amber light. Once a year, the moons stay put, blocking the hell flame for three days straight. No one knows why, but it’s my luck that it would happen while we’re traveling over the mainland. We might be on the safer side of the river, but there are creatures worse than the never cats that roam these parts. They stay clear of villages, but the nearest village isn’t for miles, if we’re still near Gael’s pub.

Faelor sighs. “The whole time?”

“We’ll take shifts, or the rest of you will. The last thing I need is for Brenn to try and take matters into his own hands again. Keep an eye on him, would you?”

“You got it.” Grass rustles as if Faelor is jogging away.

A silent moment passes before the gentle sway of Loric’s steps ceases. “You can stop pretending to still be out. I know you’re awake.”

My eyes shoot open. “I wasn’t... I... I’d just woke up.” I furrow my brow. “How did you know?”

“Your breathing changed.”

The arm supporting me gives and I drop, swinging down to my feet. “And you noticed that?” I right my dress, only to feel something stick to my hands. It’s crusted and powdery in a

way. It's hard to see what it is in the dark, but I'm covered in it.

"I notice everything." He lifts my chin with a curled finger. "Including the way you're gawking at your hands. You don't remember, do you?"

"Remember what exactly?" I stare up at him, my eyes bouncing between his, hoping something in his expression will tell me what the hell happened. "What happened to the never cat? The one Brenn pushed me into?"

"You killed it, or your other half did."

I shake my head as if that'll help me hear better. "Other half? What are you talking about?"

"Your creature. The one you share a soul with. You are a shifter, aren't you?" He lowers his head, trying to bring my eyes, the ones that have wandered off to vacantly stare at the tall grass, back to his.

"Shifter? *No?* I have magic. I'm a mage, I think. The king's a druid and I have no idea what or who my biological mother is, so I suppose it's possible. But I've never shifted before, or heard voices in my head. It would've happened before now. Right?"

He lets out a heavy exhale, trapping his lips between his teeth as he scans my face. "Not always."

"You're certain?" I try to wrap my mind around it, but I can't. After everything I've been through, if I were a shifter, I'd know.

"Yes. Your hair turned white, you had talons, *teeth*. Your eyes were jet black, except for the gold rings, and this darkness webbed over your cheeks. That part I've seen before, but only once." He darts his gaze away.

I've seen others have those eyes, but I thought it was normal, that everyone had them. Asmo does, except his go entirely black and look like obsidian glass. He claimed it was due to demonic blood. Could I have demonic blood too? If so, why would mine have gold?

I don't get a chance to ask who or what sort of creature Loric saw once before. For all I know he could be talking about Asmo, though he hides his dark side well. His eyes come from his father's side, the King of Hell Hold, a place in the neighboring realm to ours. Asmo despises him, says that when his eyes turn it only reminds him of the man who left him for dead. He'd rather forget who brought him into the world and I don't blame him. With the king as my father, I wish I could forget too.

Except, Asmo's parents seem worse somehow. Mine locked me in the dungeon, but he kept me close. He shoved him through the boundary around our realm, the one only dragons can penetrate. They didn't care that he'd never be able to return or that they shoved him through on the wrong side of the river, the one where everything wants to kill you. It's how he got his scars.

If it weren't for the king, his biological grandfather, taking him in, Asmo might never have been around to raise me. Immortal as he may be, even immortals can die. They just never grow old, but it doesn't stop monster teeth from shredding them to bits.

Mira holds the bar door open, allowing Loric to slip inside. But I'm rooted to the spot, incapable of averting my gaze as I make out what covers both of their skin. Cast in the light from inside the pub, every exposed inch is caked in blood. It's like they bathed in it.

Forcing myself to look away, I step into the room. My boots click against the ancient stone floor as I squint to see through the hazy air. Smoke burns my nostrils, invading my lungs, and I cringe, fighting the urge to cough. The same crowd as before fills the tables, their wandering eyes sliding toward me.

"They're looking at me again." I step closer to Loric, as if his presence alone could fend them off.

"It won't be for long. We'll be downstairs soon and you'll have your own room." Loric's hand gently nudges the small of my back, guiding me through the room. "However, I need a

favor. If you won't let me kill him, you need to convince your friend to let us stay."

I try to focus on the floor and not the scarred and twisted faces. Only this time, instead of looking at me with hungry eyes that threaten to eat me up, their jaws drop as if they've seen a ghost. I suppose seeing someone covered in blood would have that effect. My dress is soaked with it.

"Not my friend... If I do it, will you tell me more about what happened in the woods?" I ask.

He nods in my periphery. "I'll tell you whatever I can."

His response is evasive, not entirely what I want, but it's something. It's a step away from the monosyllabic grunts, like he gave when I first woke up in his care. So, it's progress.

"Fine. You have a deal." Even as I agree, even as I lift my eyes to look over the bar, I regret it the moment I spot him. Gael.

Loric growls as we reach the long wooden counter and the people in front of us clear their barstools like roaches in the light. "All you, princess. Make me proud. I think we can all use a bath right about now."

My stomach flutters at the idea. A bath does sound nice, but it wasn't that portion of his statement that gave me butterflies. Shaking my head, I pull out one of the abandoned stools and take a seat, waiting for Gael to finish up with a customer on the far end of the bar.

Nonchalantly resting against the bartop, Gael flashes a perfect grin at the blonde-haired woman across from him. Quite the charmer he's become since his great escape.

The woman gives him some coins along with an empty glass, and tugs him closer by fisting the front of his linen shirt. She whispers something in his ear, a secret meant only for them. I'm not sure what she said, but his eyebrows perk up, and his eyes darken as he holds her gaze.

Then, as if drawn by some unseen force, those amber orbs shift to mine. His auburn hair is a tousled, rebellious mess as it hangs just above his eyebrows. Yet, after everything, he still

looks at me as if we're the only two people in the room, making the rest of the world fade into insignificance.

I hate it.

I hate him.

I hate that he can stir me so easily, or make me want him with a single look when I know there's nothing about him worth wanting.

Even his walk carries a cocky swagger as he leaves the woman and heads toward me. She wasn't even done talking to him before he slipped away mid-sentence. The blonde scoffs, storming off. Little does she know, this just saved her from making a huge mistake.

"You came back," he says, his voice tinged with a newfound confidence, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. "That's good. You hadn't given me the chance to make things right."

I narrow my eyes, refusing to give him the satisfaction of pulling a smile from me. I'm here for one reason, not for him, but for a room—or three—but definitely *not* for him. "What could you possibly do to make things right? You left me for dead. There's no coming back from that."

"We'll see." He leans his side casually against the bar, bringing his face closer to mine. The angle showcases the chiseled, toned muscles of his body, the tendons stretching in his neck, and the sharp, defined edge of his jaw. All man. Every inch. Had he looked like this when he was in the dungeon, I don't think it would've taken weeks for him to convince me to do things.

My gaze travels from his full lips to his throat, and I swallow thickly. "As a shifter, it's rather dumb to leave your throat exposed, isn't it? I believe it was you who told me it's the optimal spot to place mate marks. They're visible and most people don't protect it enough. It's making you look easy."

His grin widens, an auburn eyebrow arching in challenge. "Do you wish to claim me?"

“Not in a million years,” I say, reaching over the counter to pour myself a drink. I’m going to need it to get through this shit. His grin is unflinching as he watches me like a hawk.

“Then it’s not dumb, is it?” he counters. “Besides, you used to enjoy kissing my neck.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” My tone is sharp. “You were literally the only option. It was either you, or the orc who had your cell before you. And I wouldn’t have touched him with a ten-foot pole.” The memory of the orc’s cat-calling whistle sends a shudder through me. “It didn’t stop him from making his interest known, though.”

He laughs silently, but when I glance at him, he’s not looking at my face. His stare is glued to my body. “You realize you’re covered in blood, don’t you?”

“It’s a new thing I’m trying. It’s good for the skin.”

He purses his lips, rocking his head as if he’s mulling it over. “So, if you’re not here for me, then why are you here?”

“I need a few rooms and apparently, you have some.” I take a long swig of the wine I poured. It’s thicker than the stuff Asmo’s let me try. Sweeter. “What is this?” Raising my glass, I peer through the side as if the color will tell me.

“Fairy wine, and I wouldn’t drink that whole glass.” Gone is the flirtatious attitude, replaced by a man who’s all business. “You said rooms, as in plural.”

“Yes, three.” I furrow my brows, taking another long swig. *Gods, that’s good.*

“For who?” He pushes off the bar, opening a cabinet of some sort below the counter in front of me.

“Me and my...” I’m not sure what I should call them. Friends? No. “Acquaintances.” Except for Brenn. I have a bone to pick with him at the moment. He’s on my shit list.

“Acquaintances?” Gael gives me a knowing look, peering through the room as if he’s looking for someone. “Well, they’re not hard to spot. They all must be trying the same thing

as you, with the blood and all. Including the man you came up here with last. He hasn't taken his eyes off you. Who is he?"

Jealous, much?

I snort out a laugh. "Your guess is as good as mine." Heat blooms in my cheeks, and for some odd reason I can't stop smiling. Gael wasn't kidding about not drinking the whole glass. This stuff isn't wine, it's drugs.

"You're staying with someone you don't even know?" Gael pauses, the keys in his hands stilling as he seemingly freezes in place, his eyes locked on Loric from across the room.

I dare a glance over my shoulder and find his silver eyes glowing. It's a look that sends an unbidden warmth cascading through me, holding me captive in its intensity. It's like magic, or maybe it's the wine. Hard to tell, but there's a playful twist to his lips, the corner just barely lifted in a smirk that suggests he knows exactly the effect he's having on me. I don't like that either.

Rolling my eyes I sigh, taking another sip.

One of these days I'll have a cottage in the middle of nowhere, where I can garden and paint as much as I want. Where I can do as I please without judgment, far, far away from all the testosterone. It can't come fast enough.

"Something like that," I say, returning my attention to Gael.

"Well, I only have two rooms, but you won't need a third." He holds two keys hanging from separate leather straps out toward me, but before I can grab them, he pulls them away, just out of my reach. "One condition."

"Of course there's a condition. I should've suspected that. There's always something in it for you." It takes me a moment to realize I've said that out loud and not in my head.

Gael's eyes sparkle with a mischievous light. I can't help but feel as though he's peering straight into my soul, seeing things I've kept hidden, things I didn't even know were there. It's disarming. "You stay with me. At least you know I won't take advantage of you."

“Advantage? You act like I’m powerless. If I should be worried about anyone it’s you. *You* took advantage of me already.” I reach forward, jaw locked as I try to snatch the keys from him.

“That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”

Glaring hard, I feel power welling in my fingertips, but I push it down. “You owe me this. I won’t stay with you and I could very well freeze during the blackout.”

“I don’t know them. I don’t rent rooms to people I’m not familiar with. As is, your presence here could lead to the king’s guards knocking on my door. I’m taking a risk by letting you stay.” Something about the way he smirks tells me he knows exactly what he’s doing. And the idea of staying in a room with him has danger written all over it. “You used to pray for a night alone with me,” he adds. “Even went to great lengths to get one, once upon a time. Now you have the chance. I’m not asking you to sleep with me, though I’m not opposed. I just want one night.”

“No.” I expected my voice to come out with a little more *oomph* behind it, not a whisper, definitely not weak.

“Is it because of him?” He up-nods toward where Loric has been standing since I sat down. I don’t answer. “Are you together? Is that why he’s been staring daggers at us?”

A smile pulls at my lips as an idea forms in my head. “In fact... I didn’t want to have to do this, but you seem to have given me no choice.” I spin on the barstool, letting the swivel seat glide me until I face Loric. Crooking a finger, I give him a come hither motion.

Loric’s face falls, the color draining from it. It makes me wonder just how well he can hear and if he knows what I’m up to. Scratching his nose, he makes his way across the bar, after leaving his cape with Mira.

“Gael, I’d like you to meet my big, scary boyfriend.”

Loric’s spine goes rigid, too straight to be natural, as he doubletakes me. “Um...” He swallows thickly, eyes wide. “Lor, nice to meet you.”

“Lor? Since when have you gone by Lor?” I scrunch my brows, wrapping my arm around his and threading our fingers together. He’s so warm... I could melt into the man. Curling against his side, I give Gael the biggest grin of my life before looking up at Loric, my eyes round and twinkling like I’m his star-crossed lover.

“My friends call me Lor, *sweetheart*.”

“Hmm...” I try the shortened version of his name on my tongue. “*Lor*... I like it.”

“I said, my *friends*.” Lethal slits with a hint of silver peer down at me. If I could feel my face, I’d be worried that I poked the bear, but... No turning back now.

“Are we not friends?” I stroke my fingertips up his forearms, admiring the raised veins.

Loric must think better of disagreeing with me, or maybe he’s picked up that this little act is the only saving grace for getting those rooms without me spreading my legs for someone I’d rather put in the ground.

He clicks his tongue, his jaw grinding, but he continues with the act nonetheless. “I just prefer you to call me by your loving nicknames.” He glues his eyes to the back of the bar as he speaks, like he’s looking over the shelves of amber bottles and rows of clean glasses. Stoic as ever.

Taking another sip of the fairy wine, I drain my glass. “And what might those be?”

“Asshole, for one.” He tilts his head. His lips twitch. “Hobgoblin was pretty original.”

I snort, trapping the laugh that threatens to leave me behind my teeth. “Indeed.” I slide the glass across the bartop, nodding to Gael to pour me more.

“You really shouldn’t.” Concern lines Gael’s brow, but he pours another small glass anyway. As he scoots the glass into my hand, his fingers linger on mine a moment and I feel Loric’s chest expand until his lungs can’t hold any more, though he stays otherwise still. “I’ll give you two a moment to talk about it, but my offer stands.”

As soon as Gael is far enough down the bar that he won't hear us, I turn to Loric. "I need you to use your..." I trail off, wiggling my fingers in front of my mouth in a vain attempt to draw a picture or act out the signal for chloroform breath.

"You want me to *spit* on him?" Loric's eyebrows nearly reach his hairline.

"No. *Breathe.*" I wack him in the arm, which seems to amuse him more than anything. "I want you to breathe on him so I can steal the keys."

"That's a stupid plan." Loric turns to face me, taking his hand back from my death grip. Honestly, I forgot I was holding it.

"Well, I don't see you coming up with anything, Mr. Send-the-Socially-Deprived-Woman-into-Battle. Go on, then. Let's hear your plan since it's so much better." I cross my arms, pursing my lips.

"What you're suggesting is temporary. We'll be here for a couple days. He'll kick us out or call the guard as soon as he wakes up. As for my plan, I already told you." Loric steps behind me, planting his hands on the bartop so his arms are on either side of my body. He leans in close. "Just lure him outside. You don't have to see anything. I'll take care of it."

"There has to be another way." I gulp, trying to ignore the urge to rest my back against his chest. "I'm not a murderer. At least, I don't want to be."

He pushes away, only to settle against the bar beside me with his arms crossed firmly over his chest. The entire persona he's wearing screams unmoving, but his face seems to soften a bit as he scrutinizes me.

I take the opportunity to further my case. "Gael can't call the guard. He's an escaped convict for fates sake." I take another gulp, feeling power buzzing in my fingertips, and hoping the wine will help my magic simmer down. Besides, this stuff is phenomenal, like berries and sweet dreams and whimsy in a bottle.

“I’m sure he has friends, and the whole point of smuggling you out is to draw as little attention to ourselves as possible. He either needs to give you the keys amicably or he needs to be put down...What did he ask for?”

“He wants me to share his bed.” My voice drips with disdain, but I’m not sure if it’s the idea of sleeping with him or the fact Gael called me out that irks me more. Downing the hatch, I barely take the glass away from my lips before Loric plucks it from my grasp. His chest rises and falls, quicker than before, his silver eyes glowing now. “Gods, I only had two cups. I grew up in a dungeon, let me enjoy the taste of freedom for a moment.”

I feel his stare still boring into the side of my face.

“I don’t give a damn if you drink. Take the bottle if you want, just make sure you can walk. I’m tired of carrying you.” *Ah, there he is.* The grump is back. “And no offense, but this man wouldn’t even be a problem had you not enjoyed *the taste of him.*” Loric’s words, harsh and unfiltered, hang between us, but he makes no effort to take them back.

Something deep inside my chest breaks as heat floods my face. I’m not some common whore. I cared about him. Gael was the first person I wasn’t forced upon who acted like they genuinely liked me, that he wanted to know more—to get to know me. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a friend. Sure, I had Asmo and Meg, but they were like parents. He was different. How was I supposed to know he was using me?

Gael approaches us, his smug expression like a flame to my already frayed temper. “So, have we decided then, darling? Will you grace my bed, or do I show you to the door?”

Tears rim my eyes, but I put every ounce of effort into keeping the tears from falling. It’s not the time or the place to be weak. My heart seethes, turning to stone in my chest as I fight to calm the tidal waves of emotions raging through me. My power grows until the sparks in my fingertips form black smoke. It coils tightly around my body, weaving over my flesh like a protective shield, like a warning for both of them to keep their distance. It dances in the air, barely visible in my

peripheral vision, and white noise of voices—of the other patrons in the pub—dwindles into complete and utter silence.

“You don’t even know me,” I snap, my voice a sharp blade. Pushing off the barstool, I step toward Loric. His eyes are wide, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look an ounce afraid. Still, he doesn’t lean away or move an inch. Just watches. I poke him in the chest, tossing my other hand in the air and continuing to speak when he stays silent. “I don’t have to justify *anything*—”

My words cut off in my throat as power bursts from my hand... The one I flailed, the one I *talked* with... Dark tendrils slice through the bar in either direction, moving with predatory grace. I didn’t mean to release them. I didn’t even know I could *throw them* like that, but they surge forward, and I’m powerless to stop them.

Gael’s eyes widen in shock, his smugness evaporating as the shadowy ropes lash towards him. I’m not even sure who the ones leaving my right side are aiming for. I’m too scared to look away from Gael as they strike with the precision of a hawk seizing its prey, coiling around him in a relentless grip. I watch, horrified, as the darkness runs in choppy lines, like veins or spider webs, covering every inch of exposed flesh in seconds.

“No!” I try to retract them, to reel back the part of me that I’ve unleashed, but it’s too late. Gael’s freckled skin cracks like stone, hardening, then crumbles to ash.

Loric is at my side in an instant, his hand sliding up my arm until it can rest on top of my shoulder, and the warmth of his presence cascades up my back. “Looks like our problem is solved.”

As if his words could break the silence, voices explode, chairs tip and smash to the ground, and the people, the criminals that once laughed and drank in the pub are all gone. They’ve run out into the night.

Loric’s grip on my shoulder tightens, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity that speaks of fear, concern, and something

else — something that looks a lot like understanding. “You didn’t mean to, but his death was the right thing.”

I’m having a hard time believing that. A tear slips down my cheek as I move away from him, circling the bar to peer at the ashes. He’s gone. I should be glad, but I can’t be. As I stand here, witnessing the wreckage of what my power can do, I understand why the king locked me away. It wasn’t just to study me, it was to keep the realm safe from what I can do. From the chaos I can create.

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CHAPTER 11

Calamity

As Loric snatches the keys from the bartop, his motions are swift, precise. He tugs me along and I follow numbly, my mind still reeling from what I did to Gael. I haven't had a moment to process, to think, to mourn... He might've been an ass, but it didn't mean he deserved death. It didn't mean I needed to be the one to bring it upon him.

Guilt coils in my stomach, nauseating enough to make my knees weak. I can't bring myself to look away from the colorless pile of ashes and what remains of his clothes—of him. Even as I'm guided to the corner of the room, and Gael's no longer in visible sight, I still can't.

Something metal squeals. Hinges, maybe? Furniture being moved.

"Calamity." My name... It should be enough to get my attention. Moreover, the way he says it should. It's spoken so sweetly, like one would to a child or someone they cherish.

Rough, calloused hands with a gentle touch move my hair over my shoulder, and only when they brush against the smooth, soft crook of my neck do I look to find silver eyes gleaming back at me, glowing like halos.

"Are you alright?" Loric's voice is deeper somehow as he studies me. I don't think anything I said would've curbed his

need to make sure I'm okay without seeing it himself. Not with the way his gaze searches me, as if looking for physical wounds that only he can see.

But why? Why does he care? He barely knows me, and I him. There's no reason for him to care. I'm a duty he can't wait to be rid of.

"I'm fine. Or will be." Dropping my head, I turn away from him, and suddenly the metal sound I heard becomes clear. It's a passage, hidden behind a long, thick wooden shelf they've moved out of the way, revealing a dark tunnel and wooden stairs that seem to disappear after the second plank. To where, I have no idea.

He clears his throat. "In case, I'll be right behind you. Mira moved the vines to hide the door, but just to be sure, I'd rather put the shelf back. There's a lot of people who know about the bar, not so much what's below it. I don't want anyone stumbling downstairs and catching us off guard."

"I don't intend to be off guard, do you?" I cock my head, but keep my gaze on the tunnel before me.

"It's called *off guard* for a reason. It's not planned. Now go, I'd rather prepare for the worst." The screech of the shelf sliding against the stone hits me, but I don't move.

"I'm not going first." Rooting my feet to the spot, I hear Loric huff.

"You're not. Mira and Vik are down there already." Loric's breathes are heavy, as if moving the shelf was laborious work.

"I don't care. I've played this game before. The king sacrificed his servants too."

He moves between me and the tunnel with his hands planted on his hips. Breathing deep, he seems to mull my suspicions over, wiping at the bloodied sweat beading on his brow. "I'm not the king." When I don't flinch, he drops his head back, staring at the stone ceiling a moment before continuing. "Listen to my voice. You know, deep down that I'm not lying. If I was, you'd feel it in your gut." His eyes connect with

mine. “Is your gut telling you not to trust me, or is it your head, and all the shit you’ve been through?”

“One of your friends has already tried to kill me. I’m not sure who I can trust.” It’s an honest answer. I’m still not entirely sure about what happened and how I survived the never cat.

“Brenn did, yes, but he’s also being punished for it as we speak, and he won’t have the chance to do it again. I promise.”

I scoff, glancing toward the empty room. “I could’ve died and you expect me just to trust that you handled it?”

“You didn’t, though, and I promised earlier that I’d tell you why.” He gestures to himself, the blood on his skin now dried and brown. “But I’d prefer to not be covered in cat blood when I do it. So, can we please go downstairs.”

Teetering the fence, I run through it all in my mind one last time, looking at all the outcomes, the possibilities, and anything that doesn’t add up. Yet I have nothing. I can’t leave the bar, not if the night is as cool as he suggests it will be up here in the mountains.

Running my tongue over my teeth, I begin to pace, and just as I’m ready to say fuck it, to go down the steps and pray he doesn’t lock me down there somehow, Loric grips my hand. His nostrils flare as my eyes reach his face.

“Asmodeus taught you how to find your way in the woods. I can only assume he’s told you how to tell if someone is lying.” He presses my palm to his chest, directly over his heart and I can feel the gentle cadence of his beating against my skin.

Asmo did. He’s guessed right. Though I don’t know his gestures to be able to tell if he’s lying, just with facial expressions or tone. However, I know what he’s getting at with this. The next sure way to tell is by their pulse or their heartbeat. If it’s steady, they’re telling the truth. If it skips or quickens, then they’re lying.

“Look at me,” he says, his voice calm and soft. It’s completely contradictory to everything else about him, but I listen. “I have no plans to hurt you. I have no intention of

sending you down there or leaving you for dead. I'm honestly not sure why I've agreed to get you out of Solaria when I'd intended to tell Asmo to fuck off, but I can assure you the only thing that's going to happen down there is a bath, because we both reek of copper. Okay?"

Trying to look everywhere but at him, I breathe in deep, then gently nod.

"Alright then, let's go." He drops my hand and I tiptoe forward, swallowing thickly as I stare down the long stretch of steps.

Here goes nothing.

The wooden steps creak under my weight and as Loric pulls the shelf over the tunnel opening, the dim light morphs into pitch black. I can't even see my hand in front of my face, let alone the stairs. Carefully, I point my toe, testing to make sure the next plank is firmly beneath my foot before shifting my weight. My fingers skid over the rock walls, ice cold to the touch, and the air grows steadily colder, as if the chill is seeping through them.

A shiver rakes through my body, making me tremble, and I can barely make out my breath condensating in the air. Then warmth wraps around me, velvet and smooth. The fur lining of Loric's cloak tickles my cheeks as he settles it over my shoulders and I tug it close.

"Here, let me get in front," he says, tapping my shoulder.

Flattening my form to the stone wall, he squeezes around me, our bodies pressed tight as he works to shift in front, to take the lead. It's hard to make out his face in the dark, but his glowing eyes are unmistakable, casting white light over his cheeks and contrasting his eyebrows.

"You can see?" I adjust the cloak and my dress now that he's made it past me on the stairs.

"Yes, and you'll be able to soon, once you and your beast learn how to share." He grips my hand, guiding it to his shoulder. "Hang on. I'll guide you down. It'll brighten up as we go deeper."

Fisting the linen fabric, I take tentative steps behind him, stuck on the idea of there being something else living inside of me. Another being. “Share what? A mind?”

“A body. Shifters have a beast that lives inside of them, that can take control, just as we can shift into their forms. Once the two of you learn how to co-exist, you can work together. You can partially shift, or feed off each other for power. Or, like tonight, they can protect you when you can’t protect yourself.”

That doesn’t sound too bad. It’d be sort of reassuring to know I’m not alone. “Like a friend for life.”

“Sort of. As great as it is, they can get annoying too. Their personalities tend to be more primitive and their needs more primal. Sometimes, it’s like all they care about is survival, procreation, and power. They don’t form emotional attachments to others outside of who they choose as a mate, but we, as people can. Sometimes those wires can get crossed and they’ll put your needs before the people you care about.”

The stairs are twisting as we go farther down, like they’re spirally around a column. Just barely, the darkness begins to lift. It’s not enough to see where I’m going, but I can slightly make out Loric’s silhouette.

“Like a protective pet you share a body with, then?” I ask, almost losing my footing as my boot slips off a thinner stair than the others. Loric’s body is unyielding as he pauses to let me get my balance, and the chuckle that leaves his throat seems to echo off the stone walls.

“My beast will hate me for saying it. I’m not sure he’ll take well to being called a pet, but yes. Very similar to that.” There’s an airy tone to his voice and it tugs at the corners of my lips—infectious, in a way.

“Your beast is a he, then?”

As we turn the column, the shape of Loric becomes more defined, but the light isn’t yellow or white. It’s not even amber like fire or torches would cast. It’s a deep, bluish purple.

“Yes.” He stops and turns to face me, and my balance wobbles as my hold on his shirt is taken away.

“And mine?”

I catch his lips pulling into a smirk. “She’s female, but I think you’ll get to know her soon.”

The blood drains from my face. “They can talk?”

“Oh yes. They can talk.” His eyebrows bounce and it’s now I realize the stairs don’t go all the way to the floor. There’s a drop, a couple of feet high. “Usually, you hear them in your head long before they have the ability to take control of your body or you shift, but it doesn’t always work that way.”

Loric leaps, landing gracefully on his feet before he turns to offer a hand. I toe the edge of the last stair, gulping down the knot in my throat. Maybe it’s not as far as it looks... Though Loric’s head doesn’t even reach the stairs. Sitting down on the plank, I scooch to the end.

“I got you, just jump,” he says, hands held up toward me, ready to catch.

Shaking the nerves out of my hands, I push off. My breath becomes trapped in my lungs, my hair flying in tangled chunks, dried with blood, and his hands bite into my hips as he stops my descent, gently putting my feet on the ground.

“See? Easy.” His glowing eyes turn toward me and he winks, right before the light in them fades and they return to their normal silver. Loric seems to shake something free as he looks me over and it makes me wonder.

Are the glowing eyes a sign of being a shifter, of inflated emotions or maybe they help with vision... or are they a sign of who or what is in control?

Loric’s shoulders roll back as he looks around, and for the first time since landing on my feet, I do too.

I have no idea how deep inside the mountain we are, just that flights of stairs separate us from the surface. The walls are raw stone, like the interior of a cave, ancient and by far the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

The ceiling arches high above, adorned with stalactites that hang like icicles and a sea of glowing crystals, painted in

every shade of purple, pink, and blue. Pillars of glass-like stone rise from the ground, towering over us, and the size of the spires of the Solarian castle. They send a kaleidoscope of colors along the rocky walls.

In the center of the cavern, there's a cluster of tables, forming a makeshift gathering place. Their wood is dark and worn, bearing the scars caused by countless meetings and meals. Around the octagonal expanse, wooden doors hang from hinges, driven into the rockface. Each one is unique, some plain, others carved with intricate designs.

The air smells clean and feels crisp as it's pulled into my lungs, cold but not enough that I'll freeze here. Though, I don't think Loric will get his cloak back soon.

"About time. We were about to go back up to check on the two of you," Vik says, her accent is different from the others, but I can't quite place it.

Mira and Vik move with purpose, their steps sure and silent as they close the distance between us. Mira's face is emotionless, unapologetic, but not unkind. She nods at me with a closed lip grin as they near. Next to Vik, they look like polar opposites with her feminine features, pixie-like in a way, similar to her brother's, and her fiery red hair is now wrapped on top of her head like a crown, revealing her slender neck.

"Did you clear the rooms?" Loric asks, taking the keys from Mira. I don't even remember him giving them to her, but I wasn't exactly watching them upstairs.

"No one is down here, but there are clothes in some of the rooms. We might be able to find something more *suitable* for Calamity. Some of it looks like it'll fit her." Vik grins at me, looking me up and down as if she's sizing me. She drops a canvas bag from where it was perched on her shoulder. "I thought you'd like to have your stuff."

Every cell in my body comes alive with a newfound energy as I grab it off the floor and clutch it to my chest. "Thank you."

“Thank *you* for healing me.” She comes up on her tiptoes as rocks closer. “I wouldn’t be doing much of anything right now had you not.”

Healed her? My brows furrow and I glance at Loric.

He seems to pick up on my silent question, choosing to answer for me. “She doesn’t remember.”

Vik’s face falls as she eyes me, then her gaze slowly trickles down before zoning out. “Oh, I see.”

One of the doors creaks open and the man Loric stole a hair tie from, Jesper, steps out of the crevice, a glass jar of something in his large hand. His dark hair is loose now, cascading in a bone-straight veil down to the middle of his shoulder blades. Oblivious to us, he curls a finger inside the jar, scooping out a brown paste before sticking the digit into his mouth and licking it clean.

I’m not sure what that is, but gods I’m hungry. The wine’s effects are long gone and my stomach roils at the idea of food—of anything. Pressing my hand to the flat of my stomach, I try to stave it off.

“Jesper,” Loric says, his voice louder than before as it bounces off the cavern walls.

Jesper jumps like he’s been tapped before hunching and turning wide eyes toward us. Then he straightens and hides the jar behind his back. “Yes?”

“What is that?” Loric up-nods.

“Oh, this.” Releasing a fake chuckle, he brings the jar into view and holds it up. “Chocolate.”

“Is there more?” Mira answers this time, twisting to look behind her.

“A whole store room full, but this one is mine. I’ve called dibs,” Jesper turns on a heel and the knives covering his long legs jostle as he makes his way to the tables.

“Vik, why don’t you take Calamity to get cleaned up. I’ll try and figure out something for food. I can hear her stomach from here.”

“You don’t gotta tell me twice. A bath sounds amazing right now.” Vik saunters a step toward me. “You packed some things, right, or do we need to find you something to sleep in? Or are you like Jesper and prefer to sleep naked?”

“Um, no thank you. I have things, assuming Loric didn’t ditch any of the stuff I brought.” I pin him with a glare, remembering how he went through my belongings before I woke up in the forest.

“She has what she needs.” He rolls his eyes, moving around Mira and Vik to head toward the storage room.

He better have a beast in there. I swear it’s like conversing with two totally different people.

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CHAPTER 12

Calamity

Vik's warm smile is a welcomed comfort as she leads me toward one of the heavy doors. Inside is a smaller cave lit by the same purple crystals, peeking from the jagged rocky walls as they cast an ethereal glow over the space.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Vik asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod incapable of forming words. I'm too transfixed to do so.

Steam rises from a natural spring in the center, the swirling water no deeper than my waist. The soothing trickle of water down the walls eases my frayed nerves. Everything about this place feels peaceful, even the way the gentle current swirls and drains through a small puncture in the spring floor.

As we both undress, I can't help but feel exposed. My past life in the dungeon was confining, yes, but it had also been protective in its own twisted way. Here, everything feels *uncertain* like the ground could open up and swallow me whole in a blink of an eye.

Her violet eyes watch me in my peripheral, but they're not unsettling. More curious than anything. "You must have so many questions. I can't imagine what it's like, growing up

locked away your whole life. Everything here must feel so new.”

New doesn't even begin to describe it. I feel like I've stepped foot into an entirely different realm, one I know nothing about even though I've spent years studying it, being taught by Asmo and Meg, warned of the dangers. Everything is unreal, but I won't tell her that, she doesn't need to know just how lost I am. No one does.

“Until today, I had no idea I was...like you.” The words still feel strange on my tongue. “It's a lot to take in.”

“I can only imagine.” Vik begins undoing the laces of her leather vest. “Just so you know, you're welcome to come to me if you have questions. I'll answer them the best I can. Us she-beasts have to stick together. We're a dying breed.” She pauses, blinking. “Though, it's possible you're not quite *exactly* like the rest of us. There's lots of different shifter breeds with the same characteristics when they're half-shifted. Wolves are pretty common around the king.”

My brows knit together as I work at my dress, removing layer after layer. *A wolf? I doubt it.* Gael... He was a hellhound, which is similar. His eyes never glowed, and he had tendencies that made his species pretty obvious.

I can't say I've ever had the urge to howl at the moons.

Vik hesitates, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. “Forget I said anything. Loric would have my head if I revealed too much.”

I wonder why... What is so striking about what they are that it has to stay this hidden secret? Pushing the thought away, we slip into the spring. The warmth seeps into my muscles, easing the tension I hadn't even realized was there. And for a moment, I allow myself to forget the danger lurking just outside these walls and simply enjoy the comforting embrace of the water.

I'm not sure how long we soak, eyes closed and letting the water rinse away the evidence of our day, but I sit up when Vik nudges me, a cloth in her hand. Taking it, I begin

scrubbing the blood and grime from my skin and rinsing it the best I can from my dark hair.

It's not until we're finished that she speaks again.

"So," Vik says, a teasing lilt to her tone as she waggles her eyebrows suggestively. "Loric, hmm?"

Heat floods my cheeks. I stare at her, blinking. "What?"

She laughs, the sound light and bubbly. "Don't play coy. While your beast had control earlier, she practically proposed to him."

"No." I shake my head, mortified. "You're kidding. *Please* tell me you're joking."

"I wish I was." Vik's eyes glimmer with mirth. "But Loric's not a bad choice for a mate. He may be brooding and grumpy, but he's strong. He'd protect you." She weighs her head side to side. "And, based on the things I've heard or laid witness to over the years, I can confirm he's good at *tending* to female *needs*, if you get what I mean."

"Did you two...?" I trail off, sensing a hint of nostalgia in her tone. A strange ache twists in my chest at the thought. I shake my head again, chasing the feeling away.

Vik smiles warmly. "No, I don't swing that way. I have a mate back in the Luminaries. Her name is Ellie, and she's a mage." A soft light flares in Vik's eyes, like the thought of Ellie breathes life into her. I've only seen a look like that a handful of times. *Love*.

Then she adds, "Loric is unmated and as far as I know there's no one he's interested in, so go for it if you are. He might be a hardass, but he'll cave. I've seen the way he looks at you and I'm pretty sure it's why we're escorting you to the outer realm. It wasn't supposed to be that way."

"So he's mentioned," I mutter, flexing my brow as the memory of Loric admitting they planned to tell Asmo to shove it resurfaces. "I'm not looking for a mate. I'm not looking for *anything* at the moment."

“Not yet.” Vik’s eyes are all knowing as she smirks my way. “If what you’re saying is true about discovering your beast-side today, then you’re about to step into a whole new world, baby girl. Your first heat is right around the corner and when it hits, you’ll be glad to have options like Loric around. Maybe even Jesper.”

My brows knit together again. “What’s a heat?” I’ve heard of mating before, but not that term.

Vik blinks at me before chuckling to herself. “You really don’t know anything about being a shifter, do you?” She shakes her head, eyes gleaming, but there’s a shred of sympathy in them. “A heat is for shifter females. It’s a time when our hormones surge and our pheromones go into overdrive to attract a potential mate, and if we don’t get marked or claim someone, it can make the males around you go into a frenzy. They’ll be humping anything with friction.” She shivers as if to dislodge a flashback. “I once saw Jesper grind up on a rock during one of mine. It’s a mental image I wish I could erase. I asked Loric to pluck it from my head, but he refused, so I’m stuck with that memory for the rest of my life. “

“Lovely,” I mutter. *Just what I need. Something else to worry about.*

“They’re not so bad.” Vik’s eyes glaze for a moment. “The sex during a heat is *wild*. Primal. And mating with another shifter, feeling their bite as they claim you...” Her lips curve in bliss. “There’s nothing quite like it.”

I try to ignore the flutter in my belly at the thought and frown at her. “But you said you have a mate as a mate. She’s able to mark you or sustain yours? It doesn’t hurt her?”

“I do.” Vik nods, gaze clearing. “Ellie is my heart and soul, but she’s not a shifter. She can’t mark or be marked, so we’re only mates by title. My beast won’t accept her as such. So during my heats, Faelor joins, to ease the ache. He marks me to stave off my heats for a time, but I won’t mark him back. It wouldn’t be fair since our mate bond would become

permanent, and he deserves someone who loves him. Until he finds someone, though... Ellie doesn't mind."

My nose wrinkles. I can't imagine being bitten in that way. From my understanding, a mate bite breaks the skin, like it draws blood. I can't imagine it feeling good, like she's suggesting. The only thing I can think about is the pain that would come with it. The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Hey, don't judge." Vik's tone hardens.

"I didn't mean to." I lift my hands in surrender, uneasy with the sudden tension. "I just don't think the biting thing is for me."

"You say that now." Vik relaxes, giving me a knowing look. "But when you have your first heat, when your beast is wild for a mate, you may see things differently. Or maybe I'm wrong. Who knows?" She shrugs.

A blush settles over my skin at the implication. I duck my head, focusing on scrubbing the blood off my arms. I can see straight down the bottom of the spring, but it's only a few feet deep. It's the reflection that ripples over the glassy surface that surprises me the most.

Mine. My image, staring back at me, multicolored in purples and blues, thanks to the crystals lighting the cave. My reflection frowns as I take in the dark hair that clings to my head, soaked through from the water, the dark circles that hang beneath my golden eyes.

There was only one thing I asked for that Asmo refused to bring me while I was in the dungeon. He'd always make excuses, claiming the witch glass they're made out of could break and the shards were too dangerous. Yet, there were plenty of other things in my cell that I felt were more so, like the small dagger he let me keep under my pillow, just in case.

If I'd wanted to hurt myself, there were other ways and more plausible options than the witch glass of mirrors. Still, I've never pushed the issue. I let it go, choosing to just be grateful that he brought me anything. He didn't have to.

Stirring my finger in the water, I watch my image blur and refocus. My face has changed so much since the last time I saw it. Granted, every look I had was rare, and mostly only came when the ocean level around the castle would rise enough for the salty spray to mist through the barred windows. Sometimes it was enough for it to gather into a puddle in the middle of the room. It's been years since that happened. That last glance I had is seared into my mind. I've drawn it from memory countless times, each version changing slightly as the memory weakened.

Vik is silent. I can feel her eyes on me, studying me with more curiosity than anything. My fingers hover above the water, trying not to disturb it as I trace golden irises. They're the only thing about me that's the same as I remember, but there's a worldliness in them now, a depth that was absent before.

Then they glow.

I suck in a breath, jerking slightly. My heart lurches in my chest, ricocheting off ribs, and as much as I want to convince myself that I imagined it, a piece of me knows I didn't. Waiting for the water to still once more, I look again. The gold rings still shine, reflecting off the water's surface and blending with the sea of blues and purples of the crystals.

My cheeks are more hollow, slender than I remember. My nose is petite, and slightly turned-up. Dark eyebrows arch gently around feminine eyes, framing my heart shaped face. I commit it to memory, this older version of myself, no longer a teenager—a woman—and the corners of my full lips pull into a smirk before returning to their natural state.

“I can promise that having a beast isn't going to change anything physically about your appearance.” Vik tilts her head in my peripheral. “Well, except when you shift. You'll obviously change then, but your face, your body, all of it goes back when you regain control. Your hair did too. It was white when your beast was in control earlier, but it's back to being black now. That's proof.” Vik slides closer, disturbing the water a moment. Her hand settles gently on my shoulder, supportively, like we've been friends for centuries instead of

just meeting each other days ago. “It’s going to be alright. You’re not alone in this, even if it feels like it.”

“Thanks...” I swallow hard, tracing every line of my face with my eyes as if it’ll help me remember. Who knows when I’ll get to see it again. “It’s not so much me worrying about that, as much as it’s fascination. I look so different now. It’s been years since I’ve seen my face,” I murmur, my voice a soft echo against the cave walls.

“What? How could that be? If I had a face like yours, I’d be looking at it all the time. Hell, I’d own it and be a force to be reckoned with.” She runs a gentle finger over my cheek, then rests her head on my shoulder, staring back at me through the reflection.

She’s gorgeous with her bright red hair, braided down either side of her head, the smattering of freckles on her cheeks and striking violet eyes. Vik doesn’t need my face. She’s just saying that to make me feel better, but it warms my heart nonetheless.

“I lived in a dungeon, remember?”

Her face falls, a sort of understanding washing over it as she sits up. “I see... It’s easier to forget about that than I thought it would be. Maybe that’s because you don’t act as timid as I’d expect someone who grew up hidden away from the world to be.”

“I think I can thank Asmo and...” Meg’s face comes into my mind and I could swear my reflection warps into her. “The other woman, the other prisoner, who raised me. They taught me a lot about the outside world, hoping one day all three of us could escape into it. Be a family.”

Vik presses her lips together, her shoulder’s slumping as she brushes my hair behind my ear. “You miss him.”

“I miss them both.” The bright glow of my eyes goes out and for some reason, I feel emptier, like a magical force that had wrapped around me, keeping me safe, offering support, vanished along with it.

“I can’t change your position or what’s happening to you, but for what it’s worth, you’re holding it together a hell of a lot better than any of us would in your situation.” The woman offers a small, empathetic smile. “Asmo and your other friend might not be able to go with you, but they’ll always be with you. You’ll see them in everything you do, every fact you know when things they taught you come to mind. All of us have lost people, our families, and it gets easier the more we rely on each other as one.”

Except I’m not one of them... I might not even be the same species of shifter. I’m a job, but maybe, once we get where we’re going, her comment will stand. I’ll find a new family—a chosen family of friends. At least I can hope so. The idea makes me feel a little less alone.

Desperate for a change of subject, I lift my head, resigning to tear my eyes away from my reflection and keep them away for good. All it does is bring about memories that for the moment, I need to forget. The only problem is, I have no idea what to talk about, and something tells me if I stay silent, Vik will feel the need to reassure me more.

As much as the topic of *heats* and *mates* makes me queasy, it’s something I’ll need to know. So, I grit my teeth and open the conversation again. “You mentioned trying to stave your... *heats* off. How often do they happen?”

Vik shrugs, pushing back her wet hair. “Depends. For most, every few months. Some go into heat more frequently, some less. And of course, there are ways to delay it, through herbs or sex...other means.” A sly smile plays on her lips.

Vik must notice my unease as I cringe at the idea of sleeping with someone out of a *need* instead of a *want*. She places a hand on my arm, expression softening. “Don’t worry, when and if the time comes, Loric will be there to help you through it.” She winks, grinning wide.

Whether her comment was meant to lighten the mood or not, I’m not sure. I know she’s messing with me, but it doesn’t help the nerves settling into my bones. What if we don’t make it to wherever we’re going in the outer realm before I have a

heat? Even if we do, I might not have time to find someone... And she made it seem like ignoring these primal urges to mate could drive everyone around me into madness.

I swallow hard. "Yeah... We'll see about that."

Vik slips under the water, rinsing the last of the grime and blood from her pale skin and fiery hair. I follow her lead, sinking beneath the steaming surface. In the dark warmth, I can almost imagine things are simple again. That I'm an ordinary woman, enjoying an ordinary bath in the dungeon. That I didn't uproot my life by trying to kill my father or make the person who loved me most forget me in order to keep me safe. That silver eyes don't excite me in a way I can't explain...

That all of it can disappear.

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CHAPTER 13

Calamity

With my bloody clothes now scrubbed and rinsed—well, the best I can in these conditions—I spread them out along the drying bar, drilled into the stone wall. The air, heavy with steam from the hot spring, makes me doubt how much they’ll dry in here, but it’ll have to do.

Beside me, Vik’s movements are brisk as she shoves a shirt over her head. Unlike my nightgown, which I’m beginning to regret, she’s chosen to get fully dressed. She rolls up the long-sleeves of the midnight-colored linen, and leaves the leather straps weaving through the V-neck collar untied.

There’s no way that shirt is hers. She’s either scavenged it from the rooms down here or it belongs to one of the men. It’s easily three sizes too big, the fabric draping over her thin frame, the frayed hem resting against leather riding pants. They hug her thighs and hips like a second skin. I’m not sure how she moves in them.

A dagger is strapped to her side, as if she needs to be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. It’s a stark contrast to my linen gown that suddenly feels too vulnerable...too exposed.

I’ve never been one for modesty, nor am I ashamed of my appearance. Growing up under constant scrutiny, with zero privacy forced me not to be. It made me comfortable in my

own skin, but seeing her ready to walk out the door and journey into the forest, has me wondering if I'm as underdressed as I feel.

Vik fluffs her hair and stands up straight. She's tall enough to rest her chin atop my head with ease. In fact, all of them seem to be taller than average, or perhaps I'm the opposite, and it's taken me twenty-five years of my life to discover I'm short.

"Alright, let's get you to a room, yeah? You must be exhausted," Vik says, opening the door. I smooth my hands over my nightgown. It falls just above my knees, and the thin straps threaten to slip off my shoulders. Bare feet padding against the cool stone floor, I approach the doorway, my boots and canvas sack in hand. I don't get a chance to double check that I have everything before Vik loops her arm through mine and tugs me into the chilled air.

It's like hitting a wall. I suck in a breath as my stomach collapses in on itself and the cold wraps around me. Goosebumps spring up as a shiver rakes through my body. Shoving down the urge to go back into the room with the hot spring, where the air was warm and inviting, I force my feet to move, fearing they'll freeze in place if I don't.

It's as if the air has grown colder since we left the others. Perhaps it has, with the hell flame gone. I've never been outside during the yearly blackout and the dungeons are heated by fire. Who knows how cold it truly gets, or how fast the icy chill descends upon the realm.

Vik lets the door slam and the noise cracks like thunder across the vast room, drawing the other's attention. Loric, Mira, Jesper, and Brenn are gathered around one of the tables, playing cards in hand and their faces illuminated by the flickering light of nearby torches.

There's no sign of Faelor, though I'd been under the impression that both he and Brenn were meant to stay with the horses overnight. Something must have changed, but I can't say it didn't give me peace of mind, knowing Brenn wouldn't be down here. Now that he is, I doubt I'll get a lick of sleep.

Even if his sister is one of the kindest people I've ever talked to, he still pushed me in front of that cat. Him wanting me dead isn't going to change in mere hours.

Every gaze in the cavern slides toward us. There's a hunger to their eyes, a curiosity that both piques my own and sends a wave of unease swirling through my gut at the same time. Even Brenn isn't immune, his gaze lingering on us until Mira slaps his arm with her injured hand. He nearly chokes on his drink, his cheeks bulging, as if the very act of swallowing is a challenge. The others don't pay her any mind, unabashedly following us with their eyes as Vik leads me towards what will be my sleeping quarters for the night.

"Did we walk in on something?" I'm incapable of tearing my eyes away from them—from him. Though Loric's face is devoid of expression, there's something in those silver eyes... something indefinable, palpable, as if his stare is tracing the contours of my body with ghostly fingertips. The air seemingly crackles with a static charge and his eyes begin to glow with an intensity that sends my heart into a wild cadence.

We approach a wooden door as Vik casts a glance over her shoulder. "Ah, that. It would seem like your beast started something that his beast intends to finish."

The door hinges protest with a high-pitched squeal, and I reluctantly tear my gaze away, following Vik into the small bedroom. "What does that mean? Started what?" Panic whittles its way into my bones as I cross my arms, running my hands over them in an effort to keep warm.

Vik pops her lips, clearing her throat as if to buy her time to form the words she's looking for. "She tried to court him, it's what shifters do when they wish to mate with someone."

"Like sex?" My eyebrows arch. I didn't even know this other side of me existed, yet she's already trying to screw people? What is happening?

"No... Yes..." Vik weighs her head side to side. "Sort of. Mating someone is like claiming them, like marriage in non-

shifter societies, but once the bond has been formed between two consenting parties, it's nearly impossible to break.”

“Loric’s beast wants to marry me?” My gaze drifts to the floor, lacking the energy to keep my head up. There’s too much to process. Too much to wrap my head around. “That’s what you meant when you said my beast proposed.”

Vik nods, evident in the way her shadow wavers slightly in the dim light. “You know he’d never force you, right?”

I’m not sure what to think, except there are things that I’m quickly learning are out of my control and it’s terrifying. “Yeah.”

There’s a long pause that passes between us as Vik reads something on the desk, her lips curling up at the corners. She taps a long finger on top of a jar, much like the one Jesper had earlier, before turning back to me. “It looks like Loric’s gotten you something to eat, so I’ll leave you to it. If you need anything, just let either me, Loric, or Mira know. We’ll make sure you’re taken care of. For now, you should get some rest.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, letting her pass by me and out the door.

“Don’t mention it.” Slowly she pulls the door shut behind her and I lurch for the handle, keeping it from closing entirely.

“Sorry,” I say through the crack, quickly shoving one of my boots between the door and the frame. “I have a thing about doors. I’d prefer it to stay open if I’m to be in here alone.”

Vik eyes me, but doesn’t pry, just gives me a slight nod and heads across the cavern to join the others. That could’ve gone better... I kick myself for making it awkward. She was so nice to me, and now she likely thinks I’m childish for my irrational fear of being locked in somewhere. I can only hope that she’ll connect the dots and understand.

I turn in a tight circle, taking in the place I’ll call home for a few nights. It’s small, yet functional. Maybe half the size of my cell, and just large enough for there to be a walkway around the sides of the bed that could easily fit two people. On top of it is a quilt that seems to be the only splash of color

amongst the tan woods and grays. A small table is nestled next to one side of the headboard, holding a lantern with a mage light burning within it, emitting an amber glow around the room. Another is mounted on the wall, but both are fueled by magic, a flame that'll never go out. There are no pictures, no trinkets decorate the space, just smooth surfaces and the promise of privacy.

Then I see it. Vik's blade. She left it. I never saw her pull it from the sheath, but I know for a fact it was on her hip when we got here. Did she think I'll need it? Was she worried her brother would try something again?

Next to it is the jar, along with a note. I discard my canvas bag onto the bed, crossing the room.

Eat please. And when you're done, look in the drawer.

You don't have to tell me twice.

My stomach rumbles at the thought. I rush for the jar, quickly fumbling the cap off and dipping my fingers into the whipped contents. The only thing I've had to eat in the last few days are the berries Loric shared. Sinking a chocolate-covered finger between my lips, my head falls back on an audible moan.

Oh. My. Gods.

It's rich, bitter yet sweet. The flavor explodes on my tongue and it's so familiar, even though I've only tasted chocolate a handful of times over the years. It's distinct, nostalgic, bringing back memories of Asmo and Meg and the way they watched my face as I tried it for the first time.

I can't help but smile, tears blurring my vision as I remember that day. Shaking my head, I quickly wipe the tear away as it rolls down my cheek, then tug the drawer of the end table open, the anticipation of what's inside pricking like magic in my fingertips.

A leather-bound journal rests on top of a slender wooden box. Grabbing them, I flip through the pages. Besides the first page, it's blank. A clean slate, full of possibilities. Turning back to the beginning, I run my fingers over the torn edges

there, as if some have been removed. But it's the message inside that has heat flooding to my cheeks, and my lips pulling into a grin, tight enough to make my face muscles ache.

To pass the time. -Loric.

Closing it, I notice an engraving in the right bottom corner, L.E. His initials maybe? It could be the craftsman too. Placing it on the bed, I pop the latch on the box and lift the lid. Inside is a neat row of charcoals, barely used by the looks of it.

How did he get these? When did he get these?

I knew Loric had gone through my things the first night, before I'd woken up from my forced nap. However, I didn't think he looked close enough to realize I only had a couple pages left in my sketchbook and that the charcoals I brought were so small I could barely hold them between my fingers. And the last thing I would've expected him to do is think of me if he came across more.

But he did, and I don't know how to handle or respond to that besides to be happy.

Eating another scoop of chocolate, I take a seat, resting my back against the headboard and kicking my feet up on the mattress.

"Don't get excited, we're nowhere close to being safe yet."

My spine goes pin-straight, the air trapped in my lungs. The words echo in my mind. It's as if someone's spoken straight to me, having stolen my voice. The thoughts are not my own, but rather her's... my beast's.

"It's you..." I say out loud, unsure if I can speak to her in my head or not. Though, I haven't seen the others talking to their other halves out loud, so there must be a way to do so.

"Yes. It's nice to meet you Jekyll. I'm Hyde."

I can't help but smile at that. It's a story, a fable from one of the books Asmo procured from the human realm. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A man with two consciousnesses in one body. One was good-kind. The other was a monster.

“Are you evil, too?” The smile tugs wider, and as much as I want to be terrified, the fact she knew about that story means she’s been present my whole life.

Asmo used to read it to me, claiming it signified that everyone has two sides of the same coin, good and evil inside them. It’s what we choose to do, the actions we take, that determine which side we’re on. He used to jokingly call me Jekyll, believing that I was what ensured his coin stayed right side up. I wonder if that is still the case with his memories of me gone.

“Evil is a strong word. Protective is better.”

“Of me?” I crinkle my brow.

“Yes, you. We share a butt. If your butt gets kicked, mine does too.”

Scooping another chunk of the whipped chocolate into my mouth, I ponder where to start. There’s so many questions, so much that I want to know.

“What do I call you?” I ask aloud, still unsure if it’s possible to speak to her in my head. It would have to be—somehow. I haven’t seen the others talk to the air.

“Whatever you want. Introductions aren’t important right now. What is, is keeping our head firmly planted on our shoulders and not rolling next to a guillotine.”

Cringing, I try to wipe the mental image from my mind. “Hyde it is.”

A warm sensation fills me, as if she’s laughed or smiled at the notion. Though, it could be the chocolate. The sugar is starting to take hold.

“You need to court one of them. Accept a mate mark, or give one if you feel bitey. I don’t care. There’s something off with this. I can feel it in my gut. There was no reason for the sheep to push you, to try and kill us, but he did. Not everyone in Loric’s group is on board with escorting us.”

I bounce a brow, scooping another bite. “Yeah, I got the same feeling.”

“Duh, we have the same stomach.”

Rolling my eyes, I lean back, resting my head against the wooden bed frame. “But Vik was so kind and Loric tried to assure me. It felt genuine. I thought it might just be me reading into things that aren’t there. Still, I doubt courting someone will help. What would that do besides hitch myself to one of them forever?”

“It gives us their protection. It’s an unspoken death wish to harm someone’s mate, fully bonded, courting or otherwise. It doesn’t matter what stage it’s in, and until you both have been marked, nothing is permanent and everything can be broken. For now, just starting the process will work. We need their help to get out of Solaria, but we don’t know what they have planned for us after that. Having the mark will guarantee that we can’t be harmed—at least, until it fades.”

“I don’t know much about the mating process, but I know enough to say it’s not that black and white. Once the claim has been made, a magical pull settles in and tries to close the deal. Gael told me about it—us about it. He said it was hard to deny. What if we start this courtship and can’t stop it? Not that I’d even know how to begin it, or convince someone to do it with us.”

Reaching for the letter Loric left on the end table, I trace his writing with my finger. Maybe I wouldn’t have to... My beast has already made her interest known, and I can’t shake the way Loric looked at me... Maybe he’s interested. Maybe it’s as simple as popping the question.

“Oh, he’s interested. He’s just being stubborn.”

“So, you can hear my thoughts? I don’t need to talk to you outloud?”

“Yes, when you allow it. Most of the time, I’m shoved into the darkest corner of your mind. I can’t hear shit there.”

“Sorry.” I’m not sure why I’m apologizing for something I’m not consciously doing, but it seems right.

“It doesn’t have to be Loric. The other two men are unmated.”

“I’ve barely said two words to them. I wouldn’t consider the time I’ve had with Loric to be ‘bonding,’ but it’s more than I have with Jesper or Faelor.”

“It doesn’t matter who you choose. Just pick one that’s willing. We’d get all of their protection, not just who you sink your teeth into. Until you do so, we’re not safe.”

I ponder her words, feeling the weight of reality settling upon my shoulders. She’s right... I’ve felt like there’s something missing since Asmo left me with them. If courting one of them will ensure no harm comes our way, it can’t hurt. Then, if it turns out that Loric truly is doing this out of the kindness of his heart, at least I played it safe. I’d rather undergo some temporary bond than end up in chains in another crooked man’s dungeon.

Who knows what someone would want to do to the king’s daughter, but I doubt it would be anything good.

“Alright,” I say quietly before I lose the courage. “We’ll try.”

“Good,” my beast replies. *“Now get some rest. You look like shit. You can’t flirt in these conditions.”*

I jerk as if her words have struck me. “You don’t even know what I look like. I barely know what I look like.”

“I saw you in the pool, now sleep.”

Screwing the cap back on the jar, I set it on the nightstand and crawl beneath the covers. Laying my head on a pillow, I stare into the empty room. So much has changed in such a short period of time. I’m starting to think I’m numb to it all. I pull the blanket closer, tucking it beneath my chin. *Who do I choose? How do I choose?* I’m not even sure any of them would want me.

“Well, considering you’re clutching that note to your chest like it’s your last piece of bread, I’d say you have your choice.”

My breath hitches as my eyes slide down to the piece of paper curled in my hand along with the bunched fabric of the quilt. Shit. I quickly toss it off the side of the bed, but it’s

useless to try and claim plausible deniability. No matter how fast I am, we share a body. She's going to know. She already did. It doesn't stop me from doing it anyway out of instinct.

The paper floats in a back and forth motion to the floor.

"Saw that."

Locking my jaw, I attempt to snuggle back into bed and get comfortable. "You know, I liked it better when you were silent."

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CHAPTER 14

Leric

Time seems to have stilled as I sit, my gaze fixed on the cards in my hands, yet my mind elsewhere. I'm not sure how long I've been staring at my cards. The intricate patterns of numbers and symbols blur before my eyes, their meaning lost to me. If someone were to snatch the cards from my grasp and challenge me to recall two, I'd be at a loss.

Since Vik and Calamity entered the cavern, having left the spring and entered the room she'll stay in for the night, my attention has been irrevocably drawn to that door, to the space she now occupies. To distract myself, I trace the outline of the card at the top of my hand. It's a red queen, depicted with two heads. One, humanoid, regal and crowned with jewels, and on the flipside, a dragon, dark as night with gold-tipped scales. Golden eyes.

The Flame Keeper, Queen of Dragons.

May she rest in peace. If it weren't for her, for her sacrifice, Jesper and I would still be in that dungeon. Hell, we might've still been there when Calamity was born. Suffering... being poked and prodded. *Skinned.*

If it weren't for the dragon queen surrendering herself, we might still be whittling away at the dead with our fingers,

picking their bones clean, so the king could hoist their skeletons up and attach them to his demented bridge.

He crafted it himself, bending bone into railings, twisting them with his druidic magic into long, slender columns. It connects the small, rocky island his castle has been built upon to the mainland. A warning to everyone who sees it, daring them to cross him, threatening to wipe their species from this realm like he did the dragons if they do.

His entire castle is a shrine to his obsession. It's not just the bridge he crafted from the dragons, but his spires. The walls are infused with bone dust, every shingle on the spire's roofs crafted from scales. Since dragons are immune to most magics, it made his castle impervious to magical attacks from the outside.

I set the cards down, clenching my jaw as memories I'd give anything to take away resurface. The sound of bone grinding into powder. How he forced dragons to shift, so he could strip the scales from their bodies. The way the dungeons smelled for days, even though they'd returned to their humanoid forms while they healed. The most haunting of them all was the last time my twin sister looked at me, her eyes glossy, her lips trembling as she whispered her goodbye. The king didn't give her a chance to finish before he killed her in front of me, all to manipulate Asmodeus.

I was supposed to be next, but the bastard caved, and in that same instant, my sister's sacrifice became meaningless.

All it took was for the king to take one step in my direction, my sister's lifeless body on the dungeon floor, and the man gave in to his grandfather's demands. Asmodeus agreed to serve the king and wear one of his enchanted gauntlets, the ones that give the king complete and utter control, the same ones his kingdom broke into civil war over, the ones those in the outer realm rebelled against, all under one condition.

The king had to spare me. Somehow, that made it all worse. Losing my sister was enough, knowing her death was for nothing was devastating, but it didn't come close to sitting in that dungeon for years, watching everyone around me die,

being tortured while I sat in solitude untouched. Unharmred, from that point on. A part of me wonders if it's why Asmodeus chose to become the dungeon master, to ensure the king held up his end of the deal, not that he could do anything about it if he didn't.

I loved Asmodeus like a brother, having found him a blink away from death in the enchanted forest. I healed him, taught him how to survive in this world, to live. We became family. Even if it wasn't through blood or marriage, it was by choice, much like how Jesper, Faelor, Mira, and the others are to me now.

His parents shoved him into this realm as punishment for not knowing how to control his power, for killing people he loved with it when it became unruly. My sister and I taught him what his parents couldn't, all so he could go through life without fear of hurting someone he loved ever again.

Yet he did it anyway, to the both of us in six simple words. *I'll do it..just spare him.*

I don't owe Asmodeus anything. I never claimed he owed me a life debt after I brought him back from the reaper's clutches, clawed and mangled by the creatures in that dark, enchanted forest. It took us hours to stitch him back together, to make him look somewhat humanoid again. More than that, it took days of combining our magic to cauterize and heal his wounded flesh, to save him despite the fact he's supposed to be immortal and heal on his own. On that side of the river, there are creatures not even immortals can escape from. He just so happened to meet one.

He should've let me die that day, shown me mercy, yet he made me suffer instead. Then has the gall to demand I owe him a favor, after stealing away my sister's noble death, after everything... claiming he'll get me out of that dungeon, telling me to just hold on a little longer. It took the queen, the dragon queen, coming to Solaria, handing herself over to the mad tyrant ruling this realm in exchange for the shifter prisoners to be released. Only then did I make it out, and Asmodeus wouldn't even look at me as I crossed that bridge, walking

past him toward freedom, with a lifetime of nightmares to remember our time by.

Yet, he had the know-how to help Calamity escape, entrusting me with her. He knew, regardless of what happened in that dungeon, that I wouldn't let someone endure what I had. Not for his sake, but for my sister's memory... fucking bastard.

Now, I'm sitting around a table, playing cards. Here, but not really. Eyes open, but not seeing what's right in front of me... fighting myself, my inner beast, to desperately keep my gaze off that fucking door.

She's a Midicious, I remind myself, scrubbing a hand over my face. *She's off-limits*.

Even if she understands what it's like to sit in that dungeon while everyone you know and love disappears, even if I can relate to what she's endured, to empathize with it enough to do as Asmodeus has asked and get her out of Solaria, it doesn't make it any easier to swallow the knowledge of who she is. But I will, because it's what my sister, Elaria, would do. It'll be the only good thing that's ever come out of us saving Asmodeus in that woods that day. All the good memories we had together have been tainted by what happened in the dungeon, but saving this girl... Asmodeus would've never brought her to me if my sister were still here, had he not bargained for my life. Helping Calamity will make Elaria's death worth something—at least in her eyes.

I hadn't answered his summons with the intention of saving her, but the moment I saw her golden eyes, it was like a sign from the queen. A chance to right the wrong. I couldn't shake it.

My beast, however, sees things differently. He's not affected by such endearments as sibling love or what it means to give Elaria an honorable death. His wants and needs are more primitive—survival and strength and power... And more recently, mating and procreation, ensuring our bloodline continues.

She's a Midicious. Saving her serves a purpose. Anything more than that is like spitting on Elaria's grave. I'm certain that her soul would haunt me for getting involved with the king's daughter—no matter what my beast wants—and I wouldn't blame her for it.

"Just go in there for fate's sake. We're withering away here," my other half pleads. He's starting to sound desperate and it's not a good look for him.

He's been a grumpy asshole since I instructed Vik to take Calamity into the spring instead of accompanying her myself. It was for her own good. He's been pushing the boundaries today and I'm not sure how much longer I can keep him at bay. Eventually, he's going to gain control... full control. Who knows what he'll do.

"No." I speak the word aloud this time, even though it's the same word I've been repeating in my head for the last fifteen minutes. Maybe hearing it outside our headspace will make him understand.

"You know what, don't cry to me when you finally decide to use that thing between your legs again and you cum dust."

A growl rattles deep in my throat, a warning to cut the shit. My patience is thinning.

Jesper's lips instantly tug into a smirk so wide, his dimples show. "Is he being broody?"

"Something like that." I pick a card up off the deck, checking my hand before discarding.

"We're going to die alone—" My dragon starts, and I can feel the heat building in my middle, his fury. Before long, there will be smoke rolling out of my nose.

"No. The answer will always be no, so stop fucking asking."

"Ooooo, I knew it." Jesper peers at his hand then the deck before placing down a card and nudging Mira who's starting to fall asleep at the table.

"Not you, too." I groan, dragging my hand down my face.

His grin manages to get even wider. “After Asmodeus left and you snapped at Faelor for wanting to tie up Calamity, I had a hunch. You’ve practically tucked the pretty girl under your wing. Then you let her wear your cloak, and I knew you had it bad.”

“I don’t have it bad. *He does*. And it’s not what you think. The girl was shivering hard enough to give herself brain damage. You saw what she was wearing. She might as well have been in rags.” I grit, feeling the door I’ve locked my other half behind in my head budge an inch.

Mira rubs her eyes, looking between Jesper and I. Even though her lips are pressed into a fine line, it does little to hide the amusement on her face. “How long has it been since he’s been interested in someone? A decade, at least.”

“Longer,” I say on an exhale. “And it’s not mutual. We’ve never once been on the same page about someone, ever.”

“And what exactly do you want, Loric? At some point, you two will have to compromise. No one is perfect, and when mating takes four minds in two bodies, it’s even more complicated.” Brenn stares at Mira as she speaks, and it makes me wonder what they compromised on.

“My beast wants someone to protect, that’s timid and sweet. I prefer my women to stand on their own two feet, that speak their mind and challenge me. The only thing we can agree on is wanting a family one day and there aren’t many shifters that are compatible with our kind. So sure, I could be like Vik and choose a non-shifter mate, someone in the middle of our wants, but look at what she deals with. She’s also not an alpha. It’s different for me. My needs are more cumbersome than going into heat once every few months.”

“You can say that again,” Jesper says, looking over the cards on the table. “I like to think of myself as having three personalities, two in my head and one downstairs, and none of us are on the same page. If it makes you feel any better, Calamity’s creature seems to hold her own, and as for her human side, I’m desperately waiting for the moment when she tells you to go suck a dick.”

Mira rolls her eyes, brushing off his oversharing. “My money is on it being the exploding kitties that did it for him. It was pretty impressive. My beast stirred for a moment, but as for yours, it’ll pass. He’ll find someone else to yearn for once she’s out of sight and out of mind.”

Jesper’s head falls back as his laughter echoes through the cavern, drowning out the crackling of the large fire pit we’ve ignited in the center of the room. “Good luck with that. With her beast onboard, you’ll be lucky to make it to the outer realm without one of you being marked and then it’s just downhill from there. It takes fucking balls of steel to resist the urges after that—so I’ve been told.” Jesper winks at Mira, referring to the way she let Brenn mark her when he got hurt.

They didn’t have feelings for one another before then, but they were friends and he was dying. It allowed him to draw on her power for strength, but it didn’t take long for the mark to settle in. Soon after, they were inseparable—still are—and madly in love, even if they’re polar opposites and grind each other’s nerves for fun.

“Laugh it up. You just fucking wait,” Brenn says, but there’s not a shred of humor to his voice.

“What could I possibly have to worry about? I’m not the one who agreed to be her knight in shining armor.” Jesper waggles his eyebrows at me and the notion makes my stomach churn.

This wasn’t what I intended... I know that I went against the plan, that I changed my mind at the last second without consulting anyone about it, but it was easy to talk about possibilities when there wasn’t a face involved. The moment I laid eyes on Calamity, she wasn’t just some hypothetical princess or a bargaining chip. She was a person, with bright golden eyes, despite looking like she’d been through hell. How could I put her through more? But I didn’t intend to be her knight in shining whatever, and I certainly didn’t intend for my beast to want her like this.

I glance at Jesper. “I wish you could just zap the bastard into submission, lock him away for a bit.” After taking my turn, I

sit back in my seat, letting my cards rest on the table. It isn't until I smell the burnt ozone that I look up, finding Jesper wiggling his fingers. Small streaks of purple-hued lightning move between them in jagged lines.

“Well, come here, big boy. Let Daddy try.”

Mira snorts, knocking Jesper's elbow off the table. His hand slams against the wood with a thunk, singeing the grain. “No one is calling you daddy. You're not daddy material.”

Jesper gasps, holding a hand over his head like he's been run-through with an arrow. “I'll have you know, there are some who'd say otherwise, thank you very much.”

“You let him electrocute us, so help me, I'll cut circulation off to your dick.”

“Our dick,” I correct. “If mine falls off, you can kiss yours goodbye too. Good luck courting Calamity, or any woman for that matter, without it.” I discard as the others stare at me.

It's Brenn who breaks the silence, chuckling into his drink. One good thing about spending the night below an ownerless bar is the drinks are free and plentiful. “The both of you have some serious problems...”

“Me? What did I do but offer help?” Jesper's eyes light up as he scans the table, searching for someone to give him an answer. “It's your mate that called my pride into consideration.”

“It'll be your problem soon enough.” I grit my teeth as my dragon, once again, tries to break through my mental door, forcing a jerk of my knee, bumping it into the table ledge. I hiss out a curse. “If her creature just came out of dormancy, you know what's coming. Soon, too. Luckily for you...” I trail off, gesturing to the cave. Mira and Brenn howl, and Jesper nearly chokes on his drink.

Catching his breath, Jesper's face falls as he lets out a guttural groan, stealing a look over his shoulder at Calamity's door. “No... Lor, I can't go through that again.”

Mira snorts, no doubt remembering the day we caught Jesper going at it with a boulder. In his defense, Vik didn't

want to sleep with someone to curb her heat. She'd just gotten serious with Ellie, so she thought if she sustained, it'd go away. And maybe it did for her, but not for everyone else around her. Brenn and Mira were the only sane souls around for weeks.

"Have any twos?" Mira asks, casting a glance at each of us.

Jesper drops his wrist letting it hit the table as he slowly turns toward her. "You asshole." Tearing three cards from his hand, he passes them to her, holding on a bit too long when she grabs them from him. "I just fucking asked you for twos."

"Well, I just picked one up." She sorts her cards, laying down her four of a kind set. "This was fun, girls, but I think I'm done for the night." Mira pushes up from the table, Brenn following her, his hand rests gently on her back and they both start toward the rooms, leaving Jesper and me to our devices.

"So... Want to play again or talk about your beast issues?" Jesper says, shuffling the cards.

"Neither." I stand up, grabbing my bow and quiver off the table to our right.

Faelor brought in everything we had strapped to the horses, since they'll be alone for the night. It got colder than even I anticipated, and even with their beasts to help keep them warm, Brenn and Faelor were freezing.

We managed to rearrange the bar enough to allow the horses to roam around inside. It's the best we could do since there's no way to bring them down here, but I'm not sure they're bothered much by the cold anyway.

Padding through the cavern, I make way for the spring, beyond ready to get the blood off my skin. There's only so much I could do with a washcloth while I waited for the others to clean up.

Faelor is already inside, shoving his boots on, but he stops mid-tie, sitting up to acknowledge my presence. "Sorry, it took me so long. I nodded off."

I take a seat on one of the carved out ledges, starting to remove my boots, the dried blood on them flaking off, and

fluttering to the ground. “Not your fault. I think everyone is pretty worn-out. We haven’t stopped much to rest since we left the Luminaries.” Setting my boots next to where I’ve propped my bow and quiver against the wall, I shrug off my shirt, turning to figure out why Faelor hasn’t left yet.

“Calamity left your cloak in here.” He weeds through his things, pulling it out of the stack in his hands and giving it to me. “I was going to bring it to you.”

“Thanks,” I say, dropping it next to my boots. Still, Faelor doesn’t move an inch. “Is there something else?”

“Vik is worried.” His nostrils flare as he exhales. “What are you going to do about Brenn?”

It’s her twin. Of course she’s worried about him.

“Nothing. He has a right to be upset. Am I pissed he did it? Yes, but what’s done is done and I don’t think he’ll try it again.”

“He tried to kill her, Loric. Vik doesn’t know what’s going on with him, but he’s not in the right mind and he won’t let her use her gift to help.” Faelor picks at the fabric of his soiled clothes. “Even if you don’t think he’ll try again, she thinks differently. Someone should stay with Calamity tonight.”

“*You should listen to him.*” My dragon’s all too excited about that—shocker. As much as I know he’s not wrong, I’m not sure I can keep my other half in line. Not while I sleep. He won’t force himself on her, but it doesn’t mean he can’t charm her into making mistakes she’ll regret—that I’ll regret.

“Why are you worried about her? Before we came here, all of you wanted to trade her to Valtrol for a ship.” My other half roils at the thought of it. A part of me does too.

I never felt comfortable with the idea, but we need the ship. The two we have in the Luminaries aren’t bringing back enough food and goods to keep everyone fed. When we left, they were cutting rations. Valtrol intended to marry Calamity for her namesake, and marrying an elf man she’s never met seemed like an improvement from the dungeons. A fair exchange. Or so I had convinced myself before I saw her.

Valtrol is a lord, reigning over the docks we're heading toward. He helps the rebels on occasion, but he's still a king's man, and in Solaria, the king chooses who marries his daughters. He hosts a gauntlet, a fight to the death for anyone brave enough to enter, but Valtrol isn't a warrior. He's a weasel, and trading us for Calamity was the only way he'd ever get into the royal family. It worked for everyone, until it didn't.

"You know why I agreed. And I'm glad you changed your mind. I'm not sure I would've slept at night if you hadn't." Faelor paces before me. Clearly, I hit a nerve. "Still, you chose to keep her. It makes her your responsibility."

"I'll take care of it." Giving up on waiting for him to leave, I start undoing the buttons of my pants.

"Brenn or Calamity." He averts his eyes, staring up at the ceiling.

"Both. I'll sleep outside her door if I have to or stay up, but I'm not going to punish Brenn. He shouldn't have been here. I needed Mira to use her gift so we could get here on time. I should've known Brenn wouldn't let her go without him, but you have to understand his position. If the king found out about us, he's screwed. We can all fly. He doesn't have wings. He thinks this is all a trap. That Asmodeus or the king is using Calamity to find out if the dragons are still in the realm."

Faelor swallows thickly, tilting his head. "What do you think?"

"I think she's honest, that she really does need help. There's a look in her eye, something you can't fake after you've lived in that... *that place*." I shake my head. "I don't think she's a part of some elaborate scheme."

"Maybe, but she might not need to be in on it to be a part of it." Faelor twists his lips, pacing in front of me a long moment before turning back to me. "Asmodeus knows where the Luminaries are. He doesn't need her to find them. He knows about dragons too, always has."

“I argued the same, but just because he’s not selling us out, doesn’t mean he’s not going along with the king’s plan.”

“The king knows where the rebels are, though. It’s supposed to be off-limits to him due to the treaty.”

I give him a knowing look. “When has that ever stopped him from paying off others to attack the islands? The treaty is only good if both parties are willing to uphold it. The rebels aren’t supposed to set foot in the mainland, yet here we are. Asmodeus can’t tell the king no, all he can do is follow orders.”

“Don’t you think he’d warn us, though?”

My gut swirls. I want to say he would, but I just don’t know. “I’m not sure.”

“All the more reason to guard her door.” Faelor sighs, shaking his head like he’s unsure how we got here. Even though he’s been a part of it every second.

“All the more reason she can’t know what we are.” I arch a brow.

“I hate using the term beast. It feels wrong.”

“But it’s better than the alternative—for now.” Slipping into the water, the door clicks as he lets himself out.

CHAPTER 15

Calamity

Tossing and turning, I flip onto my back, my gaze drawn upwards to the rough-hewn stone ceiling. The dance of firelight plays across its surface, casting long flickering shadows. I'm not sure how long it's been since I crawled into this bed, though it feels like hours have dragged on, the world around me suspended in a stagnant stillness.

Despite the quilt I'm curled up in, a bone-deep chill seeps into my marrow. The air grows colder with each passing moment, and not even the flames crackling in the lanterns or the fire devouring the oak logs just outside my door can calm it. My breath mists in the air, and I silently berate myself for not having searched the other rooms for something warmer to wear. Anything would have been better than this flimsy linen nightgown.

I push myself up, wrapping the quilt tighter around me, feeling something deep within stir. My beast. Hyde. I think that's what I'll call her. She deserves a name of some sort, and at least it has meaning.

"Sleeping usually involves your eyes being shut," she says, her voice laced with a sharp edge, echoing in the recesses of my mind.

“Yeah, but it usually involves being warm and cozy too. Neither of which I am right now.” I can barely keep my teeth from chattering.

“Oh, please, we both know the real reason you’re not sleeping. Trust me, I know your dark secrets. Same mind and all. You’re worried about the nightmares... You don’t have to pretend to be okay, Calamity. Not with me.”

My chest tightens, so blatantly exposed. It’s as if she’s peeled back layers of my carefully constructed armor, revealing the raw, weak little girl hidden beneath it. A shiver runs down my spine, the coldness of the room suddenly more pronounced, more real. I grip the quilt harder, tighter, and the fabric crumples in my palm.

“You’re not alone. You never have been and you never will be.”

I swallow hard, trying to push down the lump that has formed in my throat. Her words, though meant to comfort, feel like a light shining on the darkest corners of my soul, corners I’ve fought hard to keep hidden. But she’s right. We share a body, a head space. I don’t need to wear a mask or filter my thoughts with her. If her knowledge of the stories I read as a child are any indication, she’s been through everything I have.

“Why now?” The flat, empty question falls from my lips, but it’s all I can get out. “After all these years... I was alone in that dungeon, begging any god who’d listen for someone to talk to. Why choose now to break the silence?”

“It wasn’t my choice.”

“Then whose was it? You literally live in my mind. How could anyone else decide whether or not you speak to me in it?” I challenge, my voice rising as I toss the quilt away, and leap to my feet.

I’m not sure why I’ve bothered asking. There’s only one person capable of doing such things... My palms are sweaty as they slide over my bare arms in a futile effort to create friction, but the cold might be the only thing capable of quelling the heat burning in my veins. It might be the only thing that can

settle the anger bubbling up in my chest, so fast, so suddenly I could foam out the mouth at any second.

He controlled everything...

“The king...” she whispers. That’s no surprise to me. “The same way he suppressed you in the white room, putting me in control, he suppressed me when you left. Only it was different... Where you don’t remember much after falling asleep, I remember everything. I was present, just trapped, incapable of doing anything beyond watching our life go by.”

My fingertips brush against the column of my throat, drifting lower until my hand can rest over my heart. “It was the liquid hellfire wasn’t it? The green liquid he injected us with.”

“Yes. You’d go to sleep, then it was my turn. He never could get us to turn completely, but it didn’t stop him from trying. We heal faster when I’m in control, our magic is stronger. It fascinated him and for the most part, he just forced me to try harder, to push our magic’s limits. Then, when his curiosity was gone, he’d get to work forcing us to change.”

The scars, the letters I etched into my thigh while laying on the stone altar inside the white room... They were tangible and irrefutable proof of what had been happening to me in the time I’d been missing. The king claimed I’d simply fallen asleep, but these fragmented memories would resurface days, weeks, or months later, but they didn’t make sense.

Carving those letters had been one of those memories—those puzzle pieces I couldn’t place. Seeing those scars was how I’d known those fragments were real and not something I’d made up. Hallucinations and nightmares couldn’t physically harm me, but those scars were there and I could remember carving them. Yet, I couldn’t remember deciding to do it or why I had.

“You’re the one who carved them...” I realize, sinking back down, lifting the hem of my nightgown to see the scars.

“You needed to know you weren’t losing your mind. And I knew you’d know what it meant.”

Lotus. It's a single word, but I did. I knew the moment I saw it.

It's from a tale about a king who discovers a new land, but while exploring it, they ate the lotus fruit. It made them forget their desires, their families, their need to return home. It was symbolic of how my father made me forget his promises, his vows to free me from that dungeon. And year after year, I'd fall for his lies all over again.

"Does that mean you know what we are?"

"No... Unfortunately, the king never said."

My heart weighs heavy in my chest, but before I can voice another question, a soft knock sounds at the door. Loric appears in the crack, holding his cloak as he slides my boot out of the way. His silvery gaze briefly sweeps over me before he looks away. "You left this. Thought you might need it, with your dress drying."

"Um, yes, thank you." I stand, crossing the room, my bare feet padding against the stone floor.

He swallows thickly, holding the velvet fabric out as far as he can. "Do you need anything else?"

I shake my head, draping the warm velvet over my shoulders and tying it around my neck.

His brow arches inquisitively as he lifts his head, peering at me from beneath long, dark lashes. "But you're still awake." There's a hint of curiosity in his voice.

"Just trouble sleeping."

"I could help," he offers, then quickly adds, "if you want."

"You mean, do I want you to breathe on me again? I need to sleep, not go into a coma, but I appreciate the offer."

His mouth ticks up slightly at one corner. "I'll leave you to it then. I'll be right outside if you need anything."

"You're not going to sleep?"

"No. Someone has to stay up and everyone else is tired, so I'm taking the first shift." He starts to shut the door, and I hold

up a hand, as if I could catch it. He notices, stopping mid-swing, his hand still resting on the knob.

“Would you, um...” I scratch the back of my neck. “Would you want some company?”

“No.” He says it so quickly, I jolt in surprise, and before I can even begin to think into it, the door of the room clicks shut and my heart plummets.

No... I rush for the door, grappling with the handle. My lungs seize, refusing to breathe as if the air in this room is toxic. *Please don't be locked. Please... Please don't be-* The handle turns and the door swishes open. Eyes closed, I drag in a deep breath, trying to settle my racing heart.

When I open them, Loric stands mere inches from the door, his gaze meeting mine. “You thought I'd lock you in.” It's not a question, but a statement. His head tilts slightly, but he makes no effort to move.

“I wasn't sure what to expect.”

“You should get some sleep. One of us should.”

I nod, leaving the door slightly cracked, and return to bed. Pulling the quilt over me, still wrapped in his cloak, I stare at the rocky ceiling counting the shadows, until sleep finally claims me. And for the first time I can remember, there are no nightmares. I dream. It's not empty darkness, it's not the white room... I *dream*.

CHAPTER 16

Calamity

My father moves with a ghostly silence, his silhouette a dark shape against the scaled walls of the white room. It's darker than usual, as if only one of the mage lights are burning, the amber glow coming from the table he's working at. I lie bound to the cold stone altar, the leather straps so tight I fear they may draw blood. Blinking hard, I pray for this to be a nightmare, but when I open my eyes, it remains.

My trembling lips press together, and tears burn my eyes as I fight to keep them from rolling down my cheeks.

Have I imagined them? Was I really here, in this room the entire time? I've never had a nightmare or dream where I've created people out of thin air, let alone six. It's always been people I know, like Asmo, Gael, my father, the dungeon guards.

No... I couldn't have imagined them. Loric and his friends had faces. But in my good dreams, the few I've had over the years, the people in them usually did... It's only been my night terrors where the others look like figurines, just round, shiny heads. No eyes. No mouths. No noses.

The last thing I can remember is Loric urging me to go to sleep, and dreaming... dreaming of sitting around one of those wooden tables in the cavern, cards in hand. I remember

laughing at stupid jokes, drinking faerie wine. It was nice, like I had friends... It felt real, like a fleeting glimpse of a life that could have been mine.

But that dream had twisted, the cavern had melted away and contorted into the white room. The others disintegrated before my eyes and the stone walls morphed into shimmering colorless scales. My father moved about, his back to me as I lay helpless on the altar. The leather straps around my waist, my ankles and wrists are clamped so tight I fear they'll tear into my flesh like it's nothing.

The only way I'll be able to tell if this is in my head is to see his face—or rather, the lack of it. My dreams are too vivid, too realistic to distinguish from reality otherwise.

The scratching of glass and the creaking of wood fill the air, the cold stone leeching the warmth from my skin. Desperation claws at my chest as I pull against the restraints, the leather biting into my skin without mercy. My vision blurs with tears and I let my head thud against the altar, knowing it's useless to fight it. There's no way to break free, dream or not.

This can't be real...It can't be.

“What are you doing?” My voice, barely a whisper, trembles and I shake my head. *Weak... Weak innocent princess.*

My father continues his work, swirling beakers, mixing things together, unflinching, as if deaf to my pleas. How could I have believed I stood a chance at getting out of this place... of finding freedom? Of killing the king? If this isn't a dream, if I've been here, on this altar the entire time, sedated, dreaming of life outside this fucking room... then I've officially lost it. He's broken me beyond repair. He's won.

“What are you doing?” I ask again, my voice a little louder, but there's nothing I can do to keep the tremble out of it. “Why am I here? It's not my birthday. It hasn't been a year.”

“Quiet.” His tone is devoid of emotion. That's all I get. One word.

I let out a breath, my body shaking, whether it's from adrenaline or fear of what's to come, I don't know. My lungs

clench, as if they've been taken in a fist and squeezed, my heart fluttering at a lethal pace.

"Look at me!" This time, I yell. The sheer intensity of it has my ears ringing as my voice echoes off the walls. Slowly, he turns in place, his head hung low, a needle glinting in hand. His shoulder-length blond hair obscures most of his face, and it's only once he's mere steps away that I glimpse where his features should have been. The dim torch lights cast an ominous amber glow of that smooth, round head of his.

Never, in my life, have I been happy for that. But as relief washes over me, the world shifts again. The room spins, the altar beneath me seeming to fall away into an abyss. My heart races, my breath coming in gasps. And I wake.

I'm in my bed, in the cave room, the one Vik showed me to. The place I fell asleep in. I'm drenched in sweat, my chest heaving with ragged breaths. My mouth is open on a silent scream, but no sound comes, only a strangled gasp escaping my lips. The darkness of my room presses in on me, suffocating, as if the nightmare clung to the edges of my reality, refusing to let go.

Frantically searching the walls, I look for the paintings from the stories Meg told me, the things that have calmed me for years, but they're not here. They're in the cell, back in the dungeon. I push off the blankets, the layers becoming all too suffocating as I quickly untie the cloak, wrenching it off my shoulders. Only then can I breathe.

"Fuck, keep it down, would ya?"

Hyde... She's still here.

"Yeah, I'm still here. Where did you expect me to go?"

"Are you in my dreams too? Do you experience them?" I breathe, resting my elbows on my knees, feet slung over the side of the bed.

"Fortunately, that's a no. But I know you have them."

"Do you know what they're about?"

“I mean, I’m not dumb. I can guess. But he’s not here, Calamity. If what Asmo did worked, then the king doesn’t even know we’re alive.”

I hold my breath, counting to three before exhaling through my nose. “Easy for you to say. You don’t see him every time you close your eyes.”

“Well no... but that’s mostly because I don’t have eyes about ninety percent of the time. You have them.”

“It’s not a joke,” I grit as the cold begins to settle in again, turning my sweat into crystals on my skin.

“No, but it seems to be helping, taking your mind off it.”

I lower my head into my hands, staring down at my legs.

“Would you look at that... Our skin is turning back to normal. We’re not so damn pale anymore. A little less ghostly, not that it’s your fault, dungeon and all.”

“I need a drink.”

“Mmm, yes. Faerie wine, please. That stuff is delicious. I could purr if I had a tongue and lips in this state.”

Rolling my eyes, I pull Loric’s cloak around me, tying it again around my neck. Then, I slip my socks and boots on, taking extra care to stay quiet. No one else should have to lose sleep.

Gently, the door tugs open, and I send up a prayer that it’s still cracked, letting me skip having to mess with the knob. Especially once I see Loric. He’s still sitting against the wall, a sword across his lap, still in the sheath. There’s a quiver full of red-feathered arrows attached to his belt. A few are spilling out from it, the ends resting against the stone floor. His arms are crisscrossed, leaned against the curved wood of his bow, the drawstring pressed into his legs. He’s using it as a pillow.

I pause in the open doorway. *He looks so peaceful...*

Dark brown wisps of hair fall in his face, mussed as if he’s run his hands through it one too many times. His lashes fluttering against his cheek give the illusion of him dreaming, and I can’t help but wonder what about.

He's stayed here all night.

He slept outside my door... but why? To make sure Brenn didn't try anything? His sister had to have been worried, since she left me her knife. For a moment, I wonder if I should go get it, but I quickly shake the notion free. If it weren't safe, he wouldn't be sleeping.

"Our chances of getting him to court with us are looking better by the second. If I were a betting woman, I'd stake my odds on it."

"It's not a game," I whisper, stepping farther into the cavern, away from the room. There's got to be something to drink around here. I'd rather not wake him if I don't have to. The dark circles under his eyes tell me he needs sleep just as much as I do.

"No, you're right. It's not a game. It's our livelihood. Much more important."

Checking the store room I saw Jesper walking out of when we arrived, I sneak inside, sleuthing through the rows upon rows of shelves. It's all canned goods. A lot of it is the chocolate whipped stuff Loric gave me. The rest, who knows.

I search the other rooms, placing my ear to the door before opening it. Most are bedrooms, empty. It's too dark to really search them but I doubt there'd be anything to drink inside them anyway. One door sounds like snores, so I continue, moving to the next, and the next, before accidentally opening one with Faelor and Vik curled up together. I quickly cover my eyes and close the door, hoping I was stealthy enough to not wake them.

Out of doors, I glance at the stairs. The last one is nearly ten feet off the ground. There's no way I'd manage to pull myself up there on my own. Not even if I carried over a chair. No wonder Loric didn't worry about locking me in the room. If he was worried about me running off, he knew I wouldn't be able to.

Sighing, I look around again, scouring for something—anything. I double-take on a tapestry, hidden underneath where

the stairs let out. It stretches up from the floor, easily the height of one of the doorways. There's plenty of space above it, and one would think if Gael was going to hang something on the wall, he'd center it like a normal person. But he hung it low...

The golden tassels brush the floor, the fabric depicting a dozen wolves, half body, half smoke, swirling in various directions.

He hid the entrance down here behind a hutch. What if...

I creep closer, lifting the fabric off the stone. Sure enough, a rough doorway exists behind it. Just an arch, no door, but the amount of dust that plumes into the air has me resisting the urge to cough. Squinting through the haze, I see cobwebs, and I reluctantly bat them away.

Another stairway perhaps? Maybe one that leads to the bar?

It's dark inside, too dark for me to see anything beyond a foot or two, thanks to the fire still burning in the middle of the open cavern. I need a lantern, a torch, or anything that can provide light.

Not wanting to wake Loric, I decide to grab one of the mage light torches from the hot spring, basking in the heat a moment before returning to the tapestry. I slip inside, letting the fabric shut, and as the light unfurls, my mouth drops open.

"Holy mother of pearl. What is this place?" Hyde asks, and I'm not sure how to answer.

It's a study... no, an apothecary. I shake my head. It's a library, but with swirling glass tubes, beakers... It's a white room, just *not*... My brows furrow at the idea that Gael would have a place like this, then again, he never told the truth about anything. Who knows why he was in that dungeon. I didn't know him at all, not like I thought I did.

The walls are lined with amber bottles and vials and potions... There's an intricate track with glass spirals that run around the room, fixed in various places to shelves or hooks driven into the stone wall. It's much more elaborate than the

set up my father had in the white room. There are shelves of old books and dust covered trinkets, but no altar. No table big enough for a body to lay upon. Whatever Gael was studying, it wasn't with people.

An array of circular glasses hang from hooks, and as I wipe the dust away and peer through them, it's blurry, some more than others. I run a hand over my mouth, squeezing my jaw a bit as I gawk at the room, wondering what secrets lie within it.

A soft light catches my eye and I glance up, awed once more. On the ceiling is a map. It's invisible until I stand directly below a portion with the light. Each step I take reveals a new portion, extending far beyond Solaria and our realm. It's mesmerizing, the way it appears and disappears, as if it's a living entity, breathing and shifting with my movements.

Finding another lantern, I use a stick to transfer the flame, letting the amber glow reveal more of the hidden sanctuary, layer by dusty layer. Each step I take is hesitant, reverent, as if the very ground beneath my feet could give out at any moment. Deciding to start with the shelves, I thumb the spines of the ancient tomes, their spines cracked and worn, and some broken altogether. Dust dances in the light, swirling around the room like tiny, ethereal spirits.

As I move, my fingers trail over the various trinkets littering the shelves amidst the books. There are small, intricate carvings of creatures I've never seen—perhaps figments of Gael's imagination or beings from other realms, though I'm not sure how he'd know about them. No one can leave this one, aside from the dragons. They're the only creatures that can penetrate the barrier, but even they can't take things or others through with them.

The books here are mostly about shifters, which might come in handy, considering I have to figure out what kind I am. Each one I pull from the shelf seems older than the last, their covers frayed and pages yellowed with time.

My gaze falls upon a peculiar box nestled amongst the myriad of artifacts. It sits on a lower shelf, somewhat obscured by the shadows, but there's an undeniable aura of magic

emanating from it. The dark-stained wood is adorned with intricate metal swirls and set with red stones, similar to that of my necklace. They seem to pulse with a life of their own, drawing me closer.

The pendant around my neck, hidden beneath the fabric of my nightgown, begins to glow with them, pulsing in a rhythm, synchronizing... The crystals' light is soft, a crimson hue, illuminating the fine details of the box, revealing carved letters on its side. "The Origin of Species," it reads, and below the inscription is a series of images etched into the wood — a man, shifting and changing, his form morphing into that of a fearsome beast. The transformation is depicted in meticulous detail, capturing every stage of the metamorphosis.

I trace my fingers over the carvings, feeling the magic thrum against my skin. It's as if the box itself is alive, its heart beating in time with my own, with the pulse of the crystals. The urge to see what lies within becomes overwhelming and I lift the lid, slowly at first. The hinges whisper in protest as I let it settle all the way back. Inside, nestled within the velvet lining, is an old book. A bestiary.

Taking it out, I gently flip through the pages, each one is filled with beautiful sketches and hand-penned descriptions of various shifters, from common werewolves to the more obscure and mystical creatures like changelings and fae folk.

My heart beats a little faster as I close it. This is it. This can help me.

I tuck the book under my arm and keep searching through the study. Gone is the thirst I felt, replaced or rather drowned out by my curiosity.

Looking through the vials next, a cool draft of air hit my face, weaving through the velvet threads of the cloak, making me shiver. The hair at the nape of neck tingles, standing on end, along with those of my arms. I look around the room, wondering where it came from. There's no way for a breeze to make it down here.

"We're not alone... I can't explain how I know, but I do."

“There’s no one else in here.” Then it dawns on me. Loric... Maybe he woke up. Unsure of whether I want to share the knowledge of this place, I glide to the archway, peeking through the tapestry, but I only get the hem between my fingers before his voice startles me.

I spin around, a gasp escaping my lips as I arch into the fabric to avoid touching him. His hands are braced upon the arched stone above me, his face peering down with those striking silver eyes. “And what might you be doing up?”

“I was thirsty and couldn’t make it up the steps on my own. I thought there might be another staircase in here.” I swallow the knot forming in my throat.

His eyes slide down my face, my throat, my chest, landing on the book and his lips twitch. The smirk coming and going so quickly, I fear I’ve imagined it. “And that?”

“I found it. I thought it would help me figure out what I am.” It’s the truth... but even with the truth to protect me, it doesn’t stop the icy cold chill that creeps down my spine. It’s so light, so slow, it’s like a spider creeping down it, one vertebrae at a time.

“That’s a shame.” He cups my face, his touch warm, gentle despite the roughness of his fingers. His thumb strokes over my bottom lip, tugging it enough to part them. His eyes search mine, and I don’t move away. I can’t. He bends, but it’s not until his lips are nearly on mine that his image flickers. His face gone, replaced by something that’s all bone. I step back through the fabric, nearly falling over in the process.

“What in the hell are you doing? We WANT this. We NEED this,” Hyde protests. *Did she not see it?*

“Something’s wrong. Very wrong,” I whisper, getting my balance and putting as much distance as I can between me and him.

Dropping his hands, he steps through the tapestry, into the open cavern and shoots me a cocky grin. “Sorry, I thought... Nevermind. I didn’t mean to offend you. Did you find something to drink among the tomes?”

“N–No.” I stutter, turning back to him. “I didn’t.”

“Would you like me to go get you something?”

I nod, my teeth clenched tight. My hands become clammy, even with the frigid air around us, my chest tight. “Please.”

Loric’s face falls, but he nods his understanding, then disappears into thin air.

What the fuck...

I search the space, looking for him, and when I turn around, I see his form still slouched against the wall by my bedroom door. Asleep.

The blood drains from my face, the air suddenly too thin. It wasn’t him.

“Fuckkkkk... Okay, don’t panic.”

“Oh, I’m panicking!” I don’t bother to look behind me, even though my crystal starts to pulse around my neck. Whoever that is isn’t Loric, and I don’t want to find out what it wants with me. Instead, I break into a sprint. I open my mouth to yell for him, to wake him up but I barely get the first syllable out before something snatches around my neck, yanking me backward. My lungs, my airway, my everything screams as I’m slammed down onto one of the wooden tables. The book goes flying, landing somewhere off to my right.

The creature peers over me, his face twisted too far, facing me as if we were standing in front of each other, his head upside down. Gone is the illusion, and bile climbs at my throat. The bones of its face are humanoid, but I was wrong... What remains of its flesh and muscle have been mummified, shrunken until the bones have poked through. The dark abysses of its eyes are hollow, a soulless midnight black. My lungs burn as I choke, desperate for air. There’s nothing around my neck—whatever he hit me with is gone—but I can’t catch my breath. I gasp, and gasp, as he watches me, the bones of his teeth, his jaw, flexing as if it were rubber and not solid, creating a sinister smirk.

“This could’ve been easy, little one. Instead, you had to make it hard.” The creature bends, as if he’s still dead set on

kissing me. Except, the closer he gets, the more I can see. A forked tongue slides between its teeth, lashing out to lick the side of my face.

Oh no... No, no, NO.

"I can't help you... I don't have the strength yet. Last time took so much out of me..."

My beast's admission leaves me weak, the fight dissipating with every second that ticks by. I'm screwed.

An arrow flies through the air, piercing into the creature, hitting something solid, but I'm not sure what. Bone, maybe? It's hard to tell what is beneath its dark cloak. Another lands, then another.

The creature stands, its head twisting back around as it looks toward my room. I don't have the energy, the will, the air to lift up. All I can do is lay on this table and hope Loric kills it.

"I'm so sorry..."

I can't muster the words to tell Hyde it's not her fault. I opened that box, I went into that room and let it out somehow, that creature, that spirit, or whatever it is. This wasn't her fault. It was mine.

There's a clank of metal, the shuffling of feet, guttural grunts, but I can't tell who is winning. The only thing I focus on is the quiet dripping. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

I could tell myself it's the cave, the walls aren't exactly dry. It could be condensation beading and trickling to the floor, but I know it's not. It's blood. I can feel it, the heat of it, the wetness around my neck.

Another set of feet, followed by another joins. The walls start to close in around me, the ceiling lowering in my vision, as if it'll crush me to the stone floor. My eyes flutter, but it becomes harder and harder to keep them open until I give in and let them stay shut.

Hands wrap around my arms, cradle my head. I'm lifted from the table, but I can't tell where I'm going. Then the darkness claims me.

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CHAPTER 17

Leric

I perch on the edge of the bed, my gaze lingering on Calamity, who's sprawled out in the center, her breathing steady and deep in sleep. She looks so peaceful, the wound on her neck almost closed. It took us the better part of two hours to heal it. Every time we'd get it shut, the wound would reopen, pouring blood as if it were brand new.

How did a fucking grimleer get in here? How did she not wake me up and why did she leave her room in the first place? Unfortunately, those answers will have to wait for her to open her eyes.

Jesper leans casually against the door frame, his gaze fixed on the claw mark marring my chest. "That needs to be stitched, or at the very least, you should let one of us attempt to heal it."

I dismiss his concern with a wave of my hand, crumpling my ruined shirt in my fist. "It's a scratch. It's not even bleeding anymore."

He raises an eyebrow. "Yeah, but you've been exhausting your energy to heal her. It's slowing your own healing down in the process."

"I won't die from a claw mark. She had her jugular torn open. She needs the help more than I do."

Jesper huffs, handing me a bloodstained book. “Faelor found this on the floor.”

“A bestiary? Where did she get this?” I flip through the pages, skimming through the creatures they depict.

“In a hidden room, behind the tapestry. We believe the grimleer was guarding it. I’d invite you to come look, but something tells me you won’t.”

“Those are fighting words,” my dragon sneers.

I stand, placing the book gently beside Calamity. It’s not a stretch to believe she snagged it to learn about herself. I just hope in the process she doesn’t dig too deep on the rest of us. Though, there’s nothing she’s seen that would clue her in. Claws are a common trait, so are teeth. She’s more likely to assume we’re low tier wolves instead of dragons.

“Faelor is in the room now. I’ll stay with her until she wakes,” Jesper offers.

I nod, stepping into the cavern, my heart heavy with the sight of the blood staining the stone. The little bit I lost getting scratched pales in comparison to the puddle of Calamity’s on the floor. A wave of guilt washes over me, churning my gut. *How did I let this happen?*

Pulling back the tapestry, I step into the dim room, taking in the shelves, the alchemy set up. Gael was dabbling in things well above him... and I’m not sure it’s worth my time to know what.

Faelor holds up an open wooden box, decorated in metallic swirls and dragon’s blood crystals. They’re rare down here, but not unheard of. They’re powerful, drawing from a network like a hive would. The more crystals, the more power they can leach from the things around them. They were likely responsible for imprisoning the grimleer, their magic fueling the spell that trapped it inside. When Calamity opened it, the connection severed, setting it free.

“It’s definitely related to the bestiary she had.” Faelor sets the box on the table. “Look at this stuff. How does a lowlife hellhound get these things?”

“Because he wasn’t as simple-minded as we thought. Though I’m going to guess the glasswork was for sensitizing his own alcohol for the bar, and I’m willing to guarantee, based on those vials, he was adding a little something to his batches.”

Faelor tilts his head, his eyes following the glass track that runs around the room. “Like magic? Spells?”

“Probably.” I pick up a vial, shaking the contents until the glass clinks. “A lot of these are blood magic ingredients. Though, when you think about it, it makes sense. It’s a bar in the middle of nowhere, yet, it was packed full of nearly the same people as when we passed through the first time.”

“That’s one way to get regular customers, spell them to come back.” Faelor sits in a dusty chair, looking at the map on the ceiling.

“More like spell them to never leave.” I snort at the idea, having seen enough. “Look over this junk, let’s make sure there are no more friends hiding.”

“You got it,” Faelor says, crossing his arms over his chest. I turn to leave, but his voice stops me. “Is she alright?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

A piercing scream shatters the quiet, drawing both Faelor and my attention. He’s on his feet, both of us staring at the tapestry, listening, then we take off, bursting into the cavern and skidding to a stop at Calamity’s door. She’s sitting up in the bed, her chest heaving, eyes wide as if she’s seen a ghost.

Jesper, looking as startled as I feel, stammers out, “She just screamed. I... I don’t know why.”

My eyes slide to hers. “Are you okay?”

She nods, rubbing her throat, a grimace crossing her features. “Yes, I’m fine. Just a bad dream, I guess.”

I release the air from my lungs, the tension in my body easing. She swings her feet over the side of the bed and I send Jesper a look, a silent command to leave us, then crouch down before her. “It’s gone.”

Her eyes scan me, lingering on the claw mark across my chest. “You’re hurt,” she says, a flicker of concern in her gaze.

“How’s your throat?” Grabbing the glass of water from the table, I hand it to her. Her hands shake as she brings it to her lips, and a cringe twists her features as she swallows.

“Sore, but manageable. Did that thing try to decapitate me? I’m not even sure what happened.” She tenderly presses her fingers to her throat. I wish I could take away the pain, but unfortunately, I don’t have that power.

“I think it hit you with its tail, actually. It didn’t have any weapons, but it had claws and some sort of scaling on its tail. I didn’t see it happen. I’d just woken up to sound and saw you on the table with that thing over you.”

Her eyes find mine. “I got tail whipped?” The look on her face... It’s like its attack was somehow below her, not good enough to have taken her out.

I can’t help the smile that pulls at my lips. So innocent and so stubborn... It’s almost cute. “Yeah, you did... Why were you up, anyway?”

“Couldn’t sleep.” She shrugs.

“The last I’d checked on you, you were drooling.”

Her eyes round, her jaw falling slack. “Was not.”

I bounce my eyebrows once, choosing my battles. Until the pieces click in my mind. Of course she was fine while I was awake, but I’d fallen asleep and my magic stopped. I’d overheard her talking to her beast—out loud, for some reason. She’d been too worried about something to sleep, and must’ve stared at the ceiling for at least an hour, so I’d helped. I gave her a dream, one I’d thought she’d enjoy. The way she’d looked at our table, after leaving the spring, it was almost as if she wanted to join, so I used that.

Once I’d fallen asleep, whatever had been plaguing her mind and keeping her awake must’ve resurfaced. But the way she’d woken up just now... She was afraid. She screamed. Maybe it wasn’t something bothering her, keeping her awake,

but more being scared of what would happen in her sleep. Like Elaria...

“You have night terrors, don’t you?”

She blinks at me. “How did you—” Glancing away, she chews at her bottom lip. “I didn’t think it mattered.”

Exhaling deeply, I reclaim my seat on the bed, kicking my legs up and resting my back against the headboard. “It matters when you scream bloody murder in your sleep.” I study her face, the way her eyebrows go straight, the way her golden eyes almost lose their vividness.

“I didn’t want to be put into a coma, and it’s sort of embarrassing.” She averts her gaze, her cheeks turning a bright pink.

“Embarrassing how?”

“In the sense that adults aren’t supposed to be scared of the dark. We’re not supposed to have irrational fears, either.”

“Irrational? That’s nothing close to irrational, especially when most *adults* aren’t held captive by their father.” She looks at me quizzically and I elaborate. “My twin sister had them, and she was by far one of the strongest women I’ve ever known.”

The color seems to return to her eyes, her fingers gently rolling over the hem of the quilt. “You helped her?”

I nod. “And not in the coma way. As kids, we always shared a room. For the most part, just having someone else in there with her kept them away, and when that wasn’t enough...”

“Your gift,” she says, filling in the blank.

“Yeah. There was never a reason for them to start. They just did, but as long as she wasn’t alone at night, she was fine. She said just having me, or as she got older, her husband in the room made her feel safe.”

She’s quiet for a moment, and my heart starts to flutter, wondering if she’s going to ask why I spoke about Elaria in the past-tense. I breathe a sigh of relief when she doesn’t, but my heart quickly lurches into my throat when her big, golden

eyes lock on mine. It's a silent plea, one my dragon is never going to let me live down.

"Alright. I'll stay, but you're staying on that side and a pillow—or two—is going in the middle. I don't want your beast—whatever she is—deciding to cuddle. Deal?"

"And you're worried about what I have to say? No... You should be worried about what Jesper is going to say in the morning."

I don't answer him, just arrange the pillows while she grins at me, so full of light it makes me sick.

I can't believe I'm agreeing to this, but I suppose if she won't let me knock her out, then at least this way she won't wake up everyone else. That, and it'll be easier to know if she gets up.

She lays on her side, wound facing up, hands tucked under her head. "How old are you?"

"You don't want to know. Older than you."

I make the mistake of stealing a glance. From this angle, and the way her nightgown sits, it hardly covers anything, not her prominent collarbones, the slender curve of her throat, the swells of her breasts. My stomach tightens, my mouth suddenly feeling dry.

I'm starting to kick myself for letting Vik change her clothes. Luckily, Calamity brought spare gowns, but I should've had Vik find her something else, something less revealing for my sake. However, being attracted to her and my dragon's *urges* were the last things on my mind. I just didn't want her to sleep covered in blood, and it gave me a moment to clean my own wounds.

The arm draped over her side is covered in goosebumps, but she tucks in under the blanket before I can think of a way to ask if she's cold. "Are we talking centuries? Decades?"

I weigh my head. It's pointless to avoid the subject. She'll just keep asking. "About a century older."

"So... One hundred and twenty five."

“Close. Yeah.”

“You’re immortal, then?”

I squint, my eyes cast across the room but not really seeing anything as I think it over. “I’m not sure immortal is the right word. My kind lives for hundreds to thousands of years if we’re lucky, but we do grow old eventually. Whereas someone like Asmodeus is no longer aging. He’s a true immortal.”

“But you do heal? Magically, I mean.”

I can feel her eyes roving over my chest as if they were invisible fingers, but I nod all the same. She lifts her hand, reaching across the bed and I grip her wrist. A soft gasp escapes her full lips.

“Don’t get any ideas, princess. I’ve exhausted most of my magic to keep you out of death’s hands. You’re not going to use it to heal me. You need it, your throat and the chance of you bleeding out is a lot more important than me getting another scar.”

The way her lips press together tells me she doesn’t like the idea, but instead of arguing, she pushes onto her elbows and surveys the room, spotting the gauze wrapping on the bedside table. Vik had brought it in, but we didn’t need it, having settled to use magic instead. Gauze wasn’t going to cut it.

“You should probably wrap it, then.” She holds out a hand. “At least let me help with that. I owe it to you for healing me.”

“Fine.” I cave, handing her the ivory roll of cloth.

Calamity sits up and scoots closer. She begins binding my middle with the bandage, her hair tickling my skin like feathers as she reaches behind my back. I flex to stay still, holding my arms up and trying to focus on absolutely anything else... *anything* to keep my mind off how sweet her hair smells. It might’ve been washed with Vik’s soaps, but it’s taken on a whole different scent on her. I hold my breath, hyper fixing my gaze on the doorknob as I wait for her to finish. Only then do I entertain the idea of breathing again.

She sits back, admiring her work with a satisfied glimmer in her eyes, casually drawing her teeth over her perfect bottom

lip. It takes a monumental effort to tear my gaze away, stealing only a fleeting glance before fixing my eyes on the door again. I want to feel it for myself, to know if her lips are as soft as they look, to experience the gentle tug of her teeth against my own. The will to resist the urge to do just that is only held back by the thinnest of barriers, growing thinner by the moment.

Swallowing thickly, I clear my throat. *Fucking dragons...* This is his doing. The asshole dumped a fuck-ton of hormones into my system then conveniently decided to take a nap, leaving me to deal with the repercussions. He's been so silent... He's only ever this quiet when he's up to no good. And I wish I could say it's the first time he's done it, but that would be a lie.

Calamity lies back down, and I silently thank whatever gods might be listening for the small show of mercy. If she kept looking at me like that, I'm not sure what I would've done. I knew being in this room alone with her would be a bad idea. It's precisely why I stayed outside her door... which of course turned out to be a bad idea anyway.

“What was that thing? I've never read about anything like it.”

Oh, thank the gods... A subject change.

I settle back against the headboard, running my hands through my hair and pinching the back of my neck as if that can relieve the tension forming lower... *much lower* in my body. “A grimleer. It's a demon fox that can shapeshift. It plays tricks and people can bind them to things they want to guard, like the book you had.”

“How does it know who to look like?”

“They feed off emotion and can tap into your memories. Mainly fear and desire. They're the strongest, so they take the form of whoever they believe will cause the biggest reaction.”

Her eyes darken, staring up at me, and all I can do is hope she doesn't ask me to elaborate. I don't want to know what she saw, but considering how quiet they were before she screamed, I don't think it showed up as someone she feared. I'm even

more certain when her cheeks flame and she looks away from me, but I pretend not to notice.

“You should rest. It’s been a lot today.” My head thunks against the headboard and I close my eyes, hoping she’ll take the hint that talking time is over, and that the back of my eyelids can help me trick myself into believing I’m anywhere else but in a bed with her.

“Goodnight,” she whispers, while I think of a dream to give her. She might not want my help, my magic, but she’s going to get it anyway. For both of our sakes. Once she’s deep in sleep, I should be able to nod off, too. My presence should be enough. It was for Elaria, but until my body can filter out whatever tsunami of libido my dragon set free, it’s what’s best—her asleep, so I can’t do anything I’ll regret.

Settling on a dream, I focus my energy, picturing her face, the arch of her dark eyebrows, the slight wave to her hair, the way her gold eyes have flecks of dark embers, the slight up turn of her nose and the faint freckles that are scattered there.

Slowly, Calamity’s soft exhales become more spaced out, deeper, and she falls asleep. I push my thoughts into her head, the dream I prepared for her, the card game in the cavern. Only it doesn’t play in my mind like it always does when I use my magic. I push a bit harder, still staring at the back of my eyelids. Then the darkness fades into stone walls, to iron bars, as I’m sucked into her headspace.

Dream walking... I’ve done it before, hundreds of times, but never accidentally. But this is unmistakable. Calamity’s headspace, which looks a lot like the king’s dungeon. I search for anyone, but the cells are all empty and Calamity is nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER 18

Leric

Turning in place, I examine the cell. It's like a bedroom has been moved here from inside the castle. There's a shelf of books, a small bed, but it's the paintings on the stone walls that draw my eye—that shock me the most. I recognize them, and they're so vivid, so lifelike it's like I'm staring at the real thing. The crystal castle, complete with its dragon's blood crystals. The mountains in Frost Forge. The furies depicted as dragons, one red, one white, one black, soaring through the air. There's a waterfall that seems to flow off the edge of the world, turning to mist, just like the one in Lythandar. They're almost all places in the dragon realm.

Hinges whine and I whirl to find Asmo opening the gate to the cell, Calamity walking beside him. There are no chains, no shackles around her wrists, yet she walks inside and lets him close the door behind her. Her brows furrow together, a slight crinkle forming between them.

“The king will be here soon,” Asmo says, but she doesn't seem to hear it, staring at me like I'm a ghost. Then he disappears into thin air.

“What are you doing here?” She takes a tentative step closer, and I'm not sure how to answer that, let alone make my mouth move after seeing this... These paintings.

I didn't intend to enter her dreams, if that's what this is. I'd only meant to ensure she had a good one instead of a nightmare, but I'm here and after seeing this, I have questions.

"I'm not sure," I say, my gaze roaming the walls. "Is this yours?"

She gives me a curt nod, inching closer to the bed. "Did Asmo bring you here?"

I twist my lips, letting them go with a pop. "I mean, someone did."

"Why? He's never had me share a cell before. Not since..." she trails off, looking off to the walls.

"Since who?"

She shakes her head, as if clearing her mind. "No one."

Pausing, I debate what to do next, what to ask... I don't want to scare her or pry, but there's no way she should know about these places, not without learning about them from one of my kind.

"Do you know who I am?" I ask, deciding to start there.

"Loric, but your *friends* call you Lor."

I nod. "What's this?" Playing dumb, I point to the crystal-covered castle.

"It's the dragon queen's castle." She crosses her arms, her lips tugging up into a half smile. "It's the newest painting I made."

"The dragon queen's?" I arch a brow.

Calamity moves to stand beside me, tilting her head as she scans the painting. "If you look closely, you can see the symbols, the runes." She points to a wall, and sure enough there are little etches. It's our language, well, that of our history. The history of all the realms, not just that of the dragons.

"And where did you get the idea for this?"

“A friend told me about them, she described it so vividly, this came to my mind.”

This is more than just someone giving a description. It's like she's been there, seen it. Every detail is correct, down to the kinds of trees to the angles of the crystals.

“Your friend, did you meet her here?”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course, I did. No one ever comes here and leaves alive. At least, until me.”

“Oh, darling!” The voice that echoes through the empty hall sends a shiver down my spine. I know it... wished to never hear it again. The king comes into view, except his face is missing, nothing but round skin-covered head... Odd. Asmo had a face.

Calamity goes statue-still, his skin becoming so pale she could pass for dead. “No... He said if he stayed, I wouldn't have a nightmare.” Her golden eyes flash to me. “You said—” She shakes her head, pinching her lips between her teeth. “Nevermind.”

She doesn't know I'm real. I thought me being here would've made that obvious, but she thinks I'm part of this illusion, this figment of her imagination. My gaze cuts toward the king, the lock in his hand clinks as it clicks open. I lift my hand, drawing in a deep breath, and snap. He explodes into a cloud of snowflakes, and they slowly float to the stone floor, melting away in seconds.

“You just... How'd you...” Calamity looks between what's left of the king and me.

I thought it'd be sort of symbolic, like the way she killed the nevercats. There's no way I could've done such a thing in real life, but here... Here everything is in my control. I can do what I want.

“No more nightmares. Not tonight.”

Her jaw goes slack, her vacant stare on me, there but not really.

I offer her my hand. “Come on. Let’s go somewhere better, far away from this place.”

Her lips stretch into a wide grin, golden eyes practically sparkling as she gently sets her hand in mine. “Okay.”

Using my magic, the room starts to spin, the stone bricks becoming slick cavern walls. It’s empty, no sign of the carnage left behind by the grimleer, the air holding less of a chill. I hop up onto one of the wooden tables, my hands wrapping around the edge as I watch her. It’s like she’s taking it all in for the first time, and it brings a faint smile to my lips.

“Close your eyes.”

She seems to ponder that for a moment, but does, lacing her hands in front of her.

“Think of someone you want to see, who you want to be here. Think of their face, their voice, the way you feel when you’re with them.”

Her lips twitch as if remembering something, but her eyes remain shut. My chest tightens at the thought of Gael being the person she conjures. I hope not. She might’ve killed him in real life, but I won’t hesitate to do it here, as many times as necessary.

“Do you have your person?” I ask, hopping up from the table to stand in front of her.

“Yes,” she whispers, her hands gently feeling the air, as if she senses me here.

“Want them, want to see them badly enough and they’ll appear.”

Her head tips forward, too heavy for her to hold, but as she straightens, a lock of her dark hair falls in her face, resting over the bridge of her nose. I bring my hand to her face, hesitating a mere inch away, but I push it out of her face just in time to see light, shining off to my right. Like beads, the orbs float in midair, arranging, shifting, merging, until a woman’s shape forms, followed by dark hair. Then a dress and features, until a familiar face comes into view.

The air becomes trapped in my lungs, my eyes becoming owl-like.

The queen of dragons.

She smiles hard enough that it reaches her eyes, that it radiates light. Her gaze sliding from me to Calamity. A dark green cloak with black royal swirls rests over her shoulders, a dress beneath it that matches the one Calamity wears now—the same one drying in the real cavern.

“You can open your eyes,” I say, my voice barely audible as I gawk at a woman our realm believed to be long dead, and the paintings on Calamity’s walls become clear. She knew her...

Calamity squeals, lurching toward the woman and tossing her arms around her. Their dark hair nearly matching as they hug.

Do I bow? Do I leave? I’m at a loss for words. All I can do is stand here blinking, motionless.

She pulls away, her arms still looped around the queen’s shoulders. “I’ve missed you so much, and I know...” I can’t see her face, but I’m almost certain there are tears. I can hear it in her voice. “I know you’re not real, but...” Calamity cups the woman’s face. “It feels like it. I’d have given anything to hug you just one more time.”

The woman doesn’t speak, but she draw’s Calamity’s head toward her, kissing just above her eyebrow, and then her figure fades, disintegrating into the light before disappearing all together. Calamity’s shoulders drop, her body unmoving for a long moment, as if she’s waiting for her to come back.

I take a step forward, my fingers dusting over the back of her arm. “Are you okay?” I’m not sure why I ask. I’m not sure how any of this is happening, how I got sucked in here, how Calamity knew the queen, *knew* her enough to conjure her into existence, at that.

She lurches, making me jump. I don’t get a chance to breathe before her arms are slung around my throat, squeezing so hard it cuts off my airway. Her face is buried into the crook of my neck and my lips tingle, my lungs squeezing, desperate

for oxygen. She finally lets go, just enough to look at me and I gasp, filling my lungs as full as they'll go.

“Thank you...” her golden eyes toggle between mine. My chest tingling as I realize what's been in front of me since I met her on that mountain top. It took me seeing the queen, seeing Calamity's room to realize I'm not just protecting the mad king's daughter, but that of the queen of dragons... The daughter of the last fury.

And I'm not sure if that makes things better or worse.

“What now?” she asks, and my mouth goes dry, my throat becoming sandpaper as I attempt to swallow.

“It's your dream. You can do whatever you want.” I try to sound enthusiastic, but I can't help but to feel the weight of reality pressing in, crushing me atom by atom. I'm too busy trying to wrap my mind around the fact that this woman, a Midicious by blood, is the heir to the dragon throne. A throne which my father is holding, a crown given to him by Calamity's mother in case she never came back. And I almost let her die. *Twice.*

Fucking twice.

Her weight shifts and before I can register what's happening, her fingers thread into my hair, tugging my face to her's. Just before our lips meet, I drop the spell, my magic dissipating and I blink the cave ceiling into focus. I'm not sure when I scooted down, when I stopped resting against the headboard, but as I lay here, my breath fogging in the cold, I let my eyes, and only my eyes drift to where she sleeps soundly next to me. A minute passes, then two, then three, and finally my muscles relax, knowing she'll stay asleep. Whether her dream will continue without me, I'm not sure, but whether it turns into some dreamless darkness or not, is none of my business. Even if it involves me, or some fictional version of me.

She was going to kiss me.

I'm still not sure if she knew it was me or not, and not just something she created in her head, but I don't know if I want

to find out... I mean, I do, but I don't.

She's the heir to the dragon throne. She just found out she's a shifter. How the hell am I supposed to tell her that? Where do I start? Not to mention that she's a Midicious. Would she even be recognized as such?

Driving my fingers roughly through my hair, I pull before dragging my palm down my face.

"It took you long enough to figure it out." My head jerks to the side, as if my dragon is sitting here next to me.

"What the fuck does that mean? You *knew*?" I whisper out loud into the dark.

"No, but I wish I did." Letting out the breath I was holding in my lungs, I shake my head. "Now can we agree to court her? She's a dragon. And not just any dragon, but *THE* dragon. The heir. If we did, your father might not banish you after all."

"Enough."

I doubt it would change anything. Not that I would do it anyway. *She's still a Midicious.*

The moment any of us return to the moons, my father would have to clip our wings and kick us off the ledge. The rules were pretty clear the day the queen turned herself over. If you were a dragon, you were to leave this realm, to return to the moons or be named a traitor.

I didn't know my father had been handed the crown. He was the Lord of Frost Forge when we left to join the war. Regardless, I'm not sure it would've changed my decision to stay. I'd been so angry, so *furious* at the mad king for killing Elaria, I wanted to see his castle burn.

Those of us who stayed gathered in the Luminaries and that's when our little group started. Jesper stayed with me, having been held in the dungeon too, not that he had much he was leaving behind in the dragon realm. He's the bastard son of the Lord of Lythanar. His title meant nothing and his mother and her mate had died during the war.

Faelor was too injured to fly at the time, and since he couldn't make it through the barrier, he forfeited his knighthood. Mira, Vik, and Brenn were just barely adults, and Brenn had lost his wings. It didn't matter that he and Vik were the Lord of Wyvern's children. His father's the reason he lost them, and a dragon without wings might as well be dead. There was no going back for them, even if they figured out a way to get Brenn in the sky and through the barrier.

There were a few others that came later, bringing word of my father being crowned king. But even with the added wings, a merry band of misfit dragons wasn't going to take out legions of creatures in the mad king's army. Instead, we'd found a new mission, to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. We chose to guard the Luminaries, to form a new home.

But this... If Calamity shifts into a dragon that can breathe hellfire, then that crown is rightfully hers. It changes everything, and yet nothing all at the same time.

There's a part of me that knew Calamity couldn't go to the Luminaries. There's too much blood between her father and the rebels for it to be safe. Though, I hadn't intended on taking her there when I came to get her.

It'll never be safe for her anywhere inside this realm. Not as a dragon, nor as the king's daughter. I think it might be why Asmo chose me. He knew dragons can pass through the boundary and that she was the queen's daughter, meaning she could pass through once she learned to shift. It's likely why the king held her in the dungeon, why he trapped her there. And based on the way she looked at the queen, the lords in the dragon kingdom were right to assume she was dead.

All of it makes me look at the woman soundlessly asleep next to me in a whole new light. I just wish I knew what to do about it.

CHAPTER 19

Leric

The mage lights flicker, casting an amber glow through my eyelids, but I can't be bothered to open them. It's deathly silent, the only sounds are that of Calamity breathing and the gentle crackle of the fire light. Even with the bedroom door open, just a sliver, nothing filters in from the cavern outside of it. Everyone must still be asleep.

The bed's warmth seeps through me, tempting me to bask here all day, but that's not a luxury I can afford. I need to get up. Find food. Check on her. The list continues, never ending. I take a deep breath. And then another. It's not the cool cave air filling my lungs but something sweeter, headier. It coils through me, an intoxicating wave of pure, unbridled lust that sets every nerve alight.

Fuck... Calamity can't be in heat already. She just found out about her beast side less than 48 hours ago. Then again, I suppose being around shifters, especially those of her kind might've sped things up.

I breathe in deep, not wanting to move, not yet, not with how good it feels to have her here, curled against my chest. I'm not sure where the pillows went or when I wrapped my arms around her, but I don't hate it.

Calamity shifts, snuggling closer to me in her sleep. It's all the justification I need to wait. *Just one more minute.*

Her soft hair tickles my chest and I open my eyes. I'm not sure why, but I have a compulsion to run my fingers through the inky strands, to draw intricate patterns on her skin, to watch the light play along her curves. There's a power that rolls through me, starting at my toes and working its way up, circling around my heart and making it flutter against my ribs. It's *him*—my dragon—awake and ready to annoy the hell out of me.

As much as I want to stay, to enjoy this a little longer before she wakes up, I know I shouldn't. Not with her like this. He'll make it impossible. It was already hard enough to keep him at bay when he knew she was a shifter, but now that he knows she's a *dragon* it's going to be ten times harder.

I groan, cursing under my breath as my body betrays me.

Not the time, I say in my head, knowing he can hear me. My heartbeat quickens, my breaths become shorter, and heat pours through me, making his response clear without words.

Before I laid down in this bed, I set rules. I was to stay on my side, and she was to stay on hers, and now I'm wrapped around her like ivy would cling to stone—*cuddling* like some domesticated animal. Worse yet, I want to stay like this, intertwined with her, I just don't trust myself to do so. Not when my dragon is hovering just below the surface, pushing me, egging me on, dumping liquid lust into my godsdamn veins by the bucket full.

There's no reason for this, for me to want to be this close to her. It's not for warmth. My beast wouldn't let me freeze, and I've never needed comfort at night. I don't have habitual nightmares like Calamity, or a need for physical closeness, not even a ping of desire for it before now. This is possessive, my dragon trying to manipulate me into doing his bidding. To mark her, claim her as a mate. He's trying to show me how good it could be under the guise of comforting her..

Willing myself to move, I lift, feeling weight against my arm. It's shoved under her head, preventing me from going

anywhere without waking her up. I gently lift my other, hoping to use it and gently lift her enough to slip away, only to realize it's not just laid over her, my hand rests between her thighs mere inches from where they meet the rest of her body.

"She's ours. Can't you feel it in your gut? Something different," my dragon purrs in my mind.

She's a fury. My brows draw together. Megara's daughter belongs on the dragon throne, and mating us will prevent her from claiming it. We're banished, or have you forgotten?

"Semantics! Once she claims her crown, you'll be pardoned," he insists.

I huff out the air in my lungs. *"Right. Once she is CROWNED she can, and we'd have to prove her heritage before that can happen. Until then, my father will still make the rules. How do you think he'll react? We never returned, we failed to get Elaria to leave, word has likely traveled to him about her death, and then we show up mated to a Midicious, the daughter of the man who murdered her. Fury or not, he won't be happy. He won't show mercy."*

"Fine, then Jesper takes her up. We join them afterward. It doesn't change the fact that she's perfect—our mate."

No, she's who you WANT to be our mate, I snap back.

"You're dense. You know exactly what I mean. Most mates are chosen. True mates are rare. I can feel it, and I know you can too. You saved that girl before you knew anything about her. You felt drawn to her in ways you couldn't explain. Tell me that's not a true mate."

You know as well as I do that it's impossible to know. My lips are pressed together so hard they start to go numb. The only way to know is to court them and see if the mark simply scars or not. Until then, you're suspecting things that aren't there.

"Mark her, then. Prove me wrong."

No. She just found out what she is, and not even completely. I won't add to her confusion right now. Besides, she won't have the control of her creature to withstand the bond's pull. She'll

end up biting me back, and then she'll give up everything, her crown, her mother's legacy, all of it before she even knows it exists. So, fuck off.

A visceral growl rumbles, low and deep in my throat, but it's not of my doing. I try to swallow it down, but it's useless. There's no smothering it.

Calamity stirs at the noise, rubbing her eyes with the heel of her palm. "Good morning to you, too." She twists, ever so slightly to look over her shoulder, her golden eyes meeting mine. "I don't suppose you're going to blame me for blatantly disregarding your own rule, are you?"

The more she moves, the more intoxicating she becomes, her scent making my head spin.

"Don't move," I grit, baring my teeth as I hiss out a breath. My muscles strain as a wave of lust consumes me, infiltrating every part of my body until it aches. It's dangerous, but *fuck*... I can almost taste her, the power that pollutes the air between us. My cock twitches, and I bite my tongue hard enough to taste copper.

I need to get up, get out of this bed, do *something*. Anything to distract me.

"Are you alright? Did I do something?" she asks, searching my eyes as if the answer lies within them.

"It's not you. My beast is being an obnoxious ass right now. Just try to stay still, please."

She swallows, her spine elongating as if she's attempting to flatten herself to the bed. In reality, it just lifts her chin, lowers her shoulders, and bares her slender throat to me. Her skin is flawless, not a single mark left behind from where the Grimleer attacked her, so smooth and soft beneath my fingers. But if there's one thing you never do, it's leave your throat exposed to a shifter, and definitely not when you smell like dripping sex appeal. My senses sharpen; colors becoming more vivid, sounds more acute, and the power dancing between us flutters like cords of lightning roving over my flesh.

I salivate at the thought of kissing there, feeling her pulse against my lips, the way it would jump.

“What happens if I move?” she whispers, as if the threat can hear us.

“I don’t know, but um... You’re in heat, and...” I close my eyes, unable to finish the thought. My heart pounds in my chest, making a steady percussion ring in my ears. Between that and the way my hips threaten to move on their own accord, to grind against her, I can’t focus. Every bit of my energy is going toward staying still. And I’m quickly losing the battle.

“Your beast wants to mark me...” she says, finishing the thought herself.

“Yes.” I can’t look at her face as I speak, knowing how weak that sounds. Control shouldn’t be an issue. Up to now, it never has been. I’ve been around Vik countless times, and while Faelor and Jesper turned into complete fools, I always remained in control. But this time, I’ve never felt so helpless.

“Do you want to?”

“No... I mean, it’s not that I don’t. It’s complicated.” I try to untangle myself from her without letting my hands wander, regardless of how much they itch to do so. *Fuck*, I want to feel every curve of her body, watch her skin flush at my touch. My dragon stirs, mocking me, likely chuckling to himself, admiring a job well done.

“I don’t feel any different. Are you sure?” She turns to face me and I suck in a breath, regretting it the moment fire spills into my stomach.

I turn onto my back, finally unraveling from her, and hide my face in the crook of my elbow. “Yes. Without a doubt. From what I understand, you won’t feel any different. It’s just the unmated shifters around you that will.”

“What helps? Should I move away, leave the room?”

A hushed laugh has my lips pulling into a smile. “Unfortunately, I don’t think going anywhere except out of the

cave would make a difference, and I'll be fine. I just need a minute."

She curls onto her side facing me, hands tucked between her head and the pillow. "What helps ease it when Vik goes into heat?"

I meet her gaze, letting my hands rest against my stomach, just below my ribs. "Honestly, it's not as bad as it used to be with her. She's developed a pretty solid system. Usually, she sleeps with Ellie if we're home, Faelor if we're not, or does things on her own to ease the effects a bit. Sometimes, if it's really bad, Faelor lets her mark him or vice versa, but they're incredibly stubborn and have learned how to resist the pull to return the bite. The first time they tried that, we had to send Faelor to an entirely different island."

"I thought sex enticed shifters to mark someone more." She stares at me with such curiosity, it's hard not to divulge her every whim.

"I think it depends on the people involved. It can either ease the ache or make it worse. It's kind of like craving chocolate. For some, they can have a bite to curb the craving and then they can go on their way. For others, they try to take a bite, thinking it'll be enough, but tasting the temptation just adds to the desire for more."

Calamity traces the design on the quilt as she speaks. "So which is it for you? How do you curb your cravings?"

"Usually, I take care of them on my own until things are far too numb to react at all." My cheeks burn, flushing bright.

"You seemed pretty comfortable a few minutes ago. Did touching me make it easier?"

My gaze travels down the shape of her, taking in every inch, "Yes and no. It was hard to stay still, my hands wanted to roam, but having your skin pressed against mine made it easier to breathe. Why are you asking this?" I arch a brow quizzically.

Without a word, she lifts, sliding out from underneath the blanket to come straddle my lap, her gown bunching at her

hips. Her weight presses down on me and a deep sound comes out of my mouth, riding an exhale.

“What are you doing?”

“You took away my nightmares. Now, I’m helping you.”

“Oh.” My voice breaks and a sweet smile tugs at her lips. The light catches her eyes, turning them molten. She curls up against my chest, tugging the quilt over us. I’m not sure where to put my hands. If I put them around her, she might think I’m trapping her here, against me. If I play with the silky strands of her hair, she’ll read into it. So, I do the only other thing I can think of, I let them fall naturally to her thighs, resting on either side of me, then let out the breath I’ve been holding in my lungs.

“I thought you were going to kiss me,” I whisper, staring up at the stone ceiling, trying to force my breathing to stay calm, but she smells so good—so fucking delicious—it’s hard to keep my mind off it.

Still, her proximity does help, having her close to me is the second best thing to sinking my teeth in her throat. It doesn’t take all of the urges away, in fact, my pants are obnoxiously tight to the point I fear they’re cutting off circulation, but it does ease the pressure in my chest. It lessens the vice grip around my heart, and instead of fluttering chaotically, it slows to a steady rhythm again.

Calamity lifts just enough for her face to hover over mine. “Why did you think I’d kiss you? You think I want to kiss you?”

“Calamity—” I start, not sure what to admit and keep to myself, but the rest of my words are lost in the pull of her gaze, in the heat of her body so close to mine.

Her cheeks flame as she lowers, and I close my eyes on instinct, my stomach spinning as I wait for her lips to land on mine, only they never come. When I open them again, her grin is wicked, the golden rings of her eyes so bright they burn straight through me.

“You want *me* to kiss *you*,” she says, the amusement in her tone infectious. It’s not a question, not a theory. It’s a statement, and one I don’t think I can argue with... At least, not now. I’ve been caught. Oddly enough, I *do* want to kiss her. I want to do a lot more than that, thanks to the swarming pheromones saturating the air, but it’s wrong of me to act on such desires. Not with what I know, with who she is, with who I am. It wouldn’t do anyone any favors.

When I don’t answer fast enough, or perhaps she just didn’t get the reaction she was expecting, she braces her hands on either side of my head, elbows locked. Her hair falls around us like a veil, pooling on the bed beside me. “Unless....” she trails off, studying my face.

“Unless what?” I blink up at her. No matter how hard I try, I can’t keep my eyes from drifting to her full lips or stop my hands from rolling over her thighs. The motion makes her hips rock slightly, and the friction of her body against mine shoots a spark through me. My stomach vacuums against the bed, my muscles flexing. I clamp my teeth together, exhaling through my nose. I can feel my nostrils flare, and the crease that forms between her brows, tells me she noticed it too.

“Your magic, how does it work?” Her jaw locks, and gone is the playful ring to her voice. “Do you go into the dreams you give people? Was that actually you?” she asks, putting the dots together.

It was me in her dream last night, who she tried to kiss. I’m just not sure how to tell her that without her thinking the worst.

“Normally, I just project a thought, an idea for a dream into someone’s head, but something happened last night. I dream walked without trying to. I was sucked into your dream, and it wasn’t until you tried to kiss me that the connection weakened enough to let me out. But I did leave.”

“So it’s not just you being in the room, then...” Her golden eyes darken to a delicious amber and I lick my lips, trying to keep my hips glued to the bed, to keep from rocking hers. Despite how intoxicating it is to breathe her in, and the fire

that only seems to burn brighter in my middle, I doubt grinding against her would make this any better. In fact, it might get me smacked.

Shaking my head no. “Not always. It depends on the cause of the nightmares. If it’s from not feeling safe, then yes, my presence is enough—or anyones—but if they’re from trauma, no.” I let go of her thighs, not realizing how tight my grip had become on them. My hands form fists at my sides. It’s the only way I can ensure they stay to themselves.

“Then you saw Meg...” Her voice is barely audible. If it weren’t for the fact I keep staring at her mouth, I wouldn’t have heard her, and she’s inches away from me.

“Yes. Was she in the dungeon with you?”

Calamity sits back, still straddling my hips. “You could say that. She raised me.”

“So, she’s your mother?” My eyebrows raise.

“*Chosen* mother. I’m not sure who my biological mother is. Asmo wouldn’t tell me and Meg said she didn’t know. I’d made a promise to her, saying if I ever made it out I wouldn’t speak a word about knowing her. She said it would only put me in danger, but clearly the secret’s out.” Her lips twist as she chews the inside of her cheek.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to invade your privacy. Did she say why knowing her would put you in danger?”

She shakes her head. “You should’ve told me how your magic worked, but I forgive you. It allowed me to see her again. Even if she was a figment of my memories, there aren’t enough words to tell you what that meant to me...” She tucks her chin to her chest, rolling the hem of her dress between her fingers. She’s quiet for far too long, but I’m not sure what to say. “If you want me to kiss you, why run when I tried in the dream?”

“I didn’t think you knew it was me, for starters, and that felt wrong.” I chew my bottom lip, choosing to stare at where her fingers twist the fabric of her gown. “Just because we want to do something, doesn’t mean we should.”

Calamity tilts her weight, drawing my eyes back to hers. There's no witty remark, no snarky comment as she leans in, her fingers lifting my chin. The air becomes trapped in my throat. I go rigid beneath her, unmoving, unblinking, unbreathing, then her lips crush to mine and every ounce of tension eases from my body, dissipating in an instant.

It's soft at first, her lips gently brushing against mine, then deepens, and deepens until my tongue teases her own. I feel weightless as I grab the back of her neck, pulling her closer while getting lost in the taste of her lips, the smell of her hair, the way her hands rove over my skin. Goosebumps rise to the surface, as if seeking the power that radiates off of her.

It's mesmerizing... entrancing... and just as I begin to give in, to accept that I can control myself in this state of bliss, there's a knock on the door. Whoever it is, doesn't wait for a response before the hinges squeak open.

"Good morning! Are you hungry—" Vik stops in the doorway and Calamity jolts away, but my hands keep her in place as I peer around her body. Vik's violet eyes go wide and her hand shoots up to cover her mouth. "Oh my... I, um, interrupted. I'm so sorry." The door clicks shut and I exhale heavily, knowing she's about to tell everyone. Closing my eyes, I let go of Calamity's head, then draw my lower lip between my teeth, tasting her there.

Calamity's golden orbs are pinned on me, and she tentatively gets off my lap. "I, uh..." She scratches her head. "I..."

Running my fingers through my hair, I stand, adjusting myself. "I'll take care of it. Don't worry. Why don't you get dressed? Your clothes are on the desk. I couldn't find any pants that might fit you, but we'll be in Ashbourne by the end of the day tomorrow. We'll get something there."

My heart is in my throat as I leave the room. I don't even make it out of the doorway before spotting Jesper's head poking through the crack of his door, his eyes on me as he mouths, "Oh my gods."

CHAPTER 20

Leric

“**F** or fates sake...” Jesper whispers, sneaking across the cavern.

I glance to my left, where Vik is speed walking down the row of doors, disappearing into the spring room.

“Don’t look at her,” he says, and I reluctantly turn my attention back to him. “She’s a snitch, but she’ll tell everyone *except* Brenn.”

He remains vigilant, keeping an eye out for anyone else who decides to step out of one of the rooms. Despite the circumstances his high-stepped tiptoe is enough to bring a smile to my face, and he comes a significant distance in just a couple seconds. However, Jesper screeches to a halt in the middle of the cavern, his spine lengthening. Eyes closed, he brings a clenched fist to his lips, like it could hush the sexually frustrated whimper that leaves them. He takes a huge step back as the lump in his throat bobs. Only then does he look at me again, his eyes pleading as if he’s in pain. “I’m going to need you to come this way. I didn’t realize her lady time was going to happen that quickly or be that potent... Someone should give you a medal for surviving a night in there and being able to walk afterward.”

I shake my head, crossing the cavern. His face scrunches as I near. “Fuck, *I take it back*. Just stay over there. You reek of that divine woman. Perhaps a bath, *then* come find me.”

“I don’t have time. Do you want to know what I found out, or not?” I cock my head, crossing my arms over my chest.

“*Found out?* What did you find out? I was coming to talk to you about what I saw just now.”

I cock my head in challenge and he pouts his lower lip, shoulders slumping. “Fine, I’ll suffer. Tell me.”

Continuing forward, I close the distance between us. I’d much rather be prepared for their questions before telling the others, and whisper yelling across the cave isn’t going to help with that.

“I hope you plan to at least court her. Put us all out of our misery,” Jesper says, plugging his nose, as if that’ll help.

I give him a stern look, arching a brow, and he sighs heavily before bringing a mug of ale to his lips, taking a deep gulp as if he needs liquid courage to get through this. At this point I almost wonder if he has the right idea.

Clearing my throat, I come right out with it. “I think Calamity is a dragon.”

Jesper chokes on his drink, his eyes watering as they meet mine. “Excuse me? Did you just say—”

“You heard me,” I whisper, trying to keep my voice down.

There’s a seriousness that falls over Jesper’s face, one I’m not used to seeing. “Did you sleep with her or did you *sleep with her*? I wasn’t sure if I caught sight of some sneaky nonsense about to go down or concluding. A man can never be sure with just a glimpse. Vik’s body was in the way.”

My eyes narrow, and he holds up his hands in surrender.

“Fine, keep your secrets. I’ll find out sooner or later from Vik when she makes her rounds.”

I can’t honestly say what would’ve happened had Vik not come in. The moment Calamity kissed me, the consequences

felt more like inconveniences than anything else.

“I’m not sure if it makes you feel any better, but I wish you would. Maybe it would convince you to take one for the team and mark her, and that would work well for me right now. Vik and Faenor do it all the time. It can’t be that hard to refrain, right?”

“A week of discomfort is a lot easier than months of temptation, waiting for the mark to wear off. Better yet, a lifetime of being mated to someone you don’t want.”

Jesper cocks a brow. “You telling me you don’t want her? Anyone with eyeballs can see that’s a lie. Your dragon has already made it known. Claim her, and he shuts up. It’s a win-win for all parties involved.” He shakes his head as if it’s unfathomable.

“She’s Megara’s daughter,” I blurt, desperate to change the direction this conversation is going.

The color drains from his face, then he turns a tight circle, a hand dragging over his jaw. “I mean, I guess I can see it... Are you sure?”

“She could be a spitting image of the queen.” I start ticking off fingers. “Same eyes, same hair—”

“There are plenty of people with black hair. Golden eyes... Sure, they’re rare, but it doesn’t mean she’s the queen’s daughter, or that she’s a dragon. What made you think that? Was it something she said?”

“I entered her dream—”

“You did *what?*” He frowns, making his disappointment known. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“It was an accident, but every inch of wall space in her cell was covered in paintings of the dragon realm. And when her dream started to become a nightmare, I tried to show her how to control it, told her to think about someone she wanted to see and the queen showed up. Calamity threw herself at her in tears. The resemblance was fucking uncanny.”

“Alright... That’s...” He blows up his cheeks. “If that’s true, then we almost sold the heir to the dragon throne to a godsdamn elf. This changes everything.” Jesper threads his fingers through his long dark hair, pushing it back out of his face. “Furies are supposed to be triplets, right? We’ve got one little monster, but where are the other two?”

“I don’t know. There wasn’t anything in her dream suggesting she has sisters. If there were three, they all would’ve been locked up. Not just Calamity. The king would’ve wanted to study them all.”

Jesper gives a curt nod. “True, but how do we know the queen isn’t still there? And Calamity could’ve been locked up for being defiant. The other two could be in the castle.”

“I don’t have the answers. All I know is what I saw.” I can hardly bring myself to look at him from beneath my lashes. “Regardless, the dragon throne is her birth right. She can’t shift yet, and even if she could, she can’t just show up there on her own.”

“Well, we’re all banished, so... We might be able to fly with her up there, but if we step foot on any of the three moons, our wings are toast, and then so are we.”

I don’t say anything, pursing my lips.

Jesper nods, as if the pieces are slowly coming together in his mind. “*Fuck*, alright. How does this work then? If she’s crowned, she might pardon us. Then, as long as we show up with proof in hand that she’s the rightful heir, maybe they’ll be grateful. So, how do we prove it?”

“Her dragon in its shifted form should be enough.”

“Then we’ll teach her to shift, then take her up, drop her off, and come back. Easy peasy.”

“I can’t just toss her out to the wolves. She’s never been there. Someone needs to stay with her. Faelor won’t leave Vik, and Vik won’t leave Ellie. And I doubt Brenn and Mira would have interest in going back up to the moons, so that leaves you and me. I’m not going to ask you to risk your life, so...” I trail off, letting him finish the thought on his own.

“Then they all stay down here and that’s their choice. They can continue to guard the Luminaries while we take Calamity to the dragon realm. Once things are good, we come back down—or stay.”

“You’d really want to go back?” I arch a brow.

“Maybe. It’s not like I have anything tying me here or calling me there, but I won’t let you do it alone.”

A door clicks shut. I can feel Jesper’s eyes on me as I glance over my shoulder, seeing Calamity leave the room. Her dark hair is brushed, braided down one side, her dress and corset fixed. A part of me misses that nightgown, though... how comfortable she looked in it. The way her body moved. With the corset on, it’s like she’s stiffer now, more poised. She gives me a closed lip smile, then heads toward the store room, likely looking for something to eat.

I wait until she’s inside before I speak again. “What if my father refuses to evacuate the throne?”

“Your father might be an ass, but he’s honorable when it comes to rules. He’ll step aside. But that’s not what’s eating at you, is it? You’re worried he’ll order our execution before she can be crowned.”

“Do you blame me? Elaria’s gone. I failed to get her to leave Solaria and we both ended up in the king’s dungeon. Not to mention, I was his only heir and I abandoned him after being released. My mother was his true mate. With her gone, he’ll never take another which means there’ll be no more children in his future. He’d rather kill me than let me inherit his lordship over Frost Forge.”

“He can’t blame you for Elaria... You tried. She had a mate here. Nothing you could’ve done would’ve convinced her to leave without him. And you might be a traitor in the law’s eyes, but you stayed here for a noble purpose. What do you think would’ve happened to Brenn, Mira, and Vik had you not found them? You stayed to take care of the dragons that couldn’t leave and to aid the rebels so one day, we could get our queen back. You were braver than any of those cowards. They took their freedom and ran.”

“My father will never see it that way.” I shake my head, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Fine, then we don’t tell her.” Jesper tilts his head, giving me a knowing look. “The outer realm is never going to be safe for her and you knew that when you agreed to Asmo’s offer. Where did you intend to take her?”

“I thought we could keep her identity a secret. All of you agreed she didn’t look like a princess, so...” I shrug.

“She tells one person, or any of us accidentally slip, she’ll be burned at the stake. There are seven realms, Lor. She’s a dragon. She doesn’t need to stay here in this realm. We can leave. If taking her to the dragon realm is an issue, then go to Hell Hold, the Elven Isles, anywhere other than here. Mate the girl. Be happy for a change, start a family, whatever you want to do.”

“She deserves to know and decide for herself what she wants to do. I don’t want courting me to influence that decision, either.”

“Then we’ll figure it out, whatever she decides, but even if the others choose to stay and guard the Luminaries, you’re stuck with me. If that’s walking into our execution on the moons or finding some random place somewhere else, so be it.” He takes another sip of his ale.

I’m not sure what to say to that beyond thanking him.

“Are we sure Calamity doesn’t already know who Megara is? Or that she’s a dragon? If there are paintings in her cell, well her dream cell, I think it’s safe to assume she knows something about us.”

“No... If she knew her mother was the queen of dragons, then she wouldn’t have needed to steal a bestiary to figure out what she is.”

“Is it possible the bestiary was her trying to figure out what we are?”

“I don’t know. Vik talked to her and she can sniff out a lie anywhere with her magic. She believes Calamity didn’t know she was a shifter at all, let alone a dragon.” I weigh my head

side to side. “I just wish I knew why they kept it from her. Asmo was there when the queen gave herself over. He knew who she was. Why not tell Calamity that, especially if she’s her daughter? She said Asmo and Megara raised her.... There’s got to be something we’re missing.”

“Too bad you wiped his memories. You could’ve just asked.” Jesper shrugs.

My spine straightens, my body unmoving as I stare at him.

“You didn’t wipe his memories?” His voice carries across the cavern, his eyes widening.

“Keep your voice down!” I whisper-shout. “And I did, just not everything. He needed to remember her to pull off the execution, but he was supposed to come find me after he faked Calamity’s death so I can remove the rest. He never showed. It’s been days.”

“And you didn’t think that was suspicious? Like he could be fucking dead or in a dungeon cell? Or worse, like Brenn believes, that this is all a trap?”

“Honestly, I hadn’t thought about it until now. I’ve been preoccupied.”

Jesper tosses his hands. “Yeah, I’d say.” He starts to pace in front of me, then quickly turns to walk toward the stairwell. “Let’s go. We’re getting answers.”

“What are you going to do, summon him?” The sarcasm hangs heavy in the air between us. He stops and I almost plow into him, not prepared for the sudden shift as he whirls to face me again.

“The boy’s got demon blood in there somewhere. I’m going to draw a pretty star, sing a little kumbaya and *poof*. Daddy Asmo, in the flesh.”

“I’m beginning to get a little worried, seeing as I understood that.”

Jesper grins, rocking his head side to side as he trots to the hot spring door. “Watch Calamity,” he yells inside, then shuts it before Vik can reply. “Now, let’s go raid bar boy’s stash for

some witchcraft shit, ay? He's gotta have what we need in there."

We gather what we need from Gael's alchemy den, then head upstairs, opting to check on the horses while we're there. Once outside in the clearing between the forest and the bar, Jesper gets to work pouring salt. He creates thick white lines in the grass, while I set out the old, well-abused candles. One for each of the five points.

Then the bar door opens and the both of us freeze in place until Faelor steps through the crevasse.

"You know, you could have warned a man before you coming out here to do fucking seances," he grumbles.

"Not a seance. A summoning," Jesper corrects, continuing to work.

I shoot him an empathetic look. "It was kind of spontaneous."

"*Spontaneous?* Is that what we're calling banging the enemy's daughter these days? Vik tells me everything." He arches a thick blonde brow, coming closer.

"There was no *banging*. She kissed me. That's it," I groan, setting the last candle down.

Faelor lets the subject go, looking over the salt star on the ground. "Who are we summoning?"

"Asmodeus," I say, quickly looking away.

In the corner of my vision, Faelor's mouth opens and closes twice, before he can form a response. "Why? I thought he forgot about all of us."

Jesper snorts. "Yeah, I thought that, too. Except Loric didn't completely erase his memories. He was supposed to come back and didn't. But, crazier than that, Loric believes Calamity is Megara the Flame Keeper's daughter. So, we need to know where the other two are, and if there's any truth to that."

Faelor's face goes pale. "How? The queen is dead, isn't she?"

“Assumed dead. Everyone thought the king killed her, but her skeleton isn’t on the bone bridge and no one else has seen her since. The mad king held her prisoner, and could’ve easily forced her into having his child. Who knows.” I take a seat in the grass as Jesper walks around the rim of a circle he drew in salt around the star.

“So, you’re going to ask Asmodeus?” Faelor asks, arms crossed over his broad chest, a piece of grass twirling in between his fingers. “Are we sure Asmodeus is still alive? He was going to deceive the king. It’s possible the king found out.”

“There’s only one way to know.” Jesper gestures to the sigil.

“And if he’s locked in the dungeon, your spell’s not going to work. He’s the dungeon master, isn’t he? Even if he’s just working there walking around the halls, your spell isn’t going to work.”

I breathe out heavily. “Way to be optimistic. It’s the only shot we got. It’s worth a try.”

Jesper starts to light the candles. His lightning crackles around his fingers as he lowers them to the wicks. The candles spring to life, the flames taking on almost a purple hue just like his magic.

They flicker in the darkness, casting an eerie glow on Jesper’s face as he takes his place at the north point of the star. He shrugs, rolling his shoulders back and cracking his knuckles. “Alright, bitches. Put your war faces on and let’s summon the Prince of Death.”

“I’m not sure he likes that title anymore,” I say, resting my arms on my knees. “I don’t think anyone has referred to him as the prince of anything since he was banished here.”

“Well, too bad. That’s what we’re going with.” Jesper closes his eyes, holding his hands out, and starts to recite the incantation. The flames of the candles flare, reaching up to lick the air in long columns. The ground in the middle of the star begins to turn, blurring as it starts to spin faster and faster,

then turns pitch black, as if it was the opening to a cauldron of ink.

“I call forth the Prince of Death, Asmodeus Morningstar,” Jesper says, and the texture of the portal ripples.

A hand reaches through, followed by another, then a head as Asmo crawls out. He grunts as he struggles to get out of the portal, but none of us move to help him, fearing the possibility of getting sucked in. His skin is covered in the black goop, and it’s not until he’s completely through that it beads and runs off his body, like it was never there.

His mismatched eyes slide between us, then land on me in a scowl. “What the fuck, Loric? We agreed to never do this shit again.” Asmodeus curses, climbing to his feet.

“Call it extraordinary circumstances.” I give him a toothy grin, oddly satisfied with his struggle.

Asmodeus pauses mid-swipe, dusting off his pants, his face expressionless as he asks, “Is Calamity alright?”

“Calamity’s fine, but you forgot to tell me she’s the dragon queen’s *daughter*.” Getting to my feet, I pin him with a glare.

Asmo holds his hands up in surrender, but he doesn’t deny it or look the slightest surprised. “I didn’t have much choice.”

Jesper chuckles darkly. “Oh really? How’s that? It seems pretty important when you’re the one asking us to take care of her.”

“First off, I asked *Loric*. Secondly, it was in Calamity’s best interest to not know. She doesn’t need the guilt that comes with knowing your parents were forced into conceiving you.”

I stand up taller, my mind going quiet. “Why would the king be forced—” The words die in my throat. “He’s not her father, is he?”

Good gods... This poor girl. She’s about to have the very ground she stands on ripped out from underneath her. Everything about her life has been a lie.

Asmo’s eyes find mine, the color draining from them. “The king gave Meg a choice. Sleep with me or do it his way. I

didn't get a say in the matter, but she chose me. I tried to make it as bearable as possible for her. When Meg found out she was pregnant, we agreed to not tell the three of them. The king had planned to claim them as his own, anyway."

"You could've at least told her she was a dragon," I say, pushing my hair out of my face. "You could've told me. Where are the other two, then?"

"Dead, and I didn't tell Calamity because she might not be a dragon. Not entirely. The king was never able to get her to fully shift, despite how hard he tried. She's endured so much..." Asmo's voice breaks, his head dropping a moment before looking at me again. "She has my blood in her veins. Who knows which side she pulled more from. My hope was that being around shifters, especially dragons, would help coax her creature out. Maybe without the king suppressing her she'd learn how to shift. If she could do that, she could leave this realm behind and never look back. I even gave her the crystal. Meg said it helped her dragon side channel energy, and that it made them stronger. Did it work?"

"Not like you think it did. She shifted and her dragon took possession, but she didn't transform completely. It's a step in the right direction, though... The queen's dead, isn't she?" My voice barely projects enough to reach him, but I don't know if I have the strength to make it any louder. Not when I've witnessed the way Calamity threw herself into Megara's arms.

"Yes..." He tucks his lips between his teeth. "The day Calamity's powers manifested, the king killed Meg, trying to learn how her immortality and magic worked. He didn't need her anymore..."

I don't think anyone moves. I don't think any of us breathe as we take that in. Our beloved queen, the woman who saved me and Jesper from that dungeon died on that fucking altar... just as she likely endured the same torture the king inflicted on the other dragons in his care.

"Where's her body?" Faelor doesn't look at Asmodeus as he speaks, his eyes pinned to the dark grass at his feet. "Is it on the bridge?"

“Her body was in the crypt until you took Calamity.” His jaw saws at the hinge.

My heart plummets into my stomach, all too aware of what he’s about to say. He needed to fake Calamity’s death, and even with his gift of reanimating the dead, he needed a body, someone who looked like Calamity, to make it convincing.

Asmodeus continues and my heart breaks a little more with every word, “I’d promised Calamity I wouldn’t kill anyone... I used Meg to fake her death. She was all I could find that looked close enough to ensure the king didn’t question it.” He looks up at the moons, blinking as if he’s holding back tears. “She’s in the riff.”

“It’s not your fault,” I say, the muscle in my jaw feathering. “It’s the king’s. You did what you had to do.”

I’m not sure what I would’ve done in his position, but I know one thing. Megara is dead while Calamity’s heart still beats. Even though I barely know Calamity, I probably would’ve done the same.

“Says you,” Faelor snaps. “He defiled the body of our queen.” The hate that drips from his tone sends a wave of nerves clawing up my throat.

“She was dead, Faelor. The queen sacrificed herself to free the dragons she reigned over. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say she would’ve easily given up anything, her soul, her body, her legacy, whatever for her own flesh and blood.” Jesper lifts his chin, daring Faelor to continue. The air seems to electrify at the very sound of his voice, his power emanating in the air.

“He’s right.” I chew my lip, looking at Asmodeus, my thoughts narrowing in on his white eye. The one stuck in the ether. He’d tried to scry the future, but without the knowledge of how to do so safely, he lost focus and his eye became lost in the spell. He gets premonitions from the past and future at random, and always will unless he can figure out a way to stabilize it. It’s possible he’s seen Calamity’s future, that he knows where she goes, the dragon kingdom or one of the other seven realms.

“You’re just trying to make up for the fact that your dragon wants to mate his daughter,” Faelor scoffs, a snarl pulling on his lip.

Asmodeus’s eyes narrow in on me. “Is that true?”

“No.” I school my features, praying to the gods he can’t sense the lie. My throat goes bone dry. I swallow, desperate to wet it, to form words, thoughts, anything. His eyebrows arch, but he doesn’t comment. “You wouldn’t happen to know where we take her, do you?” I ask, hoping to take the heat off myself.

His lips curve into his signature smirk. “I can’t choose who’s future or past I see. It’s always either mine or my brother’s, or the woman who kills the king. The three of us are linked in some way.”

“I know, but it was worth a shot. I thought it might’ve changed with her being your daughter.”

“There’s only been one vision, and I think it’s because I was there. I had it a couple days before I gave her to you, but it wouldn’t help you. It’s best if you don’t know.” His smile is weak, but he inches closer to me. “I don’t have anything else I can tell you.”

“That’s not true. You could tell me why you didn’t come back to let me erase your memories.” I arch a brow, my feet cemented in place.

“The king never questioned it. He was too busy getting ready for his gauntlet to care about the specifics. He saw Calamity go over the edge and that was enough.”

“He’s hosting a gauntlet?” I tilt my head, wondering if that might be enough of a distraction to fly out of the barrier from the mainland. Calamity will be too clumsy to shift on the deck of a ship, and there’s no point in trudging all the way to the outer realm if we don’t have to.

“Yeah, his daughter, Scarlet, is being given away.” His voice is void of emotion, numb to the absolute shit show he’s been living in. I’ve lost track of how many daughters the king’s

given away since Asmo became the dungeon master, but for him, it's nothing new.

“You mean led to slaughter,” I correct. Heat burns through my veins at the thought of it. The king gives most of his daughters away as prizes to whoever wins the blood bath, and it turns my gut inside out, especially knowing it could've been Calamity. No one deserves to be offered up like a sacrificial lamb to the deadliest monster in the realm.

“I don't like it any more than you do. I tried to change it for years, but I can't. It's why I stopped getting close to the princesses. Every time the king hosted one, it felt like losing my own child, and I just couldn't go through it anymore.” A single tear runs down his face as he stands tall. “I should've come back so you could finish. There are definitely some memories you missed.”

“I didn't miss anything...” I admit, twisting my lips. “I found a way to make you forget her, while still keeping your memories intact. I changed what she looks like. You can't conjure her if you don't remember her face.”

The tears begin to run, dripping off his cheeks before he can wipe them away. “So, I can keep them?”

“Yes. Though, I still have to make you forget today and what I told you on the mountain top... along with Meg taking Calamity's place in the riff. Therein lies the problem. If you know she's alive, eventually you'll come looking and you'll have the face of someone who no longer exists in your memory...”

“And if I try to go to her, I could become trapped in the soul well. I'll die.” His eyes are vacant, here but not as he stares into space. “I either have to think she's dead to keep my memories, or have no memories at all.”

I nod, hating that there's no good choice to this, but to me, one is the lesser of the two evils. One allows him to remember how much he loved her, the way she made him feel. And if it were me, I'd suffer through the loss than forget she ever existed.

“Ok... Go ahead.” Asmodeus’s eyes gloss over, his lips twitching as he fights off tears. “Kill my daughter.”

I hold up my hands and Asmodeus steps closer, letting me rest them on his temples. My magic swarms my fingers, swirling in my veins like liquid ice, and my breath comes out in a dense fog. Memories explode in my vision, but this time, I shift through them slower.

Making him forget Calamity’s face was easy. I just pushed an image I’d created into his head, and my Calamity replaced the one he knew. But physically altering entire memories is much more difficult. It’s like looking through thousands of eyes at once, trying to find one single moment.

I wipe today from his head, replacing it with a trip to the market, then I erase ever telling him to fake Calamity’s death entirely. He won’t miss a few minutes of time. Then, I find the ones associated with pulling Megara from the king’s family crypt, and him sending her over the cliff. And by the time I’m done, he believes his precious Calamity never left the dungeon, that she stepped into the riff, gone for good.

A part of me wishes I could change it, to make it something less gruesome, but the king knows and believes this is how Calamity died. Asmodeus has to be on the same page too. I start to retract my magic now that the job is done, but pause...

There’s so much about her I don’t know, and at my fingertips is a mind that knows absolutely everything. Her face might be different, but the events are real. Before I can talk myself out of it, I begin to sift through his head, trying to learn as much as I can. Only the things I find are nothing short of bittersweet.

CHAPTER 21

Calamity

Smearing the charcoal with my finger, I try to finish my drawing before we leave. Having set up in the open cavern, I do my best to capture this place, with the large ceilings and the crystals shining from the stone walls. Though, I wish I had colors to commemorate the glow they emit, the bright amber of the mage lights, including the fire pit in the center of the room that seems to burn constantly but never eat at the wood the flames lick against.

No matter how hard I work at it, it'll never be as great as the real thing, but it's something...

"I swear you've been working at that thing for two hours now, at least. Don't your fingers get sore?" Vik's voice comes from behind me somewhere, making me stiffen.

Having successfully avoided her since she walked in this morning, to say I'm not looking forward to whatever conversation is about to happen would be an understatement.

She takes a seat next to me, leaning against her hand to peer at my drawing. "You know, when I said Loric would be there for you when you went into heat, I hadn't intended for that to be this soon." Her lips pull into a teasing grin, and my shoulders relax a bit. "You have all the men, minus Brenn,

literally wandering around outside in the dark, too. So, I'm assuming that means no one has marked each other?"

"No. Nothing happened." I train my eyes to the drawing, continuing to smooth out some of the harsh lines.

"Oh, I am many things, but I am not blind." She laughs, but I'm not sure if it's genuine or not. "It's okay. It's not anything to be ashamed of. You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to, but if you do, I might be able to help. With how much pressure you're putting on that charcoal, I'm surprised it hasn't snapped."

I can feel her eyes on me, but I'm not sure what to say about it. Loric was reacting to some magical nonsense, and I... Well, I was grateful for him showing me a way to see Meg. That's what that was, nothing more. Just two people drawn to each other for completely different reasons.

"I really am sorry about barging in. Loric said he'd be in the room he chose, so I hadn't expected him to be there with you." There's something sincere in her tone, something that makes me stop.

Meeting her violet eyes, I kiss my teeth. "I'm not upset. It was an accident. I'm just more confused than anything. Like why now? It's the most inconvenient timing ever." I place my charcoal back in the box, closing my sketchbook.

"That could be for a lot of reasons. Sometimes, there's not an explanation for things, but if I had to guess, it's that you're around shifters, especially unmated male shifters. Your body is doing its thing."

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I ponder it a moment but quickly shake my head. "It can't be that. Gael was unmated and he shared a cell right next to me. And he's only one of the shifters that passed through the dungeons while I was there. The guards, mostly, are hellhounds. That can't be it."

She smiles knowingly. "Yeah, but they probably weren't alphas. Loric and Jesper are, and their presence has an impact."

"In what way?"

“In the way that power rules everything in the shifter world. They’re some of the strongest shifters out there. Unfortunately, our animals choose when we go into heat, not us, and when they see someone they think is an ideal mate, they’re going to throw everything they’ve got at them to lock ’em down.”

“My beast did this?” My throat turns to sandpaper as I watch Vik nod. “She’s trying to get Loric to mate me.”

“Yeah. That about sums it up. You’ve been through a lot, escaping the king’s dungeon, my brother being a dick, the Grimleer... I’d imagine that she’s looking for protection. Mine tends to when I get scared or experience extreme emotions.” She shrugs as if it’s just another day in paradise.

“You were scared. We were almost eaten, then that thing from the bestiary box tried to take our head off. You’ve been a bundle of nerves since we fell under Loric’s protection, wondering how we’d survive in the Luminaries since everyone there hates the king.”

The blood seeps from my face, my heart fluttering away as if it can’t take a full beat, yet I can hear the echo of it in my ears. The cavern seems to take on a stifling heat, turning my corset into a prison. It’s too tight, constricting my lungs until I’m struggling for breath, getting nothing more than a shallow gasp.

“He made you feel safe. He laid down in that bed and you breathed for the first time. Of course, I’m going to try. We spoke about this and agreed being mated to one of them, or at least courting, was in our best interest. This just speeds things up.”

“Excuse me.” I rise, my limbs trembling, gathering my things with hands that feel foreign to me. Numb. The world around me begins to tilt, but I force my spine to remain erect—to harden—and my feet to carry me. I rush for the room I’ve been staying in, but not before my gaze inadvertently catches Loric and Jesper descending the stairwell. My eyes lock with Loric’s for a mere second before I tear my gaze away, then slip inside and shut the door, making sure to leave it open just a sliver.

I don't waste any time. My fingers tear the corset laces from their eyelets, and once they're all out, I toss the boned fabric on the table, my lungs greedily drinking in the air. But it's futile. All of this is. No matter what I take off, the corset, the top layer of my skirts, nothing eases the tension or allows my heart to slow its rapid pace. Tears brim in my eyes, threatening to spill over, and I take a seat on the bed's edge, needing the support it gives.

When did this happen? I might not have had a say in what I did or where I slept in the dungeon, but my thoughts were my own. My actions were my doing. Now, none of it is. I can't even control my own body. Looking up, I try to keep the tears from falling, hoping I can reabsorb them somehow if I look up long enough.

My beast did this.... orchestrated this... She planned to coerce Loric into biting me, and we'd spoken about such, in terms of trying to court someone in his group, but we never discussed forcing someone to do it via some sort of magic pull. It feels wrong.

There's a quiet knock at the door, and it slowly creaks open. I don't bother to look to see who it is. I already have a hunch.

"Are you okay?" Loric steps inside, leaving the door open just a sliver, exactly how I'd left it.

"I'm just lovely. Thanks for asking." My voice is laced with a bitterness I don't necessarily feel. Regardless, it shouldn't be aimed at him. He's not the problem here. He's not forcing me into some archaic mating ritual. My beast is.

The hinges of the door don't move, which tells me he hasn't left, but the room stays deathly silent, aside from the crackling mage lights. Stealing a glance, I find him leaning against the door frame, his dark hair falling in wayward strands in front of his face, the rest is thoroughly raked through by his fingers. Those silver eyes are warmer than I remember, but he's silent as a mouse.

I'm not really sure why he's here. If it were me, I'm not sure I'd do the same—come check on him. Maybe it's because I understand what it's like to be completely and utterly at

someone's mercy, to have no say in things. Maybe it's just me, because he's here, nonetheless.

His shirt is untucked, a different color than before. It's a light linen, but only the sleeves. The rest is covered by a hooded green vest. It's almost as dark as his cloak, though he's not wearing it. It's laid across the table near the bedroom door, beneath my discarded corset. Loric lolls his head to the side, resting it against the door frame, like it's too heavy for him to hold up. All it does is emphasize the sharp edge of his jaw, the thick tendon in his neck. He flexes his hand, veins raised and arms crossed.

It's impossible to read him, to gauge how he's feeling or what he's thinking. But he must think I'm a mess. I've completely disassembled my dress, piece by piece until the only thing that remains of it is the long, dark brown fabric, the base layer that everything else piles on top of. I busy my hands, rolling the hem of the flared sleeve between my fingers.

"You know, I never did like corsets much. They take too much time," he says.

I twist in place, a crease forming between my brow.

The warm look in his eye is gone, replaced by something else as he surveys me. At first, I believe it's him assessing the crazy, but his eyes linger on my dress, as if he's fascinated with the color. It's nothing fancy, plain but mine. Meg hand-stitched it for me, and that alone made such a simple dress worth more than gold in my eyes.

But Loric doesn't know that. To him, it shouldn't be anything of interest. There's no embroidering or embellishments that would draw his eye. Just looking at it, one wouldn't be able to tell me apart from a servant.

So, why stare at it like this?

"It's you he's looking at. Not the dress." That thought alone is a punch to the gut... A direct result of my beast filling him with unwanted—unmasked for—desire.

So she does speak... And clearly, Hyde sees nothing wrong with what she's doing.

I roll my eyes, shaking my head at the thought of her taking on characteristics of the real Hyde, the one from the story that Dr. Jekyll tried to banish.

Loric eases away from the door frame, his boots clicking against the stone floor as he inches closer. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong, or shall I attempt to guess?”

“Truly, I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

From the corner of my eye, I watch him close the gap between us, each step measured, deliberate. “You barely know me. How can you possibly know what I sound like?”

“Everyone’s voice changes when they cry. It’s a distinct tone, like they have something plugging up their nostrils.” He crouches before me, balancing on his toes with perfect grace. His jaw twists, eyes focusing on me as if he’s trying to solve some invisible puzzle on my face.

I arch a brow. “That’s a rather vivid description. Thank you for that.”

He chuckles to himself, still looking me over without shame. It’s almost like he’s hunting for some physical wound he can fix to put an end to this. Still, there’s a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “I’m not doing a very good job at this... I should probably warn you, I have no idea how to handle myself around tears.”

I find that hard to believe. I can’t even imagine him being anything other than confident. Even now he doesn’t seem nervous, or out of place, or even inconvenienced in the slightest to be here.

His silver eyes darken beneath a veil of long lashes, and that look alone could leave me in shambles. It could unravel me at the seams if I let it.

Butterflies. Nothing *but* butterflies.

“Did Vik say something? If so, I am not opposed to going out there, tracking her down, and then stepping aside so you can punch her.”

A laugh escapes me, unbidden, my lips curving into a grin despite the tears streaking down my face. I'm not really sure when they started, but I wipe them away, all the same. "You mean you wouldn't do it for me?"

"Gods, no." His brow crinkles as he shakes his head. "I'd never punch *a lady*, but I might hold her down for you, if you asked nicely."

I study him, the way his eyes seem to toggle between mine. "You're a terrible liar."

He places a hand over his heart in mock offense. "Me? What do I possibly have to lie about?"

"You're very good with people who cry," I say, licking the salt off my lips.

"Okay, you got me there. It's gotta stay our little secret, though," he whispers, gently tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. "But you still haven't answered my question."

I exhale through my nose. "It wasn't Vik... Did you know my beast facilitated this, that she made me go into..." I trail off, not wanting to say the word, but I gesture to myself and I think he gets the hint. "She's manipulating you with some diabolical plan."

Loric tilts his head thoughtfully. "Diabolical is a strong word, but yes. I did. And it's more common than you think. Lots of shifters do it. It comes with the territory."

"Well, it doesn't feel normal to me." I scoff, looking down at my hands. "I'm not sure how to feel about any of this. She spoke to me, and for a moment, I felt less alone. But now... I might as well be a puppet, with no control over my body, my mind, my life... Everything has been dictated for me by someone else. For a single moment I didn't feel safe, but that was all it took for her to try to coerce you into biting me. Which is fucking terrifying to think about, by the way."

Loric dips his head. "Do you feel safe now?"

"Yes. Sort of. I don't think you're going to hurt me, if that's what you're asking. But there are other things I worry about."

“Like what?” He sets his hand on my leg and my pulse jumps.

“Like going to the outer realm where everyone will hate me for merely existing. The fact you told me there are dragons there, and they’ll be worse. They won’t simply want me dead, but to suffer because of what the king did to them... I’m going to get chewed up and swallowed whole by one. I can feel it in my gut. Sure, I could lie and say I’m someone I’m not, but all it takes is one of the six of you to say something, and I’m as good as dead. There’s nowhere in this godsforsaken realm I can go and be safe and that... That’s terrifying.”

He chuckles quietly, his cheeks taking on a slight pink hue, but it’s the smile that gets me. It makes it all the way up to his eyes.

“I’m glad you think this is funny,” I say, frowning.

“It’s not. But I can promise what you’re feeling is completely normal. The lack of control is something that’s hard to get used to. It comes down to boundaries you and your beast create and understanding they’ll never respect them. As for going into heat... Your beast, despite her methods, is doing it because she cares about you. To her, being claimed by a mate is a form of safety. It’s all she can do to ensure your safety with her still learning how to protect you herself.”

I shake my head. “She’s doing this to try and lure you into my lady hole like a siren would a pirate. I don’t know how to make it stop. But I am so sorry...”

He stares up at me, fighting off a smile by pinching his lips between his teeth. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard it called that before, but it will go away. I promise.”

“Yeah, until next month or the next time you bat those sinful lashes my way.”

His eyes go wide. “Sinful?” I ignore him. “Are you trying to say that you didn’t like kissing me earlier?”

“That’s... *No*. I did. But enjoying something I’m forcing upon you, even unknowingly, feels wrong.”

“Well, if that’s it, let me put your mind at ease. I didn’t kiss you because you smell nice. It has nothing to do with you being in heat.”

Narrowing my eyes I lean a bit closer to him. “How do you know that? Just being around me influences you.”

The pupils of his eyes grow, nearly drowning out the silver rings as he drags his teeth over his bottom lip. “Because while I was outside, far enough away for you to have no effect on me, all I could think about is kissing you again.” His eyes drop, taking my heart with it. “But you just got your freedom and should learn who you are and decide what you want from this life before you mate someone.”

“I know who I am. Being locked away didn’t keep that from me.” I let out a shaky breath.

“You know who *you* are, but you’ve just discovered this whole other half of yourself you didn’t know existed, and as you can see it comes with some growing pains. That’s something everyone here understands and has gone through at some point or another. The best advice I can give you is to talk to her. Let her know you’re okay. Try to understand what she wants and why.”

Loric stands up in front of me, tucking his hand into his sleeve to wipe the tears from my cheeks. I hadn’t realized so many had fallen. I was too focused on him and his proximity and the things he was saying to care.

He tenderly lifts my chin, and as he presses a kiss to my forehead, the world seems to stand still. It’s bittersweet. The gesture itself is kind, *caring*, but it’s exactly what Asmo used to do to comfort me and that breaks my heart in two, while simultaneously stitching it back together at the exact same time.

My teeth catch my lower lip to keep it from trembling. “I thought I was supposed to process all the changes in my life before doing anything *like this*.”

“I said you needed to process before you *mate* anyone. Just, after today and everything that’s happened...” he trails off,

meandering toward the door. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. You’ll get through this.”

Here I am, tears in my eyes, vulnerability laid bare, and yet, he sees *strength*?

Reaching the door, Loric slips out without another word, leaving me to my thoughts.

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CHAPTER 22

Leric

“Did you tell her?” Jesper asks, falling into step with me as we head toward the table where the others are gathered.

“No. She’s got her own demons she’s dealing with. The last thing she needs is to find out her father’s one, too. I’ll tell her tomorrow.”

“You don’t think it would help for her to know what she is? Even if you wait to tell her about Meg and Asmo, having *an* answer is better than none.”

Halting in my tracks, I turn to face him, the urgency in his gaze giving me pause. “You didn’t see her, Jesper. The fear in her eyes... She’s terrified of dragons.”

“She’s scared of us because of what the king did, but the king isn’t her daddy anymore. Asmodeus is. The dragons have nothing to hold against her. If anything, they’ll relate to her more because she was in that dungeon.” I don’t respond, choosing to chew the inside of my cheek instead, but apparently no answer was enough for Jesper to draw some conclusion because he huffs, and shoots me a knowing look. “It’s because you’re worried she’ll be scared of you, isn’t it?”

The air hitches in my throat, but I don’t show it. I keep my face blank and my voice indifferent. “I thought it was Brenn

that had the brain.”

“Just because his gift helps him read people, doesn’t mean I’m blind.”

I take a seat at the wooden table, Jesper scooching in beside me. “But even Brenn can be wrong. Isn’t that right Brenn?”

All I can see are the white tips of his hair, his face buried in his hands. Faelor filled them in while I checked on Calamity, and by the looks of it, Brenn isn’t taking the news well.

“I tried to kill the queen’s daughter,” he says, the words nearly smothered by his hands.

“Oh just apologize, for fate’s sake. You didn’t know,” Jesper says.

And he’s right. Brenn didn’t know, but it doesn’t excuse him trying to kill her either. Nor does it stop my teeth from grinding at the thought of him doing something so careless.

“She’s never going to forgive me. I know I wouldn’t.” Brenn lifts his head, his weary eyes turning to Mira, who’s next to him, gently stroking her hand over his spine.

I snort, shaking my head. “You don’t know her.”

Brenn sits back, his face red as if the blood has pooled in his cheeks. “Well, for all of our sakes, I hope you’re right.”

Looking over the table, a crease forms between my brow. Mira and Brenn sit across from us, but Faelor and Vik are nowhere in sight. I quickly glance around the open cavern. They’re not loitering either. “Where’s Faelor and Vik?”

Mira’s brows raise. “Where do you think? Apparently, their agreement goes both ways and with Calamity...” Her lips form a flatline, letting us derive the rest.

Jesper leans against the table, head propped up on an elbow, eyes narrowed at me. “I’m surprised you can’t hear it.... Interesting. I wonder why that is.” The sarcasm practically drips from his tone.

I shrug. “Maybe they’re just being quiet for a change.”

Mira's laugh draws my eyes. "Yeah, no." Her lips form a closed lip smile, her cheeks reddening. "What do you hear, Lor?"

My face falls as they go deathly silent watching me. There's an echo, a beat but it's uneven. Footsteps, bare feet against the stone floor. Calamity talking to herself. She's trying to get her dragon to answer her—to *speak at all*. The bed creaks as if she's sat on it, then that echoing beat slows to a steady rhythm, becoming a bit quieter in the process.

"I don't hear anything besides the cave," I lie, incapable of meeting any of their eyes. Instead, I lace my fingers together and fidget with my thumbs.

"In that case," Jesper starts, gripping my shoulder to give it a quick squeeze. "Your ears are broken."

No... Not broken, just preoccupied.

"I still can't believe she's Asmodeus's daughter... Do you think her gift has to do with his bloodline? Furies don't usually have death magic. It's like she can both give and take life," Mira says, still comforting Brenn.

I dare to meet her eyes, but there's no judgment in them, just curiosity. "Asmodeus can control the dead, so I'd assume so. I probably should've put that together sooner."

Brenn scoffs, propping his head up on his hand, slouching against the table. "That girl has more power than she's even aware of. A hell of a lot more than what she toyed with in the woods. Asmodeus was strong before he put on the king's cuff and furies are already powerhouses."

There's no arguing with that. This place started as a prison world meant to contain any creature that couldn't be controlled. The dragons are immune to most magic, and therefore we can come and go, but Asmodeus was shoved into this realm because his own parents feared him. Add that with Megara's fury bloodline, and I doubt we've witnessed an inkling of what Calamity can do.

Mira sets her drink on the table, the glass rattling the wood. "So, if she can't shift, where do we take her? The Luminaries?"

She'll have to be in dragon form to make it through the boundary."

"Not necessarily," Brenn says, and all of our eyes slide to him. "Vik and I... We've been working on something. In case we ever needed to leave the realm. Since the wings I made aren't strong enough to not fall apart the moment they collide with the boundary's magic, we wanted an escape plan if it came to that."

Mira drops her hand from his back, sliding a couple inches away. "Why didn't you tell me?" Her eyes round, staring at him but her thoughts somewhere else. "I could've helped you."

Brenn bites his lower lip. "I didn't want you to get your hopes up. And so far, it hasn't worked."

"What hasn't worked?" Jesper's tone is flat, void of emotion. He won't even look up from the table.

"Well, we can cross because of our scales. They divert the magic. However, if we were to shift halfway through the boundary back into human form, we'd explode from the pressure. In human form, the boundary won't even let us pierce it, like a wall. In my dragon form, I'm too heavy for someone to carry and even with the wings I designed, they'll be ripped off the moment they hit the wall." Brenn uses an extended talon to draw on the table top, showing us in pictures what he's saying. "Before we came here, I was debating on covering my mechanical wings with old scales and leather from the next dragon that passed, or possibly making a suit out of them, but used one of my own scales to test the theory before resulting to corpse mutilation, and it would seem our scales lose their properties after once they're no longer attached. They can scatter magic if something hits them, and they are immune to some things still, but they're not strong enough to divert the barrier. It crumpled under the pressure when Vik passed through."

Cocking my head, I stare at him, my lips pressed into a fine line. Why wouldn't he tell us? We could've all been testing things and sped up the process.

Jesper shrugs. “So, you don’t really have anything, then?”

“Not what I said.” Brenn grits his teeth, working on another diagram. “There’s no way to pass through outside being a dragon, having scales... *wings*. However, being inside a dragon might work.” Brenn’s eyes fall, refusing to look at any of us. “We’ve only tested it once. Vik put a live chicken in her mouth while in dragon form, and she was coughing up feathers for most of the day, but it survived the trip through the barrier and back.”

My jaw goes slack. If that’s true, then that’s easy. That could work. “So, she just has to hitch a ride in someone’s mouth?”

Brenn nods, the lump in his throat bobbing. “Yes. And you can’t swallow her. Vik said it was hard not to do it with the chicken. It moved around while she was flying and she almost choked on it. But as long as Calamity can stay still, yes it *should* work.”

“Should? That sounds promising,” my dragon says.

The corner of my lips pulls up. *Now isn’t the time for your sarcastic remarks.*

“Maybe not, but I’d feel a little bit better if the plan wasn’t based on a SHOULD.”

You and me both, but I’m not sure how we can teach Calamity to shift, and to do so by launching off a boat in the open water.

“What’s wrong with taking her to the outer realm? You have all the time in the world to teach her to shift. The rebels can’t hate her for being the king’s daughter if she’s not the king’s daughter. There’s no safety risk.”

She’s terrified of the place, and I don’t blame her.

“No. She’s scared of dragons and I hate to break it to you, but she’s going to need to get over that.”

The sooner she gets to the moons, the better. The longer she’s here, the harder it’s going to be to not give in to you and her dragon trying to shove us together. Getting her up there is the best thing I can do for her. As is, she’s already panicking

over having no control. She should have control over who she chooses to love and spend the rest of her life with. I won't let you take that away from her.

"Not even you like that idea."

I don't have to like it, but it's the right thing. If she wants to come back down, then fine. If she gets up there and wants something from me, then fine. Until then, this is what has to happen.

"I hate you... sometimes."

The feeling is mutual.

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CHAPTER 23

Calamity

Time blurs into a seamless haze and the hours melt together. Before I know it, most of the day is gone.

It's odd being down here, not knowing day from night, incapable of seeing the hell flame high in the sky, showering the realms with light. But from what I've derived, we still have today to get through before the blackout is over. Tomorrow, the hell flame will burn bright again and we'll be able to continue to Ashbourne.

My beast remains unnervingly quiet. I can hardly feel her within me. There's no stirring, no thoughts that aren't mine, just profound silence. If it weren't for the fact we share a body and I went years without knowing Hyde existed, I'd be worried she disappeared for good.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around everything, especially after my conversations with Loric and Vik, but I'm starting to understand, or trying to. Hyde just wants to protect me, but she can't force me into literally sharing eternity with someone just because they might keep us safe. It feels invasive, *manipulative*, and I don't like it.

Though, having a mate isn't something I'm opposed to. I just want it to be for the right reasons, because someone loves me unconditionally and wants to be a part of my life, not

because some magical force lured them into the idea. And Loric.... He's not what I expected him to be, but if I allowed myself to dream, I can easily imagine a day where I'd be interested in someone like him. He's kind, despite who I am, and though he's grumpy on occasion, he seems to have a good heart. He cares about his friends, and the wellbeing of a complete stranger enough to put his own life at risk. That has to count for something.

Loric did warn me when we got here that our creatures have very different views on life and loyalty. They don't see emotional boundaries the way we do. Their needs are more primal, focused on survival and strength. In their eyes, perhaps going into heat and this entire situation makes perfect sense.

It's just not who I am. At least, not who I want to be.

Still, I wish Hyde would talk to me, that *she* would help me understand her point of view instead of leaving me to figure shit out on my own. Her silence doesn't help quell the fear gnawing at my gut, growing stronger with every passing hour that I inch closer to having to go to sleep. And I won't ask Loric to suffer through a night of discomfort to take my nightmares away. It's not fair to him.

Still, it's different now. I've tasted what it's like to have normal dreams and experienced what sleeping should be like, and I don't want to go back to how it was. I used to stay up until I couldn't any longer, just to avoid waking up on that stone altar the minute I closed my eyes.

The fire crackles before me, its flames licking the logs, casting a warm, comforting glow. Its heat wraps around me, warding off the chill of the cavern. I'm still not sure how it doesn't destroy the wood logs, but I don't think there would be much benefit in asking either.

Shortly after visiting me, Loric and the others left the cave. They were vague on the details about where they were going, but he promised to be back before I went to bed, leaving me in Brenn and Mira's hands. I can't say being watched by the man who tried to kill me puts my mind at ease, but I don't think

Loric would've left me here if he wasn't certain Brenn would keep me safe.

They might've been the only two willing participants to stay with me, seeing as I'm a walking sex beacon to everyone else, except Vik, but judging by the sounds I heard earlier, she's suffering in other ways... Though, it didn't sound like she was suffering. Still I'd decided to take advantage of the empty cavern to venture out of my room. The quiet, empty cavern gave me time to finish the drawing I was working on, and since, I've been sitting by the firepit, basking in the warmth.

Brenn approaches with his usual lack of subtlety, though I pretend to not see him. For someone so sure of himself, there's a hesitant shift in his stride as he stops at the edge of the firelight, where the glow battles with the shadows on his face. "You seem in your head more than usual."

I can't help the sarcastic twist of my lips. "What gave it away?"

He leans casually against the stone wall, his silhouette illuminated by the crystals peeking out through the rocky surface. "For starters, you've been fixated on those flames for the better part of five minutes. You hardly noticed me until I moved closer. So, you're either blind, or not paying attention."

I meet his violet eyes, they nearly blend into the crystals. "Is this the part where you say being oblivious is going to get me killed?"

"No, it's the part where I wonder why a girl locked in a dungeon her entire life isn't more curious about the people and the world around her. You'd rather stare at flames, which I'm fairly certain you've seen dozens of times before."

"Curiosity gets people killed," I say, remembering how I followed him into the woods. I'd wondered what was happening, I wanted to know, but I was also scared to stay in the clearing on my own.

Brenn's face falls.

“Sorry,” I say, though I’m not really. It’s more an automatic response, a social nicety.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you chose to ignore me,” he offers, his voice quieter now, stripped of its usual mocking tone.

“And I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to keep your distance,” I retort, my gaze drifting back to the fire, watching the flames dance. “Seems like nobody else can stand to be near me right now.”

He shifts. “That’s not entirely true. Loric can. Besides, it’s not your fault. It happens, and one of the many perks of being mated is that neither me or Mira have to deal with the heat nonsense. Though, it’s pretty entertaining to watch the others squirm.”

I tilt my head. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Not in the slightest.”

Silence stretches between us, filled only by the crackling of the fire and the distant sound of water dripping somewhere in the cavern. Then, Brenn speaks again, his tone unexpectedly earnest. “I wanted to apologize... I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

I sit back, eyebrows drawing together. “What made you change your mind?”

He runs a hand through his blond hair. “Honestly? I wasn’t sure about you at first. I thought you might be a spy sent by the king, especially with the ships we saw on the way to get you. They were attaching dragon harnesses to the decks. It was hard not to think we were walking into a trap since the king believes all the dragons are gone.”

“The king didn’t even know I was leaving.”

“Yeah, well, people lie,” he says, coming to take a seat across from me. “It’s my gift, seeing people’s auras. But yours... I couldn’t see it at first. I’ve never encountered anyone whose aura was completely hidden, like it was masked by magic somehow. Between that and the ships, and how Loric reacted to you, I thought for sure the king was trying something. I’ve known Loric for years, and he’s never looked

at anyone the way he looks at you. I didn't know what to think."

I look into the fire, letting his words sink in. *Why does he see things differently now?* "So your solution was to kill me?"

Brenn exhales, then presses his lips together. "I just wanted to keep my friends safe, but it was wrong." He glances away for a moment before meeting my eyes again. "I can see your aura now. It started to show after you shifted in the woods. It's clear you don't intend to harm any of us, and that's proof enough for me. Plus, Loric... he's different with you around."

That day, in the clearing, he didn't talk about his *friends*, he said he wanted to protect Loric, specifically. He merely mentioned being worried about Mira. I drag my teeth over my lips. "You must really care about Loric if you're willing to commit murder for him."

"All of us would. Not just me. He's the reason we're still alive."

I twist in my seat just in time to see him take a sip of his drink. "He is?"

Brenn nods. "Faelor is the only exception. Loric met Jesper in the king's dungeon. He was so traumatized he wouldn't speak, wouldn't eat. Loric took most of Jesper's memories of it away and they've been best friends since."

"He took his memories?"

"At Jesper's request." Brenn nods, his expression turning somber. "He also took Vik, Mira, and I in. We were just kids. It was long after the war, and I hadn't shifted yet. My father was embarrassed to have a son that couldn't, and it's not like my gift is super useful to a warrior clan. He took me to the highest mountain peak he could find, then pushed me off it. I shifted halfway down. I wasn't fast enough and the impact broke almost every bone in my body. My father left me to die."

My lips part, my body going numb at the thought, at the mental image of Brenn, laying broken at the base of a

mountain. And here I thought what I'd gone through was bad. At least I don't remember most of it. But that's... *Wow*.

When I don't say anything, he continues, "Vik and Mira came to find me. Mira wouldn't let her leave alone and once she saw me, bloody and broken, she bit me and forced my mouth to her wrist to return it."

"She mated you..." I study him for a moment, the flames reflecting in his violet eyes.

He slowly nods. "It let me borrow her beast's power so I could heal. It's likely the only reason I survived. If it weren't for Loric and Jesper stumbling upon us in the Enchanted Forest, I would've never walked again. The three of us would've been mauled to death by the creatures that live there. Still, my leg never did grow back, and we don't really know why." A smile curves his lips as if a memory has come to mind. "I was just lucky that Mira was my true mate. Had she not come, I'd have never made it to Loric and Jesper, and they wouldn't have been able to heal me."

"True mate..." I've read about that. Most mates are chosen, just two people okay with spending eternity together. Then there's some higher version of it, like soulmates within the shifter world.

Brenn tugs the collar of his shirt down, revealing a bite mark on his chest. Instead of a shiny, skin-toned scar, it looks like the bite has been set in gold. "We'd felt drawn to each other our entire lives, growing up in the same village, but we didn't realize that's what it was. It's likely why she left with Vik to come find me. It wasn't until our mate marks turned gold that we knew."

I'd thought they were just lore... I thought true mates were nothing more than stories parents told their children so they'd be compelled to look for love. But it's hard to deny what's right in front of you. There's no faking it, either.

"I'm sorry that happened to you." I can't stop staring at his chest, even though the fabric of his shirt is covering his mark again, I can still see a hint of the metallic scar beneath it.

“It’s not your fault my father is a dick.” He bounces his eyebrows once, a weak grin on his lips.

“It’s not yours either, though.” Suddenly, I understand why he’s so cynical. “Could Mira and Vik not heal you like Loric and Jesper?”

“No. They’re alphas. Their ability to lend their healing magic to others temporarily is what separates them from the rest of us.”

Thinking back to the Grimleer, Loric had healed my throat. He saved me. Yet, his chest was still clawed deep. He’d healed me first, instead of himself... “I didn’t realize you could have more than one alpha in a pack.”

Brenn snorts out a laugh. “We’re not wolves. There can be dozens, but the strongest leads.”

We both watch the fire in silence. I’m not really sure what to say or where he intended this conversation to go, but even with him by the fire with me, it makes it feel a little less alone.

I’m not sure how many minutes pass before Brenn speaks again. “Look, I’m not asking for your forgiveness, but maybe, if you’re up for it, we can try again... *and* I have a peace offering.”

“What sort of peace offering?” I arch a bow, crossing my arms, a slight smile tugging at my lips.

“I overheard you trying to get your beast to answer, and Vik might’ve mentioned you were upset about going into heat. The best way to make her stop is to show her you can protect yourself. So, how about a magic lesson? Assuming you don’t try to kill me, of course.”

“You think that will work?”

“It’s worth a shot,” he says with a shrug, as if it’s the most logical thing in the world.

“Glad to see you’re not an asshole all the time.”

“Just most of the time.” He winks, standing up. “Come on. The others will be back soon, and Mira’s asleep. I’ve got

nothing better to do.”

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CHAPTER 24

Calamity

“A lright, go again,” Brenn says, perched casually on one of the wooden tables that dot the cavernous space. His violet eyes nearly sparkle in the fire light.

I stand in the open walkway between the tables and the wall with the bedroom doors. My hands fall to my sides as the dark ball of magic I’ve conjured dissipates into nothing—like it was never there. The energy evaporates, but its power lingers a bit longer, tingling my palms.

“You sure you’ve never practiced this? You’re a natural.” Brenn arches a brow.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Though, I might’ve been practicing and just not remembering it.” My mind flickers back to those stolen moments, the king’s cold hands, the fire that wound through my veins, the leather straps biting into my skin. Swallowing hard, I push the memories away. “Once a year, my father would do his tests and experiments, but there were times I fell asleep only to wake up in my cell days later.”

I glance at Brenn. His expression softens, a glimmer of understanding—or maybe pity—in his eyes, but I don’t need either.

“Do you think your beast took over while you were out? Like she did in the woods?” Brenn asks as he hops off the

table, the wood creaking a protest.

“She said he was testing her too, strictly with our abilities. So, it’s possible my body has some sort of muscle memory.”

“Something tells me you’ve got a lot more surprises coming your way,” Brenn says, his tone lighter now, almost impressed.

“Let’s hope not. I’m not sure I can take any more surprises, right now. Finding out about my beast was enough for a while.”

“Oh, don’t say that. The two of you will figure things out. It takes time, but once you click, it’s pretty easy from there.”

“We’ll see.” Closing my eyes once more, I let the memory of darkness, of being alone in that cell, fill me. It’s not anger—it’s raw determination. My hands rise again, and between them, shadows begin to dance. They twist and curl, forming a new orb that’s wilder than before, pulsating with power. The air around us hums with energy, and for just a sliver of time, I feel invincible.

“Control it, Calamity,” Brenn instructs, his voice low and cautious. “Shape it... Good. Now let it go.” With a flick of my wrists, I send the shadow darting forward. It slams into a table, and the impact sends a spider web of cracks racing through the wood before the entire table crumbles to ash.

Then the warmth comes, rolling through my body as if that fire in the pit were able to heat me from the inside out.

“I’m surprised you wouldn’t try to play with your magic. You must’ve known you had *something*, right?”

A snort escapes me, humorless and sharp. “When your gift is death, playing with it doesn’t seem so fun anymore.” My voice echoes off the stone walls, raw and edged with bitterness. “I knew I could draw on things, that I could give life and extend the king’s with a touch of my hand, but it’s not like I practiced all the time in my cell.”

“It’s not all about death or immortality. You can save people, Calamity. Had it been you who found me in those woods, your gift could’ve saved me.”

Rolling my eyes, I try to focus again. “Maybe, but so far, it seems like the people I’ve wanted to save have died out of arm’s reach. A lot of good it does when you can’t touch them.”

I close my eyes and lift my palms again. The familiar crackle of energy crawls over my skin, igniting the cool air. It begins as a tingle, a dance of pinpricks along my flesh. Then it crescendos and ropes of smoke crawl between my fingers, opening my eyes, I focus it into a sphere of writhing shadows, perfect in its form, yet alive with constant motion.

“Who’d you lose?” Brenn’s voice cuts through the silence.

I hesitate, caught off guard by the probing nature of his question. He pushed away from the table, coming closer and stopping just a few feet away, arms crossed over his chest.

“No one.” The lie tastes bitter on my tongue; it’s a denial spoken more for myself than him.

“Obviously, it was someone, but if you don’t want to tell me that’s alright,” he says, and I lift my gaze, meeting his.

I start to open my mouth, but the words die in my throat.

“I thought I was doing the right thing.” My beast’s voice echoes in my head, and I breathe a sigh of relief. It’s like the noose that’s been slightly constricting around my heart finally loosens. *“Tell him to take you outside. I’ll teach you.”*

“She spoke to you, didn’t she?” Brenn asks, a side-ways smirk on his face.

“Yeah, she did.” My voice is barely more than a whisper, and the tears that burn at the edges of my vision threaten to fall. Still, a small smile tugs at my lips. At least she’s not gone. “She wants to go outside.”

Going outside sounds like a stupid idea, but for the first time, I think we’re on the same page. I have to learn somehow. This is the real world, where Asmo isn’t waiting to set the dungeon fires, where bars don’t protect just as much as they imprison me. If my beast can’t always take control to help me, then I need to learn what she knows about our magic. Asmo might’ve taught me how to land a punch, but that doesn’t do me any good if my attackers have tails that they can whip me

with from afar or magic at their fingertips. And seeing as my beast took out the never cats, Hyde knows way more about this than I do.

Still, it's hard to shake the feeling that going outside during the blackout is like walking up to death's open arms, while he beckons me with frostbitten fingers. But trusting her is the first step. It's a compromise.

"You want to go outside?" His words tumble out, each one heavier than the last, skepticism warping his smirk into a questioning frown.

"Apparently. She wants to teach me, and she said she'll forgive you if you help us."

"I'll do no such thing."

Brenn huffs a laugh that holds no real humor. "Loric's going to kill me for this, but alright." He chews his lip, turning in place, like he's mentally mapping the unconventional route we'll have to take, then heads toward the stairwell. "But I know you're lying."

Of course, he does.

The stairwell looms above us, its top disappearing into the shadowy tunnel. The steps hang suspended and completely unreachable.

"Boost or build?" I ask, eyeing the gap between us and the first step.

"Definitely build something," Brenn decides after a moment. "It'll be easier to climb down after."

We get to work dragging tables across the room. The legs screech against the stone, the sound grating on my nerves and setting my teeth on edge. Little by little, we build a structure until a tower forms between the ground and the steps. It leans a bit, like a child's attempt at building a castle from blocks—doomed to collapse at the slightest breath.

"Are you sure it's safe?" I ask, doubt threading through my words.

“Nope,” he says with a shrug. “I’m not an expert at defying gravity... *obviously*, but it *should* hold.”

A smile pulls hard across my face. I’m not sure how he does it, how he can joke about freefalling off a mountain, but it seems to work for him.

“Right... Too bad you don’t have wings, huh? We could just flutter up there.”

“Yeah... Too bad,” he shoots back, but there’s no bite to it, only the shared adrenaline that comes with doing something questionably stupid. He tests the stability of our makeshift ladder before gesturing to me. “Ladies first.”

“Yeah, no. That’s all you.” I take a step back and he huffs, then begins to climb. Once he’s hoisted himself up, he looks down at me and I follow the path he took.

“Almost there,” he encourages as I reach for his hand. Catching it, he pulls as I try to push my body up the last stretch until my fingers find the lip of the stairwell, cold stone biting into my skin. I haul myself onto it and my balance shifts as I get to my feet, making me wobble. My heart leaps into my throat, but Brenn grips one of the leather handholds hanging from the stone wall and fists the fabric of my dress to steady me.

“See?” he says, breathless from the effort. “No wings needed.”

“Thanks,” I mutter beneath my breath, but he just flexes his eyebrows and continues up the dark tunnel. I scramble behind him, unable to see anything at all, but I hear his steady footsteps against the stone steps, and I nearly crawl over them, not waiting to take the chance of a misstep and risk tumbling down. The higher we go the colder the air becomes, making my breath plume like smoke. My fingers stick ever so slightly to the stone and goosebumps cover my extremities, but I keep going.

Soon, light pours in from the entrance to the bar, though it’s not completely open. The hutch only covers the entrance halfway, but it’s a large enough hole for us to slip through the

crack and into the bar that's been converted into a makeshift stable. Dusting off my skirts, I take in the horses. They shift and snort, their phantom forms glowing in the dim light, making their bones and what's left of their muscle and flesh become dark silhouettes. We weave between them, silent and careful not to spook them, but they don't pay us any mind. They barely look our way at all. Then finally, reach the door to the outside.

The cold bites at my flesh as I wrap my arms around myself, my teeth chattering. It's impossible to drag in a full breath and we haven't even opened the door yet.

"You alright?" Brenn asks, hand pausing on the doorknob.

I nod, knowing I won't be able to form the words to answer him. It wouldn't be understandable anyway with my chattering teeth.

He exhales, rolling his eyes, then releases the door and turns back to me. "Here." Brenn shrugs out of his leather jacket. The buckles that are meant to hold it closed were already undone anyway. "You probably should've grabbed Loric's cloak."

"He took it with him when he came to let me know they were leaving, or I would've." I pull the wool-lined sleeves over my dress, sighing in bliss. It's so warm. My teeth stop shuddering, but my cheeks are already burning, and my nose is numb. There's no way I would've made it had we not stayed in the cavern below the bar. I'd have been frozen solid by now.

Looking over Brenn, he stands with his hands on his hips, nothing more than a thin, linen shirt covering his torso. His leather pants and boots are hardly going to help him much, either.

As if sensing my silent question, he grumbles. "I'm fine. My teeth aren't rattling, are they?"

"N-No," I say, forcing the word out.

"Sure you want to do this? It'll be even colder on the other side of that door." I nod and he shakes his head, turning around to grip the knob once more. "Suit yourself."

The door opens and a deep, unrelenting cold slams into me as we step into the clearing. My breath is a cloud of silver, each exhale becoming a ghost that vanishes into the night. The darkness is absolute. Brenn steps back inside and a nauseating wave of pure fear roils through me. I whirl, throwing out a hand, hoping to catch the door before he can close it, but it hasn't moved. His face appears in the doorway, mage light in hand, emphasizing his pixie-like features with an eerie, amber glow.

"You thought I'd lock you out here?" He arches a dark brow. It's almost as dark as mine, matching the roots of the hair on his head. I don't answer and he steps into the clearing anyway. "Gods... Try to kill a girl once and she'll think you're out for blood at every turn." Shaking his head, he jousts the torch into the ground, taking a seat next to it so he can lean against the rocky cliffside. I start to tell him I'm sorry, but he holds up a hand and cuts me off. "Don't be. I deserve it. Now, go do whatever you want to do. Loric and the others will be back soon. I'd rather them not know about this little excursion."

I nod, then step into the clearing, moving far away from him. Flexing my fingers, my breath mists the air. "Okay... I'm ready."

"Our power comes from the things around you, what you siphon. However, it's controlled by pure emotion. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the magic." My beast flirts just beneath my skin as she speaks into my mind. *"Pick one, then think of the memories you have that made you feel that way."*

I focus my mind, choosing anger. It's the easiest. All I have to do is visualize my father and it's like striking flint against steel. The spark ignites, the magic warming my blood as heat courses through me. A tendril of smoke coils around my fingers.

"Good. Now, open your eyes. Imagine where you want that energy to go."

Glancing around the clearing, I pick a tree along the forest's edge.

"Send it there. Direct it with your mind."

I inhale as deep as I can, focusing on the tree, and the dark energy disappears. The second the magic is gone, the frost seems to cling to my skin, the cold chill settling deep into my bones through Brenn's jacket. I shift from foot to foot, feeling the frigid air weave through my boots, too.

A breath escapes my lips, wondering what I did wrong. Did I not focus hard enough? Did I pick an object or spot too far away?

Then the power I'd channeled burst from the ground beneath the tree, wrapping like ribbons around its trunk. I jolt, the magic moving so quickly I can barely make out the individual streams of smoke as they overlap, twisting tighter and tighter around the tree. The wood disintegrates before my eyes, piling into ash at the ground.

"Damn," Brenn says behind me, dragging out the word.

"Good. Now do it again. More than one this time."

My hands rise, and I close my eyes, willing the familiar energy to coil between my palms. Darkness swirls within me and my beast purrs her approval, a resonant vibration that quickens my pulse. Images flash behind my eyelids—the king's bloody smile, the feeling of helplessness as I laid on that altar, the taste of iron on my tongue. Rage blossoms within me, a thorny vine that wraps around my heart and squeezes as I throw my hands forward, and this time, the dark smoke doesn't disappear. It flies in inky threads over the grassy clearing, writhing and twisting like living entities. They hit their marks, but instead of one tree, it takes out an entire layer of them across the forest line, the ash smoldering like fire had burned through it.

I go again and again until sweat beads on my brow and my limbs tremble with exertion. Each release of magic is like purging pent-up fury and pain I've carried with me my entire life.

"That's enough for now."

One more.

“*Maybe tomorrow.*” She sounds tired, exhausted, and it makes me wonder how much using my magic takes out of her. My muscles ache, but I’m not on the verge of falling asleep. Not like the way she sounds.

Giving it one more go, I lift my hands and surrender to the darkness simmering under my skin. It seeps out, not in cords or threads or tendrils, but a creeping fog that slithers across the ground, devouring the frost-laden grass, leaving scorched earth in its wake. Except the heat that has been running through my veins since we came out here, that burns hotter with every use of my magic, fades in an instant. Ice begins to crystalize on my skin, my heart slowing until it’s hard to breathe.

“Shit, Calamity, that’s—” Brenn starts, but his voice is drowned out by the shivering of my own body. My legs are slow, and despite my brain screaming at them to move, they barely inch forward, threatening to give out. My knees buckle and I brace for the ground, but Brenn’s there, his arms catching me. “Fuck, you’re freezing. Loric’s going to have my head.” Brenn tries to drag me toward the door, my lips so numb from the cold my teeth don’t even chatter anymore. “Did she tell you to stop? She had to. And fuck... You didn’t listen, did you?” Brenn collapses mid pull, scrambling to his feet to try again. “Sure, leave it to the man with a peg leg to have to carry you, because that’s wise.” His rant continues, but it’s not until we’re at the door to the bar that he calms. The hinges whine and then he rounds me, lifting me up by gripping the front of his coat. Violet eyes search mine, but tiny, microscopic snowflakes have formed on my lashes, blocking most of his face from view. “Fuck... Okay, don’t panic.”

“She just wanted to test her magic. She was fine until... Well, until she wasn’t, and now I can’t get her inside.”

I’m not sure who he’s talking to. My eyelids are too heavy to look, but strong hands wrap around me, hoisting me up and bending me over a shoulder. Their steady footsteps echo in my ears as they cross the bar, and glass shatters on the ground. I’m laid onto a solid surface, and warmth blazes around me.

“Dammit, Brenn! What part of *stay out of trouble* didn’t make sense?”

Suddenly, it's like every limb of my body fell asleep all at once, and now, it's finally getting blood flow back. My skin prickles and burns as they wake up, and my eyelids flutter open to find Loric and Vik standing over me, laid out on top of the bar. Their hands glow, wrapped in flames... They're on *fire*.

Trying to sit up, my eyes flare wide, but hands pin my shoulders down.

I look up to find Jesper peering over me, a toothy grin splitting his face. "Good morning, your majesty."

Loric growls low in his throat, so deep I can feel it in my bones.

Jesper straightens. "Welcome back from the dead."

"I died?" I ask, my voice hoarse, panic clawing at my throat.

"No, not really. Just teetered on the brink of it," he says, nodding quickly and for far too long than necessary.

Loric curses under his breath, leaving my side and rounding the bar. I try to lift my head, to tell him what happened, but Jesper keeps me still while Vik continues to warm me up. "I convinced him to take me out there. Don't be mad at Brenn," I say, swallowing in a desperate attempt to wet my bone-dry throat.

Jesper moves slightly, allowing me to see the room, and Loric's silver eyes flash, the iridescent glow landing on me. He's gripping Brenn's shirt like it's the only thing tethering him to control. Brenn's face is a mixture of apology and defiance, violet eyes flickering with unease.

"Let him go," I say more firmly, and this time there's a growl lacing my words—a warning from my beast that demands obedience.

Well, that was new...

"I thought you needed some help getting his attention."

Where was your help when I was freezing?

“I told you enough, that we were done for the day. I was tired.”

Loric’s grip slackens, and Brenn steps back, smoothing down his rumpled shirt.

“Go take care of the meat so we can eat later,” Loric commands the others, his tone leaving no room for argument. Then his eyes meet mine once more, his posture rigid. “And you...” he pauses, shaking his head. Loric steps closer, glass grinding beneath his boots. His head turns, listening over his shoulder. Once the door shuts and the others are out of the room, he lets out a deep breath, and when his eyes return to mine, they’re not nearly as cold. They’re concerned. “You scared the shit out of me.”

His hand is on my arm, firm but not forceful, helping me sit up.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur as he leads me down the dark tunnel, his arms keeping me steady. “I thought if I could prove to her that I could use my magic to protect myself, then she’d stop with the whole heat thing. I felt bad about making all of you uncomfortable.”

“Well, it worked. She did stop, but you don’t need to apologize. I’m just glad you’re okay.” His deep timbre makes my breath catch.

It worked?

“Yes... It worked. We’ll try things your way.”

I smile wide in the dark, my heart fluttering. Brenn was right...

“Please, next time you decide to do something like this, at least wait for me. I’d much rather be here to help than have you rely on Brenn,” his voice is low and rough like gravel. We’re halfway down the stairwell when he stops abruptly, turning to face me. “And speaking of the asshole. Take that shit off.” My back brushes against the stone as he leans into me, his fingers fumbling with the buckles of the jacket in the dark. I can’t look away from his glowing silver eyes, the light barely illuminating his features. I shrug off the leather, and

Loric tosses it onto the stairwell. “He can pick it up on his way down.”

Velvet brushes the back of my hand, and I lean forward, my head tipping back to avoid hitting his chin as he threads the cloak around my shoulders, making quick work of the tie at the neck. His breath caresses my face and he makes no attempt to move, not to head farther down the stairs or to back away from me. It’s like he’s fixed to the stone steps.

“A bit jealous, are we?” My voice is so quiet I worry that I said the words inside my head and not out loud.

He steps closer, glowing orbs bearing down on me until there isn’t a sliver of space between us. “Yes.” His lips find mine with a hunger that speaks of fear, of relief, of *possession*. It’s a collision of everything unsaid, every emotion we’ve danced around. The pull that seems to taunt us when he’s near me. When he pulls away, his breath ghosts over my cheek, sending shivers cascading down my spine. I open my eyes, but the fluorescent rings of his are gone, having returned to their normal sterling gray.

“Sorry,” he says. “I told you my creature was an ass. Heat or not, he seems to think he’s already bitten you.” Loric’s thumb traces the freckles scattered across my cheeks like a map of constellations.

I can taste the unspoken promise in his words, and I slide my hands up and around his neck. “So, what? Me wearing your cloak is the next best thing to biting me?”

A rumble sounds from his chest. “It would seem so.”

I push up on my tippy toes, but even then, he still has to meet me the rest of the way as I tug on the back of his neck. His lips meet mine again, and my heart flutters, the butterflies in my throat. I’m drowning in the taste of him, the feel of his body against mine, the heat of his skin, and for a fleeting moment, I allow myself to sink into the madness. When I finally pull away, I catch his lower lip between my teeth, tugging gently before letting it go and he groans, his weight pinning me harder against the stone.

“Fuck...” he breathes. “You can’t do that to me.” He rests his cheek to mine, arms braced against the stone wall on either side of me.

A large part of me wants to do it again, especially now, knowing his reaction is from me and not the heat. But before I can say anything, voices sound from above us as the others make their way down the stairwell. Loric’s silver eyes become slits, but he takes a deep breath, and pushes off the stone, and leads me down the stairwell.

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CHAPTER 25

Calamity

It's been almost a week since Asmo left me with Loric and his friends, and tonight, we finally have something other than chocolate or berries to eat. The cavern is alive with the sound of laughter and conversation as they cook the last of the meat they'd brought back.

I didn't have the stomach to ask exactly *what* I ate. I'd chosen to let my imagination fill in the blanks. I'm not sure I would've eaten it had it been something I wasn't used to, and the way my stomach growled at the scent of those flames charring it over the firepit... I needed substance more than my curiosity needed to be sated.

I sit on the edge of the bed in my room, having retired for the night. It just didn't feel right being out there. It felt like I was holding my breath, waiting for Loric to look at me again, to come talk to me, which we haven't done since our kiss in the stairwell. A part of me thought he might come in here, after seeing me leave, but it was quickly squashed, and I'd decided to keep my mind off it—*off him*—by flipping through the worn pages of the bestiary. I'm not sure who I'm kidding, believing I can figure it out on my own, but I need to make sense of it all. I need to know what I am, what they are, to have answers.

Though, there are too many species with talons and heat cycles and alter egos that live within them for me to figure out what type of shifter I am based on this book alone. The closest I can narrow it down to is a phoenix, necromancer, or a reaper, due to my power to manipulate life and death. But where it gets complicated is, for Loric and the others to have felt the effects of me being in heat, we'd have to be the same species.

The door creaks open, and Loric enters, his steps slightly unsteady, the sweet aroma of faerie wine clinging to him. His silver eyes glimmer in the dim mage light, catching mine for a moment before I return to the bestiary. "I was wondering what you were doing in here. I'd thought maybe you were drawing."

"No, just trying to learn something from these before we leave. I didn't think you'd be up for taking them with us," I admit, shutting the book with a sigh. "Though I'm starting to think it doesn't matter. There are too many possibilities. I thought I might be able to narrow it down further, but—"

Fingers tilt my chin, cutting off my words, and he bends down to kiss me. It's short, but he barely pulls away, his lips mere centimeters from mine.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask, bringing my fingers to my lips.

"Wanted to." He smirks, reaching out to turn the book over, pages splayed to keep my spot. "Dance with me."

"What?" I reel back, my eyes searching his.

"Dance. With. Me." He holds out a hand, palm up, awaiting my own.

"There's no music..." A crease forms between my eyebrows.

"We don't need it." I study him a moment, then place my hand in his.

His hand is warm, reassuring, as he pulls me to my feet. The room feels smaller, the air charged with something unspoken as we step into the open space near the door. Loric's gaze is intense, his eyes a stormy silver that seem to see right through

me, but it sends heat swirling through my middle, and makes my heart kick up the pace.

I swallow, trying to find my voice. “How do you dance without music?”

Loric’s smirk deepens as he steps closer, his hand resting lightly on my waist. “You just feel it,” he says, his breath fanning across my cheek. I can taste the wine on my lips, left there by him. It makes me crave more, but I don’t dare try to kiss him again. I stay put, my hand hooked around his neck, the other clasped in his, and I let him guide me.

Our movements are slow and tentative as we start to sway, and I’m acutely aware of every point of contact, the heat of his hand through the fabric of my nightgown, the brush of his leg against mine.

“You’re thinking too much,” he whispers, and I realize I’ve been holding my breath.

“I’m not sure how to do this. I’ve never danced with anyone but Asmo, and that was very different.”

He chuckles, a low, rich sound that sends warmth spreading through my chest. “If it helps, I’m not sure what I’m doing either,” he confesses. “It just feels right.”

His words hang in the air between us, and his grip tightens ever so slightly, pulling me a fraction closer. I let myself lean into him, my head resting against his shoulder. Loric’s heartbeat is steady in my ear.

“Wow...” I say, as he pushes me out, twirling me halfway around. “Kiss a girl in the stairwell, and suddenly you’re smitten.”

He chuckles, my back pressing against his chest. Loric wraps his arm around my middle, pressing a soft kiss to my bare shoulder. “Not smitten. Not *yet*.”

My cheeks flush at his words, but I feign indifference. His gaze drifts to the bestiary on the table and his movements become stiffer, until we stop swaying altogether.

“Have you figured out what you are yet?” he asks, his fingers toying with the strap of my gown, not taking it off my shoulder, but slipping up and down the length of it.

“Unfortunately, no, but I *am* one step closer to figuring out what you are.”

“Is that so?” He smiles against my shoulder, and I can practically hear the challenge in his voice. “What have you narrowed it down to?”

“That whatever we are, we’re the same,” I answer, trying to sound confident.

Loric hums thoughtfully, his grip on me tightening ever so slightly, intrigued by my deductions. “Why’s that?”

“Because you wouldn’t have been affected by me going into heat unless you were the same. It’s likely why I never knew I had them, if I did at all.”

Loric’s smile widens as I turn to face him and he nods, seemingly impressed. “You’ve figured part of it out.”

My eyes widen, taken aback by his acknowledgement. “So, you knew we were the same species this whole time?”

“No,” he admits, running a hand through his unruly dark hair. “But I figured it out when I woke up next to you.”

“Then what are we?” I step back, giving him room.

He narrows his eyes, weighing his head side-to-side. “I’ll give you two guesses.”

“Alright, fine...” I go to reach for the bestiary, but he puts his hand on it.

“From memory,” he adds. I study Loric as he takes a seat on the bed’s edge, his silver eyes flickering with a mix of emotions. He grabs the hem of my nightgown, tugging me closer until I’m standing between his legs. The warmth of his body against mine sends shivers down my spine.

We could be phoenixes, which would explain how they controlled fire. I’d say fae, but they’ve all been banished and locked away in the shadow realm. Dragons are a solid

possibility. They have talons, heats, mates, sharp teeth, and humanoid counterparts with the ability to control fire, along with a gift specific to their dragon. It would explain how Brenn and Loric have different abilities, but so can phoenixes, and a phoenix would be a lot more likely to help the king's daughter than a dragon, even if Loric admitted to there being some in the outer realm.

“Are we phoenixes?” I ask.

Loric shakes his head, breath caressing my skin. It sends a shiver down my spine as he trails a slow, deliberate path down the centerline of my body with his finger. “No.”

Confusion furrows my brow, thoughts racing as I ponder the possibilities. “You’re sure we’re the same?”

His grip around me tightens ever so slightly. “I’d bet my life on it.”

The realization washes over me like a tidal wave, and for a moment, I can hardly breathe. The closest thing that fits both me and him are... “Dragons,” I whisper, praying it isn’t true to whatever god might be listening.

Loric’s eyes shift away, his silence a confirmation.

“That’s why he imprisoned me, isn’t it? I was born there because I was a child of one of his captives.”

“Not just any prisoner,” Loric says, his voice so quiet, I barely hear him over the crackling of the mage lights.

I freeze, the air trapped in my lungs as I study him. The paintings, the reaction he had to meeting her, Meg’s stories – it all aligns with chilling clarity. My voice deserts me, the realization dry and heavy in my throat. “Meg.”

His lips find my sternum, placing a gentle, grounding kiss. “Megara, the Flame Keeper.... The Queen of Dragons.”

In a sudden movement, I arch my back, gripping his face and forcing our eyes to meet. *This is a joke... It’s a lie... It has to be.* Except the only thing I see in his eyes is raw, untwisted honesty.

“She was my mother... the queen.” That’s why the king treated her well, when he regarded the other prisoners like scum on the bottom of his shoe. Meg knew about the dragon kingdom, because she was one. My eyes are dry by the time I take a breath.

He nods solemnly. “That makes you the last fury alive.” His lips press a tender kiss to one of my hands. “And the rightful heir to the dragon throne.”



I ‘m not sure how long I lay there in the dark, staring at the stone ceiling. I’ve memorized every line, every crevasse by now, and still, I can’t wrap my mind around the fact that Meg was my mother. Why didn’t she tell me? Why didn’t Asmo? Surely, he knew.

Loric hadn’t needed to use his magic tonight. I wasn’t sure if I’d even get to sleep after learning that my entire life has been a lie. Yet, he still stayed. He didn’t put the pillows between us like before, and instead, he lay with his back to me. His faint snores fill my ears, but I can’t be bothered by them.

I still can’t stomach the fact that dragons have been taking care of me. Actual *dragons*. Days ago, I would’ve ran for my life, blackout or not, but they haven’t killed me yet, and since Meg was their queen, once upon a time, I don’t think they plan to now. It wouldn’t make sense for them to.

Loric shifts, turning on his other side, now facing me. His long eyelashes flutter a moment, then sterling eyes meet mine. He blinks quickly, as if he’s still trying to pull himself out of a dream.

“Did you have a nightmare?” he asks, rubbing the palm of his hand into his eyes.

“No... I never went to sleep.” I pull the quilt a bit higher, but his arms snake around me, tucking me against his chest. “You don’t have to do this, you know... Stay with me.”

Loric’s grip on me tightens just a fraction. “I want to,” he whispers, nuzzling my neck. “If it makes you feel safe, even if

it just helps to ease your mind, I want to.”

I nod, snuggling closer to him as his breath tickles the skin behind my ear. He presses a soft kiss there, making my heart flutter wildly in my chest. The steady rhythm of his breathing soothes me in a way I never thought possible. Gently, Loric brushes his fingers through my hair, untangling any knots he finds, and the tenderness brings tears to my eyes.

“You’ll have to get some sleep at some point,” Loric murmurs against my skin.

“You must hate me,” I whisper, catching my lip between my teeth. “For what the king has done to you, and your kind... *Our* kind.”

“I don’t hate you, Chaos. Trust me, you’d know if I hated you. I wouldn’t be holding you...” He places a kiss against my throat. “I definitely wouldn’t be kissing you.” His hand slides down my side, running over the curve of my hip. “I wouldn’t be here at all.”

“But my father—” I protest as he hooks a hand around my thigh, pulling me onto my back.

“The king’s sins are not your own.” He rests his head on his hand, peering down at me. “Do you understand?”

I nod, blinking back tears. “Does Brenn know?”

Loric chuckles softly. “Brenn knows. He wouldn’t have changed his mind about you otherwise.”

“He said it was because he could see my aura now.”

“Brenn can’t see auras.” Loric rolls his eyes. “He just has these gut feelings about things. Whether it’s things he invents or people. It’s his gift, but for him it’s easier just to tell people he can see their aura than to try to explain that he knows things about them just by looking at them.”

“He said he couldn’t see mine until after I shifted in the woods.”

Nodding gently, he smirks at me. “That part is true. He couldn’t read you.”

“But he can now.” It’s more of a statement than a question.

“Yes.” He licks his lips, staring off into the room. “He thinks you’re my true mate. It’s what set my dragon off the day we first came down here. My dragon was curious before, but hearing Brenn say that... It took him to a whole new level.”

“You mean like him and Mira are?”

He chuckles, running his hand over my side. “It’s just lore. His clan in particular believes in a lot of stories.”

“But his mate’s mark is golden...” I say hesitantly, recalling the conversation I’d had with Brenn earlier.

“He showed you, huh?” Loric drags his fingers up the inside of my thigh, turning as he reaches the top of it, then travels back down to my knee. “Sometimes, the marks just turn gold. Most of us think it’s from mating prematurely rather than being true mates. Brenn and Mira were teenagers, thus it’s gold.”

“You can’t feel it, can you?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Feel what?” he questions, his gaze locked on mine.

“There’s something different about us. I’m drawn to you and I wish I could explain it.”

Loric looks up at me, his brow furrowing slightly. “You think we’re true mates?”

I twist my lips, rolling my teeth over them. “I don’t know what to think... Do you really not feel it?”

“I feel something, yes, but that’s what being interested in someone feels like. You think about them, look for them in every room you walk into. All of a sudden, your fingers ache to touch them, and no matter how much you try to fight it, you can’t.” He pauses, searching my eyes before continuing. “I like you, more than I should. I’m attracted to you in ways beyond words, but it doesn’t mean we’re soulmates. As much as I’d love to believe that.”

“Then what is this? What are we doing?” I dare to meet his eyes.

“That’s a really good question, and one I don’t have the answer to. All I know is, I want to enjoy it as long as I can... because once you wrap your head around Meg being your mother, you’re going to want to go to the dragon kingdom and possibly claim her throne, as you should, and that’ll change everything. I can take you there, but I can’t stay.” His face falls and he lays back down beside me, staring at the ceiling.

“Because you have people that count on you here...” I say, filling in the blanks.

“Something like that, yeah. I’m sure they’d make do without me, though. It’s mostly that I *can’t* stay there. There’s too much water under the bridge for me to even think about staying there.” Loric watches me, sensing that his words weren’t what I wanted to hear. I bite my lip, fighting back the disappointment that threatens to overwhelm me. He reaches out, gently guiding my face back towards him. “I won’t ask you to give up something incredible for me. I won’t even allow you to do it on your own accord. I’d never forgive myself. So, if you want me to stop, I will. I’ll move to the floor, still do whatever you need me to in regards to your dreams, and I won’t touch you anymore.”

“What if I don’t want you to stop?” I ask, staring at his full lips. There’s a hint of a smirk pulling up one corner.

“Then we don’t have to. We can enjoy this while it lasts, but you have to promise you won’t stay here for me.”

I barely get a chance to nod before Loric leans in, his lips are against mine.

CHAPTER 26

Leric

I should stop. I should get out of this bed right now and walk away, but not a single fiber in my being will obey my command. Every piece of me is held entirely at her mercy and I'm not sure I want the control back.

The closeness of her, the feel of Calamity's body pressed against mine, ignites a primal urge deep within me, and my dragon purrs in delight. The sound echoes through my lips as I break the kiss, breathing heavily as golden orbs search my face.

My hands skirt down her side, wrapping around her hip to squeeze her ass in the palm of my hand. The action pulls her closer to me, making her crane her neck back to hold my stare. I lick my lips. "Tell me to leave."

Her gaze shudders. "Why?"

"This is a bad idea. I want you in ways I don't even know how to put into words. I want to feel your skin against mine, hear your moans on my lips, but I told you what's at stake. All it takes is one slip up, one bite, and it's completely out of our hands."

Her lips quirk up at a corner. "Then don't bite me."

I drop my forehead to hers, closing my eyes. “Tell me stop, tell me to leave, anything to get me out that door.” I swallow, salivating at the thought of tasting her on my lips.

“I won’t.” She runs a hand down my torso, around the waistband of my pants, making my stomach cave in on itself. “I want to... I want *you*.”

I groan, clamping my lips shut to smother the noise. “Roll over.”

Calamity hesitates, then flips sides, putting her back to me. Gathering her hair in my hands, I wrap it around my fist and gently tug her head back. She shifts slightly, and I instinctively press my hips against her, a low growl rumbling in my chest. My teeth graze her neck, the skin there so tantalizingly close, yet I don’t dare break it.

“Do it. Break the skin. Make her ours.”

I won’t force her to choose between me and her throne.

“Once she claims the throne she won’t have to. Besides, you heard her. She feels the pull, as do you. You know as well as I do what that means. Mark her.”

And you know being mated to us isn’t a guarantee we’ll survive if we go back. Behave or I’ll deny us both.

“Don’t move,” I manage to grit out, my voice strained with the effort of holding back my beast and the desire to go slow, to be gentle with her.

My dragon starts clawing his way to the surface, eager to mark his claim, but I tamper him down, swallowing hard as I kiss a trail up her throat, across her jaw, pulling her hair harder until I can feel those perfect lips press to mine. I drink in the sweet little whimper she makes as my teeth capture her bottom lip, the same way she did mine in the stairwell, recreating the tender yet primitive act.

Fuck, I haven’t stopped thinking about it.

My fingers splayed wide, I rove over her body, caressing the flat planes of her stomach, the gentle curve of her breast. Cupping it in my palm, I knead slowly, savoring the smooth

weight of it as it molds to my touch, and willing my cock to stay still when my hold pulls a contented sigh from her throat.

She arches into my hand, a silent plea for more, and I pinch a hardened nipple beneath the thin fabric of her gown. Her breath hitches, her body jolting at the pulse of pleasure that races through her. *So responsive. So eager. It'll take more strength than I anticipated not to mark her.*

Willing my beast to stay dormant, I let myself travel lower, feathering my fingers up her silky thigh before cupping between them. A gentle squeeze tells me she's so wet, so *ready* for me that my chest tightens to the point where I fear I might not be able to breathe if I wait any longer.

"Last chance, princess..." I whisper, my fingers slipping past the hem of her panties, playing with the arousal pooling between her legs. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she breathes, her golden eyes staring up at me in the darkness. Arching her back, she seeks my fingers and I sink them one-by-one inside her, coating them each individually, taunting and teasing, enjoying the way her body writhes in my arms, rubbing against my steel length.

Every slow push, every lingering withdrawal, elicits a new sound. A moan. A whimper. A needy little growl. Each one drives me closer to the edge, testing the limits of my restraint.

I want to bury every inch of my need inside her tight body, to watch her mouth drop open, the bliss in her eyes, to hear my name fall from her full lips as she shatters to pieces. I want it *all*. Every moan, every sigh, every kiss... *mine*.

Fingers drawing lazy circles against her clit, I drag my tongue up her throat, setting my teeth against her skin.

"Do it."

Shut up.

Her body trembles against me as she lengthens her neck, beckoning me to bite her harder, to claim her here and now, but I won't. No matter how much I want to sink my teeth into her throat, I vowed to let her make her own choices, and I

won't take that away from her, no matter how much my beast—and I—might want to.

Calamity's softness molds against my hard edges, her pulse beating against my lips. I let go of her hair, curling my arm around her to cover her mouth. "You'll have to stay quiet. Can you do that?" I ask, breathlessly.

She nods and I push two fingers inside, her mouth falling open against my palm while I smother the moan that escapes her lips. Her hips squirm against mine, rubbing her ass over the cock I'd tried so hard to keep out of reach. The friction both sates and ignites my need, shooting a wave of pleasure tinged with pain coursing through my limbs.

"She wants us. Stop fighting it."

No!

Her heart hammers so hard I can feel it against my chest. I twist and curl and fuck my fingers into her, finding the place that connects every nerve ending in her body. Her skin flushes, my teeth clamp onto her throat, riding the line of no return. Any harder and she'll be mine. I'll be hers, body, mind, heart, and soul.

A guttural growl tears through me just as I pull my mouth away, right before her body bows, submitting. *Gods, that was close.* She comes on a silent scream, before moaning loudly into my hand. I release her throat, kissing the small divots left behind by my teeth, my dragon purring at the thought of it staying there, of it turning gold. Her breaths are shaky as she comes down from the high, her eyes hooded, satiated as she rolls on her back to face me.

"That was..."

I crush my lips to hers, caressing her body, admiring and memorizing every curve and every inch. She fights to keep her eyes open and I smirk at the thought of fucking her to sleep. She deserves it, to dream, and I tuck her against my chest. Her hair falls around her like a veil and I can't help but watch her, to note how peaceful she looks.

A pang of guilt flutters through me at the thought of me lying to her. She was right about me being smitten, even if her timing was off. It didn't start after kissing her in the stairwell. I have been wrapped around her finger since I saw her in the clearing, clinging to Asmo for dear life. I'm just not sure how to handle that, or what to think about it, but it makes me wonder if there is more to the stories.

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CHAPTER 27

Calamity

It was nice waking up next to Loric, his head buried into the crook of my neck, his arms around me. I hadn't anticipated anything from last night, yet what unfolded was... indescribable, a sensation that made my toes curl and stars explode behind my eyelids. It lingers in my thoughts now after it had already invaded my dreams, and the most startling part? Loric hadn't wielded his magic to craft those dreams.

They were my own doing.

I knew this was temporary, that we'll have to part ways soon, but Loric promised that he'd take me wherever I wanted to go—whether that be the outer realm or the moons. And the moment we got to either, things between us would change.

This is all we can be. He was right. Knowing what I am and who my mother is changes things, but I haven't completely decided what I want.

On the one hand, going to the outer realm allows me to stay with him. But that's assuming he wants me to stay. If he doesn't, what do I have there? I know no one. I have no friends, no family. There are dragons that I could learn from, but I don't know what comes after that.

Then there's a small part of me that wants to go to the moons. Loric was right about that, too. I want to see all the

places I've painted, all the places Meg told me stories about. Even if it is just to visit. She spoke so highly of the dragons that it's hard to not be curious. Those were her people. She ruled over them, loved them enough to sacrifice herself for their freedom, and cared for them like her own children.

I could hear it in her voice, though at the time I thought it was pure fascination or her imagination guarding her from the trauma. I'd thought she either made it up, or let herself get consumed by the stories to keep a spark of hope alive that we'd make it out and see those places one day. I had no idea that it wasn't her wishing to be there, rather her missing home.

I want to know about them. I feel like I owe it to Meg, but I don't want her crown. I don't even know the first thing about ruling, especially over a species I barely know. Still, it doesn't stop me from imagining what it would feel like to step on those moons, to see that crystal castle, to feel the power in the air. I just don't understand why Loric can't visit with me.

I supposed I could go see it, explore the pieces of me I never knew existed, then come back. Dragons can pass through the realm boundary. And if he won't stay on the moons—and if going to the outer realm doesn't sit well with me—then there's six other realms we could go to. We could start somewhere new. But I won't ask him to leave his friends, and clearly there's some *duty* tying him here.

So, I'll keep it in my mind that this is temporary. That we're simply two people who are attracted to one another, exploring something that has a means to an end.

Still, I wanted him to bite me and that was a shocking revelation. I thought I'd be terrified of it, that the second his teeth touched my throat I'd be frozen in fear, but it was the opposite. His teeth scraped my skin and it took everything I had not to moan. I felt butterflies in every inch of my body, heat cooked in my middle, burning so bright, so hot I could've melted in his arms.

It was at that moment I knew he was right. All it would take is one bite, whether initiated by him or me, and I don't know if I could resist the pull between us, whatever magical force that

would fill us up with desire, the want for more. I already feel that now without being marked. I can't imagine what it would be like if I was.

With that said, I'll indulge in what little time we have. I'll let him take me up to the moons and I'll leave whatever happens next up to The Fates.

I only wish it didn't have to end.

It's incredible how fast things have changed in just a short period of time, of days, a week at most. I went from fearing the dragons to being one, and not just any one, but *royalty*.

I'm not sure what Meg would want me to do. Would she want me to claim the crown, to try and rule a species I don't know? The dragons are powerful, but they're also ruthless. They have a code that if broken won't go unpunished, and I doubt they'd want a Midicious on the throne.

And I, for one, prefer my head firmly planted on my shoulders and not rolling across the ground. But what I do know is, I at least have to see it. As for claiming the crown, I'm not even sure how to do that to begin with, so that's a subject that can wait until another day. For now, I just need to get there. Home.

I don't know how to process that. How can I feel like somewhere I've never been is home? Yet, it feels like I've known the moons my whole life with all the stories Meg has told me, and if Meg is my mother, then I'll be safe there, regardless of who my father is.



The moment the hell flame started shining down on our twisted realm, we'd set out, leaving the cavern and the bar behind without a glance back.

It took us all of the day to get to Ashbourne, but despite the long journey I didn't argue about sharing a horse, nor did I point out how Loric made excuses to touch me, to braid my hair, claiming it was in his face, or even just to hold me to him because there was uneven ground up ahead. We'd stayed

within the winding valleys between the mountains, snaking around them, so there wasn't any *uneven ground*. Yet, I didn't stop him. I craved his nearness and yearned for every excuse he made.

The horses' packs are heavier now, laden with whatever we could scavenge from the cavern and bar. Gael would no longer need the rations he stored or the magical trinkets in his study, but they'd get us through for the next couple days. Loric had let me keep the bestiary too, claiming I paid for it in blood, and that little win had my lips pulled into a wide smile for half the trip.

The warmth of the hell flame caresses my skin, a sensation I can't help but relish after spending days underground, and almost freezing in the clearing. We finally approach Ashbourne, my legs a chorus of aching muscles. Most of which I didn't know existed until now, but the most notable is the way my thighs burn from the constant flexing required to maintain balance on our long ride.

We round the last curve of the trail, and the quaint village of Ashbourne unfolds before us. It's speckled with cottage-like structures, nestled among stone roads. The roofs, thatched with a hay-like material, give it a rustic charm. Rather than imposing upon the mountains that rise on either side, the village gracefully weaves along the base, spilling through the valley in harmony with the earth.

We pull off the trail, and the others start gathering our things. Loric's hands are gentle yet firm as he aids me in dismounting and I wince the moment my feet hit the solid ground.

"If I never ride one of these things again, I'd be the happiest person alive," I grumble, hissing through my teeth as I attempt to walk off the ache.

Loric chuckles, handing the reins to Jesper. "Luckily for you, this is where we got them, so from here, we're on foot."

I fall into step with him, making way for the front gates of the village. A tall fence made from some sort of metal, like the bars of a cell surrounding it. "What is this place?"

“It’s an elven village.”

As we walk, the quaint village unfolds around us. The people are mostly dark elves with their skin and long pointed ears, but there are other species sprinkled throughout it. Orcs, shifters in humanoid forms, mages and druids... it’s hard to tell what most are just by looking at them, but they stand out against the sea of gray.

A bridge arches gracefully over a river that cuts straight through the town. The air is alive with excitement, as if the village itself is stirring with anticipation, preparing for some sort of festival. Paper lanterns hang on every hook, the cobblestone chalked with vibrant swirls, and twisted ribbons adorn pillars. It’s magical.

“What’s all this for?” I stop at the gate, curling a finger around a ribbon.

“It’s the bloom festival,” Loric explains. “They celebrate it every year after the blackout.”

Jesper jogs up to us, his chest heaving from the effort. I look over my shoulder, seeing that the horses are gone, along with the others. They must’ve taken them to be returned to whoever they borrowed them from.

“I’ve never been so glad to see streamers,” Jesper says, trying to catch his breath. “It’s been decades since we attended the bloom festival. We have to stay.”

“What’s so special about it?” I ask, curiosity piqued.

Loric narrows his eyes at Jesper as if he opened the door for something he’d intended to keep locked away. Then he shakes his head. “It’s mostly for unclaimed and unmarried maidens. They dance in flower crowns and white dresses, hoping to catch someone’s eye.”

Intrigued, I look over the street before us again. “Can we see it?”

Loric hesitates, then concedes. “Since we’re no longer planning to head south to the Asgardian docks, we’re ahead of schedule, even with the blackout. So, it wouldn’t hurt to stay one night.”

My eyes light up as I smile wide. “Really?”

“There’s one rule, though. You’re not participating, and we only stay if we find rooms,” Loric says, a smirk playing on his lips as he takes in the sight of me. It’s like it brings him joy to see me excited.

Jesper slings an arm around my shoulders and chuckles. “Let her have a bit of fun. She’s been cooped up her whole life. The worst that can happen is getting poked by a thorn in her flower crown.”

Loric relents, muttering something under his breath as he leads the way. Jesper shoots me a wink before dropping his arm and I mouth a silent ‘thank you,’ following after them through the town.

We venture down the cobblestone streets to a marketplace teeming with merchants. My eyes widen in awe at the vibrant life around us, and Loric keeps me close, moving to my side, his hand against my lower back as we work through the crowded streets.

A table catches my eyes, covered in flowers, and I start to veer toward it, but Loric’s fingers catch the ties of the corset on the back of my dress, pulling me back with a gentle tug. “Stay close. If you’re far enough that I can’t yank you back, then you’re too far.”

Puzzled, I ask, “Why? You can see me.”

Loric sweeps my hair to one side, his voice low and urgent. “Because you smell delicious, and there are creatures here that would be overwhelmed by you.”

“I’m not defenseless. I do have magic, you know. Besides, I’m pretty certain that all I’d have to do is yell and you’d be there in seconds, either sword drawn or knocking an arrow.”

His response is a protective tightening of his hold. My back presses to his chest as his hand trails so tantalizingly slow, up my arm, over my shoulder until he can stop my chin up, forcing me to look him in the eye.

“For starters,” Loric begins, his tone grave, “there’s a mate trade in this region and this festival is like their goldmine.

They prey on the women who participate and auction them off to the highest bidder. People assume the girls run off, or found someone and took interest enough to leave, except they end up in cages in Solaria, their blood bound to a deed by elven magic.”

“That’s awful,” I breathe.

“I know, but unfortunately, when families sell off their own children to the bastards, it doesn’t matter how many times you disrupt their trade routes, it continues to happen.”

It makes me wonder how he knows that, if he had a hand in disrupting them before he was imprisoned. I could see him playing vigilante, and the way his jaw ticks at the very thought of what could happen tells me it’s something he feels strongly about.

“Not to mention,” he continues, “every unmated shifter here will be drawn to you. You’re beautiful, so powerful that I can feel how strong your creature is just by entering a room.”

My brow crinkles. “But my beast stopped. I’m not in heat anymore.” I’m not sure I could get myself to say *dragon* yet casually, and there are too many ears moving around us to risk being overheard.

“Doesn’t matter. You’re unmated, and a lot of creatures in this realm could care less if you’re the same species as them or not. They see a shifter woman without a mark, a piece of property to claim and command, that looks pretty beneath them. There are a lot more bad people in this realm than good. They don’t care about your consent, or whether you scream, because they know once they sink their teeth into your throat, the magic will make you submit to them.” His words send a chill down my spine, but I nod in understanding.

Loric cared. He gave me a chance to say no—promised to obey it if I had. He fought the urge to bite me, because he didn’t want to chain me to him, to keep me from discovering a part of my heritage, knowing full well he’d never stay in the dragon realm with me.

I'm not sure what his reasons are for not wanting to stay there longer than to escort me to the moons, but the simple fact he thought of me enough to put my feelings, wants, and needs before his own desires means something to me. It sets him apart. Especially when he's made it clear that most men in this realm, and likely others too, wouldn't think about me at all.

His lips press just behind my ear, then against my pulse, his teeth nipping me there. My knees nearly give out. Perhaps they would've if his arms weren't around me possessively.

"Why would you do that?" I squeal, unprepared for the euphoric feeling that slipped over me without warning. Whirling on him, ready to level him with a glare, everything fades into oblivion the moment I see his face.

He's biting his lower lip, trying to hide that obnoxiously sexy smirk, his silver eyes so dark they look like he could swallow me whole, and *fuck, I'd let him*. I'd beg him to do it if he asked me to, and that alone is far more frightening than learning I'm a dragon. Realizing that you'd happily get to your knees and bow at someone's feet, to put yourself completely and wholeheartedly at their mercy when you barely know anything about them should be profoundly terrifying.

Yet I don't feel the least bit scared. It's a thrill that snakes down my spine, that bows it, that urges me to get closer to him, to ignore the fact he looks like he could possess me at any moment.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks, arching a dark eyebrow.

I snap upright, clearing my throat. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

Loric licks his lips, leaning closer. I tip my chin, closing my eyes, my breathing shallow as I wait for his lips to meet mine, but they don't. Instead, I feel his breath on my cheeks as he says, "Perhaps neither of us should answer that question then."

His hand is warm against my lower back and my eyes flare open, locking on to where his lips are only an inch or two

from mine.

“That’s probably for the best,” I whisper, wanting to lean forward and close the gap, but he stands up right.

The hand he has at my lower back twists into the tied strings of my corset, pulling it slightly tighter. It knocks a huff of air from my lungs as he leads me down the cobblestone road, not caring that everyone behind us can see what he’s doing.

“The purpose of those strings is not for it to be used as a leash,” I grumble, my features going flat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Loric tips his head back, looking up at the sky a moment. “Maybe not,” he says, his Adam’s apple bobbing slightly before he resumes staring at the road ahead. “But they make a decent handle that can be used for other things.”

The blood rushes to my cheeks as my mouth gapes. The shock alone interrupts the signals from my brain to my legs and they stop moving. His hand is ready, nudging me along and I gasp in shock, but the heat that pools in my core is full of something else.

Loric’s silver eyes meet mine, still wide as I try to remember to breathe, and he smiles, his tongue playing with the tips of his teeth as he looks away. My cheeks are flaming hot as I try to compose myself, and we continue down the line of shops and street-side merchants.

“Promise me that you’ll be careful, that you won’t go anywhere alone while we’re here,” he says, his deep voice sending butterflies swarming my stomach after I just got them to settle down.

“I promise,” I say, trying to catch my breath.

CHAPTER 28

Calamity

After meandering through the market, grabbing some supplies we needed, we stopped into a quaint little cottage on the main strip of the village to meet with a seamstress. She took my measurements, had me try on a few things, and made me pick a few styles I liked for the trousers and top she'd have fitted for me by morning.

And since Loric finally caved, agreeing to let me participate in some of the festivities beyond just bearing witness to them, we bought a thin white dress for me to wear tonight. Apparently, all the maidens wear something similar. Another merchant had a table full of flower crowns and I picked one that was a ring woven of red roses to match.

By the time we were done, the others had secured a place for us to stay tonight. Loric led me through the village until we passed a sign that read "Arcane Cottages" which he explained is like a home that could be rented for a night. The rays of light from the hell flame spill onto the cobblestone, casting long shadows off the sides of the cottage eaves.

He points to ours and I squint through the light to get a better look. It's like the entire thing was carved into some sort of molten stone, and like the marketplace, the roof is made out of thatched grass that's turned gray with time. Wildflowers

sprout up around the base and line the stone walkway, their colors vibrant and the scent of them sweet and earthy.

I follow Loric up the path and toward the front door. The air hums with a quiet magic, the walls themselves seeming to pulse with a life of their own. Each cottage in the row matches, as if they were cast in a mold, but each are painted to have their own theme of whimsy, their rock walls covered with wild ivy, along with their twisted chimneys.

We step inside, and even the inner walls have vines, peeking through crystal-lined cracks, decorating the corners. There's a fireplace nestled into the far wall, the flames burning an odd blue and green hue. It's hell flame, a rare element that as far as I know, shouldn't be messed with. One touch and the wound will burn for eternity, even after it's healed. There are only a handful of creatures in this realm that can touch it safely. My father, nephilim, furies, and hellhounds. Otherwise, touching it won't be a death sentence, but the pain that'll fall will make you wish it was.

That's odd they would light their hearths with it, instead of using something safer, like mage fire. It's enchanted to never go out.

Jesper, Mira, and Brenn are gathered around an old oak table, cards in hand. Jesper's the first to notice us, his brooding shoulders straightening as he breaks into a sly grin. He stands with a flourish, bowing so low his dark hair almost sweeps the floor. "Your majesty," he says, his voice laced with a playful respect.

Brenn, lounging in his chair, his leg that's clad in the mechanical hinge is propped up on another chair, elevated by a pillow. The long ride here must've bothered it. His pixie-like features twist into a smirk as he quickly glances up at me, then back to his cards. "She's not a queen yet." He nods to Mira. "Go Fish."

Mira chuckles, watching Jesper return to his chair. Her long dark hair is down now, the shaved side of her head to me, and for just a split second, I could swear the tattoos wrapped

around the side of her head glow. “You’re both idiots.” She shakes her head at them, and discards.

I can’t help but smile, the tension from the day’s travels melting away. Loric glances around the room. “Where’s Vik and Faelor?”

“Sleeping. They were up most of the night,” Jesper says, wagging his brows. His attention turns to me and he holds up the cards. “Ever play?”

I shake my head, setting down our things and joining them at the table. There’s no other chair, since Brenn is using it to prop his leg up, and I won’t ask for it, so I lean against the table top.

“Want to learn?” Mira asks, her brows lifting.

Jesper gestures to an empty spot in his lap, the mischievous glint in his eyes unmistakable. “Come on, let daddy teach you.”

Leaning back, I try to form a response, but can’t. I glance over my shoulder, finding Loric less than a foot away, setting down a stool from the bartop table in the kitchen. He takes a seat first, then takes it upon himself to tug me into his lap by the corset strings he seems so obnoxiously fond of. “See, I told you it makes a good handle.”

My cheeks flush. Scratch that, my entire body does as I cover my mouth with my hand, pretending to wipe something away to hide the smile tugging at my lips. Loric chuckles shortly as Mira deals me in then leans closer to me, his arms on either side of my body. He organizes the cards, fanning them and arranging my fingers along the bottom edges of them. “Just like that,” he says, his hands dropping to my lap as he rests his chin on my shoulder.

Jesper smacks Loric in the arm. “Show some respect, will you? She’s practically royalty. You can’t be breathing all over her. You should, however, be kissing her damn feet.” He winks at me, a gesture meant to be teasing, *I think*.

Loric’s low grunt rumbles against my back, sending a shiver down my spine, his breath warm against my neck. I fight to

resist the urge to lean into him. “Royalty or not, she likes it.”

Jesper rolls his eyes. “That’s... You’re insufferable, making all the single folk around this table uncomfortable.”

I squint, trying to do the math in my head, but it’s... *not mathing*. If he’s counting Loric and I as a couple, even though we’re definitely not. Jesper would be the only single person here.

Ignoring him, Mira leans forward, her eyes on me. “Alright, the game is simple. Collect pairs by getting all four cards with the same number or letter. You can ask anyone if they have any of that number, and if they have them, they have to fork them over. If they don’t, you take a card off the top of the pile. The person with the most pairs at the end wins. Just watch out for Jesper, he cheats.”

Jesper gasps in feigned shock, a weak little ‘ugh’ escaping his open mouth. “How dare you divulge my secrets...”

Loric snorts, against my shoulder, amused, and takes the four twos in our hand and sets them down.

Jesper sucks in a breath, his eyebrows squishing together as he tries to get a better look. “Oh, yeah.. And *I’m* the cheater.”

I laugh, the sound lighter than I’ve felt in days. The tension that had been coiling within me begins to unravel, replaced by a sense of belonging. “Beginner’s luck, I guess.”

Glancing at Jesper, he looks mock-offended. “You sure you don’t want to sit on my lap? I need some of that luck right about now.”

Music sounds somewhere off in the distance, drums to be more specific. “When does the festival start?” I pick up a card, keeping it.

“Sounds like it is now,” Mira says, tapping her chin. “We should probably get you dressed if you’re going to go.”

Jesper’s up and out of his chair before anyone else can move. “What are we waiting around for, then?”

Loric taps my hip, silently telling me to stand up. “Mira can help you get dressed, unless you prefer me to do it.” I meet his

silver eyes, and something tells me if I take him up on his offer, there will be no leaving to attend the festival.

Mira's out of her chair before I can answer, her arm looping in mine. "Well, come on. You don't want to miss the best part."

"What's that?" I'm not really sure what happens at the bloom festival, other than it's some ritualistic celebration for maidens. Loric and Jesper alluded to music and dancing, but what's the best part?

"There's a blood oath that you and your partner take. Well, whoever your date is for the night. If you don't have one, then you miss out on it, but since Loric is going with you..." she leaves it open-ended as we slip into one of the bedrooms and Jesper lays my dress on the bed before taking his leave.

"A blood oath, like a marriage oath?"

"Sort of, but temporary. It only lasts as long as the paint is on your body. Bathe and it's over. You mix your blood into a mortar with the paint that's been enchanted. For the night, you feel everything they do. It's kind of erotic if you ask me, but we have celebrations like that in the outer realm, and most people attend just for that."

Mira helps me out of my dress in silence, and before I know it, I'm left in nothing more than the flimsy linen layer that goes beneath everything.

"That too," Mira calls, turning her back toward me as she gathers the white dress I'll be wearing tonight in her hands.

I didn't get a chance to look at it, but the merchant said it's the same style all the maidens will wear. At the time, we were trying to hurry and get everything we needed before the merchants on the main row closed for the day. With today being the festival, Loric thought they'd all pack up early. Regardless, I want the full experience, and I won't get another chance if I'm leaving the realm.

Hesitantly, I lift the gown over my head, turning back to Mira in the nude. I've never felt self-conscious before, but the more I'm around them, the more perfect they become. Both

Mira and Vik are gorgeous, *goddess* gorgeous. They practically float when they walk and I'm still getting used to running in boots. I'm better off barefoot or in flats these days. Yet, they make it all look so easy. Their posture is poised and practiced, and if I didn't know any better, I'd believe they were royalty before I so much as thought about myself.

Mira's about to say something as she turns, but her face morphs instantly, becoming expressionless, save for her jaw flexing as she swallows.

Even she knows that they're everything I'm not.

"Shut up. I'll eat her if you keep thinking that." My beast's voice echoes in my mind and I try my best to feign confidence, to straighten my shoulders, to stand tall, even if all I want to do is disappear.

"What? Is something wrong?" I resist the urge to wrap my arms around myself as she looks me over from head to toe.

"No... I just..." she stutters.

"Just what?" There's a nip to my tone I hadn't intended, but her gaze lifts to my face and she feigns a smile. It doesn't come close to reaching her eyes as she lifts the fabric over my head.

"I didn't realize you had so many scars..." She averts her eyes as the sheer fabric floats around me. It's damn near, see through in some places. The neckline plunges to just above my navel, and the sleeves are short, scrunched over my shoulders. There's a high slit that cuts up to my hip bone and the fabric flows, pooling slightly at my feet.

I look around for the rest, but I don't see anything. "Is this...? This can't be all."

Mira's smile returns as she steps back, crossing her arms as she takes me in. "That's all of it."

"But you can see through places," I say, pulling the fabric taut around my breast, clearly able to see the whole nipple. Not half, not a peek, but the whole thing.

“It’s intended to be that way. It’s meant to show off your assets and attract a mate.” She steps closer, adjusting my dress in places. “You could also change back, go watch. No one would blame you.”

The air deflates from my chest. “This is really what people wear?” My voice is quiet, defeated.

“Yeah... The festival is mostly for men, and they enjoy looking at pretty things. It’s pretty messed up if you ask me.”

I bite my lip, staring down at myself. “Loric won’t murder someone will he?”

Mira’s laugh takes me by surprise as she flops down on the bed, resting back on her hands. “He certainly would if someone touches you, but otherwise, he’ll get one look and be drooling on the floor.”

I flex an eyebrow up. “Assuming he doesn’t see my scars.”

Mira’s lips pinch into a fine line. “You’re hot, scars and all. He’s just going to think you’re even more badass than you already are... Though, I have to ask. What does lotus mean?”

My hand inadvertently brushes over my thigh, the carved letters there. “It’s from a story. The king was wiping my memories of his experiments. Carving it made me remember.”

She nods but doesn’t comment.

“Well...” I take one last look. “Wish me luck, I guess.”

We head out of the room after I slip my feet into the sandals that came with the dress. The door barely makes it open before all eyes are on me. Brenn, a bite of food paused just before reaching his mouth. Jesper frozen, plate in hand. He’d been on his way to the table. Then my gaze slides to Loric. He’d been spinning my rose crown in his hand when I walked out, facing the door as if he was waiting for me to walk through it.

His eyes slip over me, taking in every curve, every pleat in the sheer fabric. He wets his lips before meeting my gaze, then stands from the table, flipping my rose crown over and over in his hands as he nears. Slowly, he sets it on top of my head.

Crooking a finger beneath my chin, he tips my face up, hovering over me before gently brushing his lips to mine.

“You look beautiful,” he says, whispering it against my lips. “I almost don’t want to let you walk out that door.”

“You’ll be with me, though.” I set my palms against his chest, running my fingers over the firm muscle beneath his shirt.

“Yeah,” his voice goes up an octave. “I’m going to have to be.”

He takes my hands in his, threading our fingers together, then lets one drop as he leads me out of the house, leaving the others to pick up their jaws off the floor.

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CHAPTER 29

Calamity

The festival unfolds before my eyes like a dream.

Loric keeps me close, his arm wrapped possessively around my waist as we wander through the village that's been transformed by magic. Girls twirl in diaphanous white gowns under the twinkling stars, their laughter mixing with the melodies carried on the breeze. Various creatures wear intricate masks, and beneath their feet is a vast painting on the cobblestone. It depicts the triplet moons surrounded by wild, unruly flames. The image itself covers most of the village center, where all the roads converge into a giant circle.

Magic hums, vibrating through the air, growing stronger by the second until a midnight dome rises from around the town's edges, as if connecting to the mountains that surround the village, and it swallows up the light. Darkness swirls overhead in sparkling blues and voidless blacks as bright white orbs rain down, floating like soap bubbles.

"What are those?" I crane my neck back, watching them fall.

"Magic." Loric watches me as I twirl in a slow circle, soaking it all in, waiting for one of those orbs to be close enough for me to get a better look.

“They look like wisps.” Wisps are magical little traitorous fairies that float around in bubbles just like that, except they sing to you, feed you lies, and are willing to promise anything to lure you into their trap.

Loric laughs, and the sheer sound of it is so beautiful that I can't help but look at him. His teeth gleam in the fire light, cast from torches that fill the village center with an ominous amber glow. It's a sight I don't think I'll ever get enough of.

“Not wisps, maybe inspired by them. They're just lights, but they're beautiful, aren't they?”

“I'm not sure I have the words.”

They're like *falling stars*...

The very sight of them brings back memories of the books Asmo would read to me. The ones that take place in a world vastly different than our own—a place void of monsters and magic. I always imagined escaping to those places, where I could pretend to be anything or anyone. I've sat for hours before, trying to picture the sky there, this empty void of darkness, filled with small twinkling lights, but this... This is what I'd imagine the stars would look like if they fell. Tiny little balls of light.

The orbs are closer now, swaying through the air. My breath catches as I reach out to touch one and it explodes into a tiny cloud of fluorescent dust. Loric chuckles, watching me. He doesn't push me to keep walking toward the festivities like everyone else, he just lets me be, lets me take it in, almost fascinated by my curiosity.

When I've had my fill, he leads me toward the center of the village, where elves are gathered, playing music on drums and some sort of stringed instruments. Other's hold metal tubes that twist in weird ways to their mouths, blowing into them. I've never heard anything like it.

Every now and then, when my father would host an event or a gathering, the village that lined the cliffside near the castle would play music, or people would sing loud enough for me to

hear. I used to listen so closely, cherishing the moment like it would never come again.

Being up close to it, feeling the vibrations of the music in my chest, it's nothing like I expected it to be. I shut my eyes, feeling every beat thrum, my heart fluttering like it's trying to get in sync with it.

A zing races down my spine as Loric's knuckles brush against my cheek. His metal rings are cool against my skin for just a second before the warmth of his fingers traces the same path, and when I open my eyes, I find his gaze locked on mine, filled with an intensity that steals my breath away.

"What are you doing to me?" he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

Heat creeps into my cheeks as I blink at him, not quite understanding the question.

"Had I known you'd be this mesmerized, I would've agreed in a heartbeat, just for the chance to watch you take it all in," he admits, pushing a rogue chunk of hair behind my ear. His knuckles linger on my jaw, and I swallow hard.

I'm speechless, my heart pounding in my chest.

He leans closer to press his lips to my forehead, and intertwines my fingers with his. "Come on. I can't let you miss the best part." Tugging me along, he leads me through the crowd toward the white tents that line the outer rim of the village center.

The merchant at the entrance hands Loric a bowl of silver paint and nods for us to go inside one. Lifting the flap door, we enter, finding a small table and two chairs, but it's otherwise empty.

"What is this?" I ask, running my hands over the woodgrain of the table.

"It's where we'll take a blood oath." Loric's silver eyes pierce through the dim light, making my nerves come alive as he quietly takes in the sight of me. "Mira told you about it, right? The paint?"

I nod, remembering our conversation. “She mentioned it.”

Loric smiles, something dark and mischievous flickering in his gaze. “Once one of the maidens finds someone that could be their mate, they come into a tent like this, add their blood to the paint, and then put it on each other’s body. It binds them for the night, and their feelings become mirrored.”

As he speaks, he slices open his palm with the dagger on his hip, his blood oozing from the wound and dripping into the metallic silver paint. I lift slightly, trying to watch from afar. With a sure step, he closes the gap between us, holding out his hand, beckoning for mine, and I give it to him without a second thought.

“Just so you know, your other half will be suppressed until the paint is gone. She won’t be able to talk to you or influence you in any way.”

“*See yeah, Jekyll. Have fun.*” If she could wink at me, I feel like she would’ve just now and I fight the smile that pulls at my lips.

Loric glances at my mouth. “I take it she’s okay with that.”

“Yeah, which surprises me. I didn’t think she would after...” I trail off, not wanting to bring up my father tonight. “After *everything.*”

His eyebrows raise. “That’s a good thing. It means she trusts me to keep you safe.”

The cold steel of the dagger bites into my palm, and I hiss at the sharp pain that follows. He lets my blood trickle into the bowl, mixing with his, and then kisses my hand, using his magic to seal the wound in an instant.

I can’t help but watch him, admiring how he moves, relishing how I feel when he touches me... It’s overwhelming in the sweetest way. I’m not sure how I’m ever going to get myself to leave him.

This is temporary and I know that. If I choose to go to the moons, he won’t stay with me, there’s no changing his mind either. I saw it in his eyes, felt it in the way he spoke. Now, we’re both just pretending to be in one of those other worlds

from my books, where happily ever afters are guaranteed... Where I won't have to choose between falling helplessly for him and honoring my mother's wishes for me to see the dragon realm, to uphold her legacy...

Meg told me those stories for a reason. It's like she was preparing me for this. Why else would she repeat the stories of the furies over and over, to want me to paint them and the world they lived in. I feel like I know every inch of that kingdom and I've never stepped foot in it.

She wanted us to go there—for me to see it. And finding out that she was my mother, that she was their queen... How could I not? Yet, doing so might mean never seeing Loric again, feeling his hands on my skin, and maybe he's right. Maybe this is just some crush and I've managed to conjure up this pull I feel towards him in my imagination, but I'm not sure I'm ready to give it up.

“Where does the paint go?” I ask, straightening my spine.

“Everywhere you can see, and considering that's an awful lot...” he trails off, his eyes sliding down my form, heating my blood. He steps forward. “May I?” Loric nods at my shoulder.

Mentally, I slam the doors, trapping everything about what comes after today behind it. If this is all I get with him, then I want to enjoy it. With a slow nod, my cheeks flush, and imaginary hands begin to stitch my fractured heart together.

A wicked grin plays at the corners of Loric's mouth as he deftly slides the sleeves of my dress down my arms. The sheer fabric turns inside out, hanging off my hips, leaving me exposed to his hungry gaze.

He sets the paint down then grips my hips and lifts me so I can sit on the tabletop. Those sterling eyes toggle between mine before he cups my face, gently pressing a light kiss to my lips. I chase them as he pulls back, tearing a grumble from his throat, but I fist the front of his shirt, lift my chin. Before I can kiss him back, he turns his head and trails heated kisses down my throat and over my chest.

“Why are you so damn tempting to me?” he asks, pausing at my collarbone.

“I could ask you the same.”

He smiles wide, his rough hands sliding up my body, palming my breasts. My breath hitches as he pulls a taut nipple into his mouth, biting gently, teasingly, sending a jolt racing through my core. My hands weave into his unruly hair, anchoring myself to him as desire coils low in my belly.

Loric continues his sensual assault, his lips trailing lower until he knocks the fabric of my gown away from my legs. The slit in the dress sets over my thighs, and he nudges them apart, lowering himself to kneel before me. There’s a predatory glint in his eyes as they meet mine, and my heart races, pounding into my ribs. My breaths become uneven as he leisurely kisses and licks up the inside of my thigh, then with a languid strike of his tongue, I trap the air in my lungs.

He hooks one of my legs over his shoulder, and I lean back on the table, bracing myself on my elbows. His strong hands hold me steady, gripping into my hip bones and my head falls back, too heavy to hold up any longer.

Loric pushes his fingers into my body slowly, twisting and curling while I bend to his will. His lips close around my clit and he sucks hard. The air rushes out of my lungs, my body trembling in his hands as his tongue swirls and flicks with precision. He knows exactly what he’s doing, driving me towards the edge at a reckless speed, all while his fingers press deeper into my body.

Goosebumps cover my skin as a flush settles across my face, heating me from the inside out. I’m not sure when I started to, but my hips move in tune with his fingers, with his tongue. My body is careless, unbidden, no longer following my orders as it chases the visceral need burning inside me.

Ragged breaths leave my lips and the sounds they carry are unrecognizable to me, unabashed. I try to bite them back, knowing there’s no way the canvas tent will swallow them up, but then something snaps within me. My jaw falls open, my lashes fluttering as every muscle in my body goes weak all at

once. It's all I can do to cover my mouth with my hand, breathing hard as the most euphoric feeling I've ever experienced takes over and I shudder in his hands as he draws out the pleasure. It's so tantalizing and torturous that I can't form coherent words.

I lay back against the table, my hands pulling my hair out of my face. Loric moves to hover above me, his arms outstretched on either side of my head as he licks his lips.

“Was that part of the ritual?”

He smirks. “No.” It's a simple answer, but something about it has my gut tightening all over again, sending butterflies rampaging through me. “I just really, *really* wanted to taste you.”

I roll my eyes, still trying to catch my breath. My body is so blissfully numb I'm not sure I could push up off this table if I tried.

Then fingers press against my skin, the coolness of the paint making my stomach concave. I stutter a breath, looking down my body to see Loric drawing swirls. “I'm not sure how I'm going to be able to leave this tent...”

Those standing in line must have heard us. Maybe even those in the neighboring tents, and oh gods, *definitely* the guy who gave us the paint. My face warms as blood floods and I hide my face in my hands.

Loric chuckles, sending a burst of warm air across my stomach. “With your head held high and a fucking smile on your face, I hope.”

I lift my hands, narrowing my eyes at him, but everything falls away when I see him smile at me. Even his cheeks have taken on a pinkish tone. “Are you blushing?”

His face falls and he clears his throat. “No.” He quickly returns his attention to the task at hand and draws his swirls. But I know what I saw and somehow that gives me a little more confidence than I had two minutes ago.

CHAPTER 30

Calamity

We leave the tent, stepping back out into the festival's lively atmosphere. Loric threads his fingers through mine, and I do my best not to look at those standing in line or the tent guard distributing the paint.

Loric leads the way and we meander toward one of the roads that just off the village center, but my eyes cling to the other festival-goers. None of the other maidens have their entire body painted like mine. Most have a symbol or simple swirls adorning their arms and chests, but nothing as intricate as the designs Loric drew on me. As for their potential mates, most wear masks, but they're fully clothed. No paint in sight.

Loric covered every square inch of me. The tops of my hands and feet, my breasts, *all of it*. Granted, I only did from his waist up since he only removed his shirt, which is now tucked into his belt. I'd followed the same paths he drew on me, covering everything from his throat down to his hips.

I open my mouth to question it but his eyes slide toward me, though he makes no effort to turn his head or his body.

"I was being thorough." The deep timbre of his voice seems to hum across my skin, but *thorough* doesn't explain why he's covered in paint when none of the other men are.

"I'd say," I snort. "And why is that?"

“If someone looks at you...” he trails off, stealing a glance at me. “And trust me, they will. I wanted them to know every inch of you is mine, even if it is just for tonight.”

I exaggerate a nod as we continue through the village. “But why insist that I paint you, then? It doesn’t seem like the others did.” He doesn’t answer, just gives me a knowing look, letting me figure it out on my own. I stop breathing a moment as it dawns on me.

He wanted everyone to know he was mine too.

My heart flutters at that, the idea of him being mine, but I won’t say that out loud. I roll my teeth over my lower lip and scan the crowded streets before us, doing my best to play it off. “If only maidens are painted, does that mean they’re the only ones who feel the magic from the bond?”

Loric nods. “It’s part of it, yeah. It’s supposed to make it easier to seduce them, since they’ll feel the mens’ lust. To me, it seems like it’s more of a chance to bond beyond lust if they were to both partake, and then more so through it, but I didn’t make the rules.”

“Is that what you want to do? *Bond* with me?” I hadn’t intended that to sound sultry, but even I could hear it dripping from every word, and for a quick moment, I panic.

He smiles, exhaling on a silent laugh. “I agreed to let you experience the festival. It doesn’t mean I have to be a dick and play into the dark elves’ sexual objectification.”

Silence falls between us. I’m not quite sure how to take that and maybe a tiny part of me wanted him to say yes, that he genuinely wanted to get to know more on a deeper level, but regardless, he’s here doing it. And he has a point.

Loric scours the festival for something, or maybe someone. “Are you hungry?” He nods toward a merchant selling food, set up down one of the side streets a little ways.

Weighing my head, I shrug. “I could eat, you?”

He smirks, then looks at me out of the corner of his eye and I can’t shake the feeling that his unspoken answer is implying

something else. Especially when that smirk pulls tighter and tighter.

I smack his arm and he flinches away with a wide, toothy grin.

“You have to... That’s not...” I stutter trying to tell him he has to actually eat food, *not me*.

Regardless, he continues to lead us toward the merchant. “Are you always this flustered?”

“I—*Yes*, but that’s not the point.” His eyes are so full of life, so *unburdened*, that I can’t help but stare at him.

“Hmmm... See, I told you, if the ritual is done right, it’s the most important part. I’m already learning.”

“Learning, huh?” I tease, leaning closer to him.

“Are you telling me there’s nothing you’ve noticed since we left that tent?” He arches a brow.

“You don’t seem as grumpy.”

His thumb gently strokes across my index finger. “Yeah, well, it’s pretty nice not to deal with my other half for a change. He can be pushy.”

“Mine is quiet, most of the time, but when she does speak up, it’s usually something violent. Like her threatening to eat Mira today because she looked at me wrong.”

His brow furrows. “How so?”

“It was nothing.” I say, reaching out to touch the vibrant purple flowers hanging off a tent we pass.

“It obviously wasn’t nothing, not if she felt like she needed to defend you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. She’s also threatened to eat Brenn... a few times. She’s just aggressive.”

“Fair enough,” he says, letting go of my hand as we near the merchant selling some sort of skewers. They’re a mix of meat and sweet fruit. Loric hands me one and we take a seat on a waist-height stone wall, just off the main circle. It’s a little

more quiet, though neither of us talk as we eat. It's not until I've picked the stick clean and set it down beside me that either of us speak again.

“What is this blood oath supposed to feel like?” I ask, trying to sense what's changed but coming up empty handed.

Loric finishes his last bite, setting his skewers down, turning toward me so he can lean his back against the raised pillar beside him and plant one of his boots between us on the ledge. “It's almost an extension of your feelings. If my heartbeat picks up, so does yours. If you cry, I might. And if I do this...” His free hand trails down his bare stomach, pressing against the steel length in his pants. Loric's breath hitches, his abs flexing as he bites back a groan.

Desire ripples through me, knocking the air from my lungs with its intensity.

“We're connected,” he whispers, eyes locked on mine. “Just like it would be if we were mated fully.”

Loric's smile is warm and infectious as I take it all in, trying to wrap my head around the concept of sharing emotions—*feelings*—and wondering what I let slip through the bond since we painted each other.

Loric chuckles, likely sensing my confusion. “I hadn't realized how nervous you felt all the time,” he admits, “or maybe it's just around me. But I like it.”

He flexes his brow, and I can't help the blush that colors my cheeks as I narrow my eyes on him. “I didn't know mates were connected like this.” Though, there's something oddly comforting about it.

“Mates share everything: power, healing abilities, even their emotions and feelings. It's what makes losing a mate so heart-wrenching. It's devastating to have someone just disappear from your life. Even more so when they're so entangled in you to the point you don't know where they end and you begin. Not that I've experienced it, but I know others who have.”

The words hang heavy in the air between us and his eyes darken as he looks away for a moment. I can't imagine the

pain he's describing, but I can feel it through him. The overwhelming sadness that floats through our bond brings tears to my eyes, and I blink them away, trying to maintain some semblance of control. But he sees them anyway, and curses softly under his breath.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." His voice is soft as he scoots toward me, gently wiping at my cheeks with his thumbs, cradling my face.

"I think I understand how this works now," I squeak out, trying to hold the tears in. *How the hell is he not crying?*

He chuckles, noiselessly, shaking his head. "This is a new experience for me too. I've never done something like this." He presses his lips into a fine line.

"Why haven't you? You're what, a hundred and twenty-something years old? You mean to tell me no one has ever swindled you into attending a festival with them?" I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me, and my lips tug into a soft smile.

Loric looks thoughtful for a moment, then shrugs. "No, not really. People have tried I suppose, but never someone I couldn't say no to. I guess I just never found someone I wanted to do it with."

Until now... He doesn't say it, but he doesn't need to. Warmth floods through me as I try to bite back my smile.

"Okay," he says, rolling his eyes. "Don't get a big head about it. I'm not *smitten*, but I do love how this feels." Loric's eyes soften as he gazes at me, his voice dropping until it's just above a whisper, "This last week of being around you has been the first time I've felt genuine happiness in I don't know how long."

His words send a thrill through me, but I'm still trying to figure out if I've imagined this, all of it, as he stands up.

Loric pretends to bow, holding his hand out to me. "Milady, there's still one more thing I want to show you before we go back."

His gaze finds mine, molten silver and endless. I take his hand and let him lead me away.



“Here we are.” Loric gestures to an iron gate.

Hedges as tall as the cottage we’re staying in stretch up to the sky behind the metal spires, like a maze. Bright white blooms that drip some sort of sparkling dew, move and twist and turn within them, like they’re alive. Even their light pulses, making the hedges appear to be some living entity—the pulses its beating heart.

“What is it?” I ask, cocking my head to read the sign.
Garden of Tyche.

“You’ll have to see for yourself. Don’t you trust me?” Loric asks, a mischievous glint in his eye as he tugs me toward him, beckoning for me to enter.

“That depends.”

He chuckles. “On what?”

“Is something going to swallow me up in there?” The phrasing takes me back to sitting on the bed in the cavern, how he comforted me when I felt out of control. I told him I was terrified of dragons, that I thought one would swallow me up the moment it found out I was the king’s daughter. Little did I know he was one. He even knew that *I* was one and all he did was smile, said nothing.

I shake my head.

“No dragons present, Chaos. If there were, they’d be more scared of you than you are of them,” he says, holding a hand up like it’s a solemn vow. “Not even ours are here.”

My heart skips as I quickly look around, worried someone heard him, but the streets are empty. Everyone is at the village center.

Loric tugs my hand again, his tongue sliding between his lips. “I can still taste you, you know.”

The blush hits hard, and I'm starting to believe he just wants to get a rise out of me. Regardless, I cave. As I follow after him, he walks backwards, smirking at me as we enter the secret garden. It is a maze, the paths carved out by the towering hedges, but it's not boxy. The paths curve like a spiral. Wrapping around what, I'm not sure.

The hedges are covered in intricate flowers of every color imaginable, their fragrance sweet. And instead of cobblestone, the pathways are made of soft moss, such a bright green that it almost glows in the darkness. Still, if it weren't for the flowers having some sort of bioluminescent ability, we'd never see more than a foot in front of us. The floating orbs wouldn't be enough.

Loric's hand is warm and steady in mine as he leads me through the garden, our fingers intertwined. We wind deeper into the labyrinth by the second, the atmosphere growing more enchanting with each step. Until finally, we reach the heart of the spiral – a cement fountain standing tall in the middle. The orbs, the ones floating in the sky like bubbles rise out of the well, trickling up from the water's surface.

We step closer and the water shimmers with an otherworldly light, sending projections of the rippling waves across the hedges. I watch Loric as he digs in his pocket, his features cast in a bright blue light, fighting against the shadows on his face.

He holds something out to me, dropping it into my palm. My eyebrows scrunch together as my gaze drops to find a crystal gem of some sort. I roll the tiny glass ball in my hand, my eyes sliding to the fountain where dozens of these little orbs rest underneath the water.

"This fountain belonged to the fae before they were banished to the shadow realm," he explains, his silver eyes reflecting the well's ethereal glow. "It's said to contain the spirit of the Goddess of Luck, that she grants wishes to those she deems worthy. After everything you've been through, I thought you might want to make one."

A smile tugs at my lips as I peer down into the fountain. "What do I do?" A thrill of excitement courses through me,

zinging around my heart like the man has reached through my chest and caressed with his bare hands.

“Close your eyes,” he instructs. I do as I’m told, holding the glass orb in my clenched hand, resting it against my heart.

“Now what?”

“Make your wish.” His hand gathers my hair, draping it over one shoulder and as I think of what to wish for, and he kisses my throat. Even with my beast suppressed, the very thought of him being there, of his teeth—his mouth—so close to the crook of my neck, can send butterflies spiraling through me.

My body leans against him and I stretch my neck, allowing him better access. I’m not entirely sure what to wish for. I know better than to hope for the impossible. Not even a goddess can bring someone back from the dead, nor could they unshackle Asmo from my father, but there’s one thing I’m certain of. I’m completely smitten with Loric, and I want there to be a world where we could go to the moons together. So, that’s what I wish for.

“Now, kiss the gem and drop the orb in the water,” he whispers against the shell of my ear and I flutter my eyes open, bringing the glass ball to my lips, then let the crystal plummet into the fountain.

The water ripples as the orb sinks below the surface, its color shifting from a light fluorescent blue to a deep purple. Mist begins to pour off the concrete edges, swirling around the ground at our feet.

Loric watches the transformation, his brow furrowed. “What did you wish for?” he asks, curiosity lacing his tone.

I look at him over my shoulder, entranced by the way his eyes flicker between mine. “To be happy.”

CHAPTER 31

Calamity

We're almost back to the cottage, ready to call it a night. The longer the dome has been up, the cooler the air has become and when you're wearing nothing but a sheer dress, it means the chill sinks down to the bone.

Though, Loric did manage to find a merchant selling dresses. It's made to go over a standard dress to add another layer for the cold, but it works, even if it doesn't quite hang right without the form of a corset beneath it.

It's a dark maroon with gold embellishments and far fancier than anything I've ever worn or owned. It's not anywhere close to being as cold as it was during the blackout, but it's enough to bring goosebumps to the surface when the wind blows and this keeps the chill away.

"You've been quiet," he says, his boots clicking against the stone, still shirtless with his body adorned in silver swirls of paint that match his eyes.

Even without his dragon to keep him warm he doesn't seem to be phased much by the cold. But I suppose that could be the faerie wine heating his blood.

The amber bottle clutched in hand, he spins to face me, walking backward. "Have you thought of what you'd like to do? To go to the outer realm or Lythanar?"

“That’s where the crystal castle is, right?”

He nods. “It’s the biggest moon.”

“I’m still not sure. I feel like I owe it to Meg to go, and I’d be lying to say I’m not curious, but I also know that means leaving you and I’m not quite ready for that.” Watching the street in front of me, I feel his worry through the bond, and I’m not sure what that means, but I can’t bring myself to meet his eyes. “I wish you could go with me.”

“Whatever you decide, I understand. And as much as I would love to go, I won’t give you false hope. I can’t. My father won’t accept me. Maybe once you take the crown things could be different but that all depends on whether you can shift and according to Asmo, you might not be able to at all since you’re only half dragon.”

I hadn’t even thought of that. I’d just assumed that I could since I had a beast I could talk to.

He falls into step at my side as we reach the cottage and slings his arm around my shoulders, pulling me to a stop. “I can feel it, you know,” he says, twisting my hair around his hand and tugging my head back gently, forcing my eyes to meet sterling rings. “I wish it didn’t have to be this way, but I also don’t want you to stay for me, then years from now regret not going. Unfortunately, there are lines that are too easily crossed and once that’s happened, it’ll be impossible. There’s no going back. My crimes won’t be dissolved just because I delivered the last fury to the realm.”

“Crimes?” I squint, not following. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t leave the realm and the treaty between the king and rebels is contingent on dragons not being in the realm. Your mother also demanded everyone return to the moons or be named a traitor to ensure her sacrifice wouldn’t be for nothing, and treason is punishable by death.”

I twist my neck, glancing off to the wildflowers around the cottage, seeing them shift, but I’m too busy trying to wrap my head around all of it to care about what’s lurking in them. “You’re a traitor, then?”

“Yes.” His answer is absolute, but the way his knuckles brush my cheek, everything I’ve come to know of the man goes entirely against it.

“Why? How?” I dare to meet his gaze the moment sorrow swims through the bond, so strong it clenches around my heart, making it skip a beat.

“I’d met Asmo in the woods and helped him get to Solaria, and on the way we became friends. I’d thought he would change his mind, but he believed the king would want revenge against his father for putting up the boundary that traps him and everyone else within it. Though, instead of welcoming Asmodeus with open arms, the king imprisoned him, demanding him to wear a cuff or be condemned to the riff. Asmodeus refused and instead of being executed, the king made his mages search his memories and they found out about us and where we were hiding. It landed Elaria, my twin sister, and I in the king’s dungeons until the queen gave herself over.”

Loric steps away from me, his head falling back as he looks to the sky for strength.

“But you were a prisoner. Could you not have returned after Meg was taken?”

Loric snorts, shaking his head. “Elaria died in the dungeon.”

“She was tortured...” Just like Meg and I. “The king killed her, didn’t he?”

“Not in the way you think, and I’m honestly not sure which would’ve been better. The king gave Asmodeus an ultimatum, wear the cuff or he’d kill us and make him watch. Asmodeus refused, knowing the moment he put it on he’d be a prisoner forever, just without bars. The king had planned to use him as a weapon. The king killed Elaria and then turned to me and Asmodeus caved saying he’d wear it as long as I wasn’t harmed anymore. Instead, I got to watch Jesper and my friends get tortured from that point on, while I rotted in a cell.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, incapable of looking at him, even though I can feel his gaze on me. The king did that to him, my

flesh, *my blood*.

“After I was released, I was so angry, I didn’t want to go anywhere. I wanted to be here when the king’s castle crumbled to ash. Jesper and I joined the rebels in the outer realm, found Mira, Brenn and Vik on the way, and met Faelor there. All of us never looked back. We broke the law and were excommunicated for it. So, we can take you there, but we can’t stay. One day, if you become queen, maybe we can return with a pardon, but you have to prove your blood before they’ll even entertain the idea of giving you that crown.”

“It sounds like you need me to go.” I meet his gaze, and I don’t need spelled paint to see the hurt in his eyes.

“No, trust me. I don’t, not for me, but I need you to go for you, so you can get closure. And if you get there and hate it, then I’d jump at the chance to make you mine for good, not just for one night.” He gives me a sluggish grin, one that doesn’t quite meet his eyes. “And should you become queen, well, you know where to find me.”

“Then it’s decided. How much time do we have before we fly to the moons?”

His eyes drop to the space between us. “Tomorrow. Maybe one more day. It depends.”

Tears spring to my eyes, and no matter how hard I try, there’s no stopping them from streaming down my face. Loric tips my chin to kiss them away, drawing in a shaky breath as if he’s struggling with the same battle.

“I want more time,” I whisper as he hugs me close to his chest.

“I know, but we still have time, and I’d much rather spend that time seeing you smile than kissing away your tears.”

Nodding, I wipe my face. “You’re right.”

We continue up to the cottage and the movement I saw earlier catches my attention again, jostling the wildflowers off to our right. A fluffy white tail curls and a delicate purr reaches my ears, growing louder the closer I get.

“What are you doing?” Loric asks, watching me as I step off the stone path to the house, drawn toward the flowers.

“Looking at something.” Reaching down, I part the flower steps to find a small, pure white kitten with golden eyes staring up at me. It hunkers to the ground, its fluffy tail swishing as if it’s uncertain on whether it should run or stay deathly still. My heart explodes as I reach for it, gathering it in my arms and squealing as I whirl to face Loric. “It’s a cat!”

“A what?” he asks, coming closer. He halts midstep a few paces away. “Oh no. Put it back.”

“Why? It’s probably lost.” I curl a finger under its chin and it closes its eyes, nuzzling into my touch.

“It’s a pest and no one here keeps never cats as pets, Calamity.”

“But it’s adorable. This is nothing like those things we saw.” Up close, I can see the gray and white stripes of its fur, the color change is so faint I wouldn’t have noticed if I weren’t holding it.

“Put it down. You can give it food on the porch, but that’s it. We’ll be on our way in the morning and regardless of whether that’s to the Luminaries or Lythanar, there’s no way it can go with us.”

The little creature stares up at me, its golden eyes rounding, so pure, and so sweet, I can’t imagine it being deadly. “But it needs me.”

“*Needs you?* I need you. That thing will have horns in a year or two and be on a pure meat diet. It’s not cute, it’s *ferocious*. Trust me, it can fend for itself.”

“Look at it,” I plead, stroking its fur. It rubs against me, its little tiny teeth showing between its lips as it smiles.

“Put it back.” Loric takes a step closer and the kitten twirls in my arms, hissing at him.

“Well, now you’ve upset it... Fine, go ahead and once it calms down, I’ll put it back.”

Loric shakes his head but nods and steps inside. I glance to the ground, then back at the little cat that's barely bigger than my hand. Digging in my pocket for the bread I took from the festival, I pause.

It could fit...

And I wouldn't want it to sleep outside in the cold...

I tuck the cat into the oversize pocket of my dress, taking out the bread and breaking a bite-sized chunk off to feed it before heading inside.

The cottage door creaks open, the mage lights in the common living space have all been put out.

"Is anyone else home, or is it just us?" I ask, hearing Loric shuffle around in one of the rooms.

"Just us. Vik and Faelor went ahead to meet our friends at the docks and the rest of them are still at the festival," Loric says, while I take the opportunity to pull the cat from my pocket, opening one of the bedroom doors and setting it inside with the baguette piece. I make quick work of grabbing water from the canteen on the table, pouring a little in a bowl and slipping it into the dark room, racing his footsteps to close the door.

I straighten as Loric enters.

"We're in here, princess. Jesper's called that one." Princess is starting to feel more like a pet name than a title, and honestly, it's probably more fitting that way.

He eyes me for a moment, then heads back into the room I changed in when we first got here. Collapsing against the door, I breathe a sigh of relief, then see its little paw beneath the wooden slab. There's maybe an inch of space between the bottom of the door and the wooden floors, and this little white paw is just sitting there. It's not wiggling, not feeling around, just waiting as if it wants me to hold it.

Slowly, I bend, running my finger over the pads of its foot, hearing it purr through the door. "Goodnight," I whisper through the wood and I head to the room before Loric can question anything further.

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CHAPTER 32

Calamity

I step into the room we'll be staying in, my heart pounding in my chest. It's cozy and warm, with a large bed draped in luxurious furs and linens. They beckon me to sink into them, to feel the soft fabric against my skin.

My fingers tremble as I start undoing the laces of my dress, the one over the sheer gown for the festival. Loric is already in the room, his back toward me as he sits on the far side of the bed, removing his boots and dropping them to the floor.

Once the strings are free, I let the dress drape over my shoulders, hanging freely at my sides as I dig through my bag, setting out a nightgown and pausing when my hand brushes my sketchbook. It's filled with so many images, places Meg described to me within the dragon realm. All of those things I'll miss if I stay.

Loric's Faerie wine sits on the nightstand and I bring the amber bottle to my lips, taking a generous swig. The sweet berry taste envelops my senses, numbing my worries for a brief moment. I know I'm doing the right thing by going, I just wish it didn't hurt so much.

The wine swirls in my stomach, burning, generating heat. I let it take hold, knocking back another long gulp until my skin tingles with it.

Loric glances over his shoulder, his eyes flicking up and down, his hair is mussed. The muscles in his back flex as he twists a bit farther, and I find myself incapable of tearing my eyes away from him. Surely, he feels it—the confusion mingled desire warring within me through the bond. But if he does, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't act. Those captivating silver eyes simply meet mine.

The tension in the room is so thick, I could drown in it. It could be sliced with a dagger, but I refuse to look away.

With a raspy voice, he asks, “Do you need help taking the crown out of your hair?”

My heart races at the idea of his hands on me at all, but I just nod.

Loric stands tall, looking more god-like than any mortal man has the right to as he rounds the bed. His pants are unbuttoned, slung low on his hips, revealing the arrow of muscle that disappears beneath the waistband. Smooth, solid, mouth-watering muscle, adorned with the painted silver swirls, moves with a predatory grace, reeking of confidence I wish I could borrow. Even just a drop.

The sight makes my mouth go dry in an instant, and not once does his gaze waver from mine. Every painted inch of him is pure sin. Temptation as it's finest, his power palpable in the air. It's a tangible static that floats between us, resonating in my very core.

Loric takes a seat on my side of the bed, his legs spread wide like a king on his throne, radiating a sort of relaxed, yet mortifyingly lethal charm. “On your knees.”

If shock could stop a heart, mine would cease beating.

“What?” My voice hitches as I force my breath to remain even.

Loric closes his eyes, exhaling deeply. “I meant between my legs, so I can untangle your hair from the flowers.”

A spark ignites in my core and I clutch the wine bottle harder, then lower myself to the floor in front of him. I tip my head back and he gets to work, unraveling chunk after chunk

of hair from the crown. I take another drink, needing the liquid courage for what I want to do. There's no reason I should be nervous. It's not the first time I've been with a man, but Gael had been on death row. Had he hated every second of it, it wouldn't have mattered. Or it wasn't supposed to matter.

But this is the first time I'll be with one I'm falling for... that I want to impress.

Loric reaches over my shoulder, plucking the wine bottle from my hands and setting it aside. "You're in your head about it. We don't have to do anything if you don't want to. We can lay here, you can curl against me and sleep, or more... There are no expectations, I hope you know that."

I nod, quietly, trying not to move too much as he untangles rose after rose. The final knot comes free, and I can feel the weight of the crown lifting from my head. He sets it on the nightstand beside us.

"There..." he says, trailing his fingers down my neck, raising goosebumps in their wake. "All done." He kisses the top of my head then taps my shoulder. I get to my feet, and before I can turn around, he's standing behind me, sliding the dress off my shoulders, leaving me in the sheer gown.

"Arms up, princess." His voice is deep, husky, and it seems to vibrate straight through me.

I lift my arms over my head without a second thought and he bunches the thin fabric, taking it up and over my head. I can feel his eyes, like a spider creeping down my spine, slowly igniting every nerve it steps over. Suddenly, I've forgotten how to move. I'm left standing before him, naked, clothed in nothing more than painted swirls.

His touch is feather light, gently feeling down my spine. My breath catches the second he reaches the small of my back and he stops. It's not the greedy, possessive touch I expected it to be. This is something different, something deeper. It's as if he's trying to memorize every curve, every dip, every arch that makes me who I am.

I turn in place, daring to meet his eyes. They're filled with an obsessive fascination, and I can't help but wonder what he sees when he looks at me like that, but I can feel the longing through the bond, the unspoken desire.

"Gods," he breathes, shaking his head. "If you only knew the thoughts in my head..." His fingers trace my collarbone, starting at my shoulder and working in. "You'd never doubt yourself for a second."

Gently, he tips my chin, his mouth lowering to mine. It's so simple with him... All it takes is a look, a single tender kiss, and every unsettled nerve fades away like it never existed.

"Let's get you dressed." Loric reaches for my nightgown on the bed.

He unfolds the gown, turning back to me. As he starts to raise it over my head, I stop him, my hand resting on his, lowering it. Loric arches a brow.

"I don't want to think about what comes after this..." Not the unknown, the fear associated with going somewhere new, not the fact my nightmares will return without him, *none of it*.

"Then what do you want?" he murmurs, dropping his hands.

"To be yours, just for tonight." I drop my eyes, staring at the swirls on his chest. "If this is it, then I want to remember it. I want to pretend for just a moment that a world exists where my heart isn't going to break tomorrow. Where this could be the beginning of something new."

I feel like I've found some part of me that's been missing, like some dark void has been filled within me, like I'm whole. And I want to blame that on me being locked away, that I never got to experience what being with someone was truly like until now, but I can't shake the feeling. It's like my soul has been searching for something and now that It's finally found it, it's slipping through my fingers.

He tilts his head, his eyes round as he looks between mine. He doesn't say anything, but I can feel my heart flutter and I don't think the feeling is my own.

Loric slips his arm around me, pulling me closer. His knuckles slide up my cheek, the rings on his hand cold. “You can’t say things like that to me...” He shakes his head, his eyes darkening. “As is, I’m *drowning* like I don’t know how to swim. So, trust me when I say your heart won’t be the only one breaking tomorrow, Calamity.” His teeth still his bottom lip. “I’m falling helplessly in love with you and saying goodbye is going to completely destroy me, but I have to... and *gods*, I hate it.”

He holds my face in his hands, the dress lost to the floor somewhere, and presses his lips to mine in a searing kiss that sets my very soul on fire. The tip of his tongue slides across my bottom lip, so heartbreakingly soft, as he holds me close. Time slows as my hands explore him with a tender touch, feeling the dried paint beneath my fingers. A surge of electricity surges through me, sending a wave of heat flooding my veins.

The room disappears around us, the world and everyone else in it becoming insignificant. All that remains is him and I and this moment. My lips part for him, and his tongue teases mine, each caress and stroke filled with a need that threatens to devour us both.

I can taste the faerie wine on his lips, smell the magic on his skin. His breaths become ragged as it deepens further, the air warm against my skin, and I press against him, feeling his chest rise and fall as he steps into me, slowly turning until the back of my knees hit the bed. The desire coursing through the bond, mingling with my own has my need turning fervent, until urgency defies all reason and I let myself fall.

My back hits the bed as I drag him down with me, my legs parting for him. Our movements are frantic, frenzied, as if we can’t get close enough fast enough, becoming victim to an insatiable hunger that only the other can fill.

Fisting his hair, I hold him to me as he devours my every sense, kissing away the tears I didn’t know started falling, taking away every worry, every care, until there is only us, only this.

Loric growls, the sound vibrating through me, and his hips grind against mine, pinning me to the bed beneath him. The friction sends sparks floating behind my eyelids, spinning my core tighter than I thought possible from a simple touch.

“Calamity,” he rasps, lips trailing fire down my throat. His hands grip my ass, grinding my center harder against his rigid length. I moan, lost in the feel of him, the taste of him. His lips crash into mine, bruising and thorough, only breaking to tear away the remaining barriers between us.

He lifts to step out of his pants, and I stare down the space between us, watching the way his cock bobs, now free of the restraints. His hands glide up my sides, calloused palms scraping over sensitive skin. He cups my breasts, testing their weight, and rolls my nipples between his fingers, then proceeds to take them each in his mouth. His silver eyes darken as he watches me, gauging my every reaction, pupils blown wide with lust.

Pleasure lances through me, tightening low in my belly. I gasp, arching into his touch. Loric reads my body like it's his native tongue, giving me exactly what I want, what I need, what I crave. He nips the curve of my breast, grinding his length through my sex, a hungry groan escaping his lips.

“*Fuck...* You're so godsdamn wet.” He pants against my skin, his muscles flexing as he moves. It's impossible not to look at him, to watch him. He's a work of art.

Loric sits back, gripping his cock, hard and thick and dripping for me as he drags it over my clit. I moan, my back bowing off the bed. My hands fist in covers as he feasts on the sight of me, as if he could get drunk of the way my body responds to his. My eyelids are heavy as I watch him lick his fingers, and he watches me take them, teasing me until I'm shaking beneath him. His hand strokes his length as he brings me to the brink, over and over again only to take it away.

“Please,” I whimper, not even sure what I'm begging for. I just need him, all of him, now.

Only then does he move.

He lines himself up with my entrance, arms hooking around my knees. His abs roll as he presses into me, stretching me, filling me so full it takes my breath away.

Lifting his head, his eyes find mine. “Gods, Chaos,” he breathes as our bodies collide. “You take every inch of my cock like it was made for you.”

With a torturous slowness, he pulls back only to sheath himself again, inch by glorious inch. No one has ever filled me so completely while touching my soul so profoundly, as Loric.

He leans forward, his arms locking, hands fisting the covers on either side of my head. Our mouths meet in a kiss and I moan against his lips. And gods, the sound he makes as he rolls his hips against mine, has my head spinning. It’s deep and visceral, like he’s doing everything he possibly can to hang on to his rapidly thinning restraint.

I meet his rhythm as he sets a brutal pace, hitting every nerve in my body until I can feel my release building inside of me, coiling so tight I might burst with it.

My fingers dig into his back, needing him closer, as each thrust sends wave after searing wave of white-hot pleasure thrumming through me.

“Loric,” I gasp, his thumb pushing my head back as far as it will go. He kisses my throat, pinning me to the bed as he goes to war on my body, teeth scraping over my pulse until I’m clenching around him, shaking beneath him and falling so hard, so fast that lights burst.

He snaps his hips forward over and over, I come apart around him, his thrusts so deep I know I’ll feel him there for days as he finds his own release. The sound that leaves his mouth is carnal, downright predatory as he follows me over the edge.

But as everything calms, as the room falls deathly silent, only filled by our heavy breaths, I can’t help but wish he’d bitten, that he’d marked me and given me a reason to stay.

Loric collapses against me, placing gentle kisses across my chest as my legs tremble around his waist.

No words are needed at this moment. No vows or promises to be made. It's like there's an unspoken agreement between us to not break the silence, because once we do, we'll have to admit reality. Instead, we simply hold each other close, pretending tomorrow will never come.

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CHAPTER 33

Calamity

I wake up alone, the bed cold next to me, and Loric nowhere in sight. I'm not sure why I expected him to be here, curled against me. The magic swirls are gone, and though I can't feel his emotions anymore, I know there's enough roiling within him over me leaving today.

Putting distance between us might be his only way of coping. Hell, it might be my only way of coping. I'm still not sure how I'm going to look him in the eye and part ways, but I'll have to, and perhaps this will make it a little bit easier.

Pushing up from the bed, I slip on the dark brown fabric of my dress, uncaring to put the rest of it together, and slide the robe over my arms, lacing it up the front. I can hear the voices of the others coming from the main area of the house, and when I pull open the door my senses are assaulted with the smell of food. I breathe it in, my eyelids fluttering as my mouth waters.

"Someone's hungry," Brenn says, and I open my eyes to find him smiling, chewing his food.

"Shut it," Loric says, glaring across the table as he pops a bite of fruit into his mouth.

Brenn grins wickedly. "It's nice to be able to tease you for a change, so no. I don't think I will."

I smirk, taking a seat next to Loric and grabbing a plate. Piling on food, the hinges of another door draw my attention.

Jesper walks through it, the entire blanket wrapped around him as he rubs his eyes, groggy as he makes his way to the table. “Morning.”

Mira chuckles to herself. “I’m not sure we’ll be going anywhere today. Not with how hungover all of you are.”

“I’m not,” I say, flexing my brow.

“Neither am I.” Loric’s hand claims purchase on my thigh, and my chair jerks toward him as he yanks me closer.

I freeze mid bite, sliding my plate back in front of me.

“Maybe not, but I can guarantee none of you got any sleep. Jesper was passed out on the porch pantsless this morning, and the two of you nearly knocked all the pictures off the walls.” Brenn points at each of us with his dagger, a chunk of an apple stabbed on the end of it.

“Me and my roommate slept just fine, I’ll have you know... once I came inside,” Jesper says, opening up the blanket to set the kitten on the table. It hunkers for a moment, startled, then meows and starts to rub against him. “Anyone want to explain how this ended up in my room?”

I can feel Loric’s eyes slide toward me. “You kept it,” he grits.

“It was cold.” I slowly bring my gaze to meet his. “I fed it, like you said I could.”

“You weren’t supposed to bring it inside.”

“It’s homeless.” I frown, and it trots across the table to plop into my lap. The kitten kneads my dress, tail swishing as it circles and coils up against me. “See? Harmless.”

“For now,” he says mid-bite. “You can’t keep it.”

“It’s not hurting anything,” I say, gesturing to it.

“It’s a *pest*. You feed it, you feed the problem. You feed one, it brings its friends home. It stays.”

My lips twist as I stroke its soft fur. “At least let me feed it on the porch. For real, this time.”

Loric nods, and I take my plate, carrying the cat with me as I walk out the front door. Setting it on the ground, I toss a chunk of meat at my feet, taking another for myself, wrapping my arms over my chest.

I know Loric’s upset. He doesn’t want me to go, but he’s also insisting that I do. There’s nothing I can do to make him happy right now, but the cat shouldn’t become collateral damage. It’s a baby. It’s lost.

The path to the cottage is just off one of the village streets, and I’m surprised to find it so busy this early. Especially right after the festival. You’d think the villagers would opt to sleep in today.

Something catches my eye, a glint of light bouncing off something from the street, and I squint. Catching the golden handle of a sword. Since when can villagers afford gold swords? I’m used to seeing the guards in the solarian castle wear them, but that’s because the king demands it. Everything as far as the king’s concerned must sparkle and gleam, even though all that gold is surrounded by bones and death.

The world halts, my breath suspended, as my eyes lock onto a ghost, the sword attached at his hip. There, amidst the thrum of the elven village is Asmo, talking to some dark elf, accepting a worn scroll. My heart aches, a sharp, relentless pang, as I watch him. Incapable of moving, of *breathing*.

It’s as if nothing has changed, as if I never left that dungeon and his life simply continued. As if I never existed...

He still refuses to wear a shirt, his body shrouded in scars. His dark hair is still unruly, abused roughly by his fingers, his mismatched eyes smiling as he talks with the man. I’m rooted to the porch as the kitten purrs, winding through my feet, it’s fluffy tail wrapping around my bare legs.

He starts to leave, waves a goodbye and disappears into the crowded street. As if propelled by an unseen force I can’t comprehend, I step off the porch. My bare feet fly across the

ground, eating up the distance between us as I push through the crowded street. Creatures of all kinds scowl at me, but I couldn't care less. I just need to hear his voice, to see his face, to see him look at me one last time. I need to hear him say my name, to feel his arms wrap around me. Just once. Then I'll leave.

The creatures in the street blur into an array of colors as I sprint, desperate to catch up, to get to him before he can leave and teleport away in a blink of an eye. I have to. My focus narrows to him alone, though I only catch glimpses of him through the crowd—his dark, unruly hair, those mismatched eyes that have made me so whole, so *loved*, that no one can ever replace them.

I'm not sure how many times I've run my fingers over the scar on his face, the one that slices cruelly through his white eye. I can feel it, just thinking about it, every bump, the smooth texture of where it healed. I can feel his lips press to my forehead, hear his voice in my ears, his laugh.

Every stride I take feels like wading through a dream, and the crowd thickens, oblivious to the tempest raging in my chest, to the fact I have to get to him. The glimpses become shorter—a shoulder here, a flash of an amber eye there—and with each sighting, my heart thrashes against my ribcage.

He veers off the cobblestone road, disappearing into one of the many merchant shops that line the street. The door swings shut behind him, and I run. I sprint so fast my lungs scream at the onslaught of air that invades my chest.

Reaching the door, I yank it open, my heart slamming to a stop the moment I see him, sitting at the bar, the scroll resting on the counter beside him as he runs his fingers through his hair.

I've made it all this way, I caught up to him, yet standing here, feet away, I can't bring myself to move another inch. He won't remember me. Loric made him forget, and the idea of walking those last few feet is like a stab in the gut.

But I have to try... He seemed so sure that he'd find me one day, that he'd make himself remember. Maybe seeing me will

help. It could spark something, return his memories somehow.

The bar looms ahead, the walls covered in wooden planks, shrouded in vines that seem to spill from the cracks between them. There's hardly anyone here. Just a few others who gather around one of the tables. Their voices boom through the air as they laugh to themselves and share in conversation.

I force my feet to move, one joint at a time. They feel heavier than normal, like weights cling to my ankles or they're somehow shackled to anvils, but I inch closer anyway, dragging my anxiety along with me. The familiar scent of ale and the burning wood washes over me, the hearth crackling off my right, ablaze.

Asmo talks to the bartender as the man slides a glass toward him. It's like he belongs to this moment and not to the haunted echoes of my past. After the years we've spent together, I can hardly imagine him visiting a place like this. He spent every moment he wasn't fulfilling the king's orders with me, watching me paint, telling me about his day, about the world he wished I could see with my own eyes. The closest I'd got before meeting Loric was with him projecting memories in my head, showing me the places he visited. The forest, Hell Hold where he grew up, the crystal caverns in the Elven Isles, the villages he'd seen...

I have so many questions, and I'm not sure where to start in asking them. I'm not sure he'd even be able to answer me now.

I draw a breath, my feet moving of their own accord now. Each step towards him is like walking through years of lost memories. My hands tremble, but I'm not scared in the slightest, not of him.

I'm not sure how I'll feel if he doesn't recognize me. Relieved that the king can't torture him, not like he did to find Loric and his sister... At ease with the fact the king will never know I survived... Saddened by the loss of those moments that made me who I am, that made me know what love felt like...

Biting my lip, I stop it from quivering, the sheer intensity of the moment flooding through me, bringing every cell in my being to life. My heartbeat is so shallow it's practically non-existent as I make those final steps. It knows... It knows the moment he looks at me and doesn't smile, that the man I've loved my entire life will be lost. And those memories of us will only exist in my mind, just like the stars.

As I near him, my throat tightens, words jostling for release. *What do I say?* How do you reach across the void of forgotten love and plead for recognition? My hand reaches out, hesitating in the air between us, but he senses my presence and turns.

For a heartbeat, I see a flicker, a glimmer of something deep within his eyes. Hope surges, fierce and bright, as he smiles wide, only to be smothered by the blankness that swiftly replaces every ounce of expression on his face. "Can I help you?"

Just like that, my heart shatters.

It's all I can do to press my lips together, to hide the tremble in them as I force air into my lungs.

His jaw twists as he glances away, then turns back to me, a brow arching up. "What? You've never seen someone with scars before? Didn't anyone teach you that it's impolite to stare?" The muscle in his cheek feathers as he glares daggers into me.

"I'm sorry, I just thought you were someone else," I say, my voice submissive.

He chuckles soundlessly, "Well, if you'll excuse me..." Turning back around, he freezes a moment, as if he expects me to leave. When he realizes I can't, he spins on the stool, slapping his hands against his thighs. "Okay, look, lady. I'm not sure what your deal is, but you can either join me for a drink, or be on your way. I don't like people standing behind me."

I swallow, wetting my throat. It's so dry it almost burns. "I'll... um... I'll go."

Asmo's eyes soften as they drop to my hands. "You're leaking."

My neck tilts on its own accord. "What?"

"You're *leaking*. Your hands."

It takes every ounce of strength I have to look away from him, finding smoke coiling around my fingers, my wrists, the veins so dark it looks like my blood has called upon death itself.

"Calamity," a familiar growl sounds from behind me, a hand clamping on my shoulder. I'm spun around before I can think a single thought. The shadows coiling around me dissipate in an instant. "What the fuck are you thinking?"

Silver eyes trap mine, the fury in them not even registering in my mind. Though his face softens the moment he sees mine, and he glances up over my shoulder, jolting ever so slightly when he realizes who I was talking to.

"Asmodeus... Why are you... When did you..." Loric struggles for the words as his wide eyes glance between us.

"Is she yours?" Asmo asks, my back to him. "Is she okay? She looked at me like she saw a ghost."

"Uh, yeah. What are you doing here? I thought the king was getting ready for a gauntlet?" Loric hugs me, and I bury my face into his chest, but I don't dare let the tears fall, not yet. I just breathe him in, letting the smell of him storm my senses. That alone is the only reason I can breathe at all.

"He is, it was pushed back a few days. Something came up."

"Do I dare to ask what?" Loric stiffens, holding his breath.

"The king asked me to find someone, and since he's pissed at me, I don't really have much of a choice." I can hear the anger in Asmo's voice, the uncertainty of what will come next if he fails. It's not the first time the king has demanded he do something, threatening to set off his cuff and kill him if he doesn't come through.

"Mad at you? What did you do?"

Asmo's voice drops to a hushed tone. "He thinks I tried to fake someone's death, but I don't have any memory of the girl he's looking for. He showed me her cell, but it couldn't have been. It hasn't been touched since my daughter died. I've made sure of it."

My heart pounds in my ears. Loric didn't take away his memories, he altered them. Asmo remembers something... he has to or he wouldn't have remembered my cell.

Loric takes a step back, taking me with him. "Asmo, I need you to answer something and you can't ask why." His voice breaks, his arms tightening around me, but I don't dare lift my head away from his chest. His heartbeat is the only thing keeping me together.

"Alright..." Asmo trails off, and I hear the slide of his glass against the counter. "I sort of figured you must be up to something, especially since we decided you'd stay off the mainland for good since I couldn't cover for you anymore. Though, it's been what, twenty-something years? What do you want? It's not like I have anything to lose anymore."

Asmo was covering for him? Then the realization slams into me, taking the air from my lungs. Whatever Asmo was helping him with, he stopped before I was born, because if he got caught, it meant I'd lose him too. I swallow down the knot forming in my throat, leaning back to look at Loric's face. It's so pale... the blood drained from it. His eyes meet mine for just a fraction of a second and he tucks my head to his chest again, his fingers combing through my hair.

"Well come on, out with it." Asmo insists.

"Where's Megara's body?"

Asmo snorts. "It's been years since anyone so much as mentioned her name and now both you and the king? What are you up to?"

Loric's hand pauses in my hair. "It's better you don't know, but I need you to tell me."

"You're not planning to steal it, are you? If so, that's a death wish."

“It’s not in the riff, then....” Loric breathes, a statement not a question. Asmo had planned to use her to trick the king into believing I was dead, and if she’s not in the riff, then it means his plan didn’t work. *The king knows.*

“No, she’s not in the riff. Not anymore, anyway. The king accused me of putting her in there to fake his prisoner’s death, but I know for a fact, I don’t care who the fuck it was, I’d never drop the mother of my child’s body in the riff.” Asmo pauses, getting up from his stool, and Loric takes another step back. This time, when Asmo speaks, venom drips in his tone, “Did you do it? Are you the reason she was in there?”

“No...” Loric releases me, shoving me behind him and the bar falls deathly silent. “You did, I just made you forget.”

Asmo’s eyes widen as he freezes in place. “Why would I...”

“Don’t ask those questions. It was for a good reason. One you felt strongly about.”

Asmo cocks his head, frantically digging in his pocket to pull out a small metallic triangle. The edges are decorated in intricate lace-like swirls, a blue gem raises slightly from the top surface. He holds it out and it starts to float.

“Don’t do it.” Loric’s jaw ticks. “If you do, I’ll have to make you forget everything. Right now, you can remember having a daughter. I don’t want you to forget her completely.”

Asmo’s spine lengthens, his eyes vacant as he slowly leans to peer around Loric at me. As if the pieces fall into place, he meets Loric’s eyes. “I don’t want to know, but you should be aware that the king knows something is up. He managed to pull Meg’s body out of the riff, killed the beast inside it, I think. Maybe he tricked it, but I haven’t seen it in days, and Meg’s body is whole.” The gem in the metal triangle begins to glow bright, pointing directly at us and Asmo curses under his breath. “I’m not sure who the fuck she is, but he’s looking for her and I’m not the only one he sent to find her. So, if she’s important to you, and to me enough to do what I did, get her out of the realm before he kills her himself.”

“What about you?” Loric asks.

“I’ll be fine. He’s already searched my memories and didn’t find whatever he was looking for.” Asmo glances at me one last time before snatching his triangle out of the air and shoving it in his pocket. “Go, before I change my mind.”

Loric nods, his hand gripping my arm tight as he pulls me out of the bar. His eyes sweep every inch of the road as he hastily takes me back to the cottage.

“You didn’t erase his memories...” My feet fight to keep up with him.

“No. You wouldn’t have wanted me to.” Loric doesn’t miss a beat, slicing us through the crowd with precision.

“He said that I’m his child...” My foot lands on something hard and my knee buckles. Loric’s grip is unyielding, holding me up as we keep moving.

“Now isn’t the time, Calamity.”

“Isn’t the time?”

“Yes.” His voice, still the same deep timbre that once sang me to sleep, now holds no trace of warmth. “Unless you want to end up dead, it’s not the time.”

Tears sting my eyes, unshed, as I fight to keep his pace—each one of his steps is nearly three of mine. I swallow the lump in my throat, fighting the urge to yank him to a stop, to answer my questions, to shake him, to scream.

But I don’t. Instead, I force myself to keep up, masking my face, but it doesn’t stop my hands from being consumed by dark, inky lines. It doesn’t so much as smother the smoke that curls around my hands, completely and utterly out of my control. The tips of my hair start to fade into a pure white, the color draining from the strands as panic seizes my lungs. Only the king’s daughters have pure white hair... If it changes, if I look like a Midicious, everyone Asmo spoke of that’s searching for me will be on our heels in an instant.

“Loric,” I breathe, and something in my tone gets his attention, or maybe it’s the fact my magic is starting to creep along his skin.

He looks over his shoulder at me. “Fuck me,” he grits, quickly pulling us into an alley near the garden we visited last night. “*Breathe, Calamity,*” he says as he leads us down it.

“I’m trying,” I say, each word a shard of glass in my heart.

“I can’t fucking help you if I’m dead.” He tucks us behind a stack of crates so those passing by on the street can’t see us, pressing my back against the stone wall of a shop.

“Look at me,” Loric demands, his voice laced with power as his eyes start to glow.

My teeth sink into my lip, drawing blood as I fight to calm my magic, to regain a semblance of control. But how can I? The king wants me dead. He’s likely sending the shadow shrouds after us, and they’re trained assassins. And Asmo... I’m not sure if it’s better or worse to have him remember me, but not, and think I’m dead all at the same time.

“For fuck’s sake, Chaos.” Loric pins my hands to the wall, the shadows fading but I can feel his power seeping into my soul, my magic siphoning him. “*Look at me.*”

I meet his sterling silver eyes, noticing the way his teeth grit, the way the muscle in his jaw feathers and ticks, the way his nostrils flare as he glares down at me.

My hair is ghost white now, my incisors develop sharp points, even the teeth next to it, yet I’m still in control, despite the talons pushing from my fingertips, or the way power seems to coil around me. I’m not merely siphoning him, I’m shifting, just like he had in the woods with the nevercats.

Even fighting my magic, the pull I have on him is nothing more than a trickle, it’s slow and steady, but it would take hours to kill him.

“I need you to breathe through it. If you shift completely in this village, we’re dead. If someone so much as walks down this alley and sees your hair, we’re dead. So fucking *breathe*, woman.”

“Hey, you can’t be back here!” Someone calls from the street and my eyes shoot wide.

Loric's breathes are uneven as he stares into my soul. "I need you to trust me," he whispers, dropping my hands. "Just need a moment!" he calls to the person, undoing his belt with frenzied fingers.

Before I can ask what he's doing, his lips crush to mine, his strong hands grip my thighs, urging my legs to wrap around his waist. My power coils and the dark smoke morphs into gold threads, wriggling through the air around us, returning the power I stole from him.

My heart beats so fast, *so furiously*, that it echoes throughout every limb of my body. Loric clamps a hand on my jaw, twisting my neck with ease and sending my white hair flying over my face. Then teeth scrape my throat.

My mouth drops open on a scream as his teeth sink into my skin, so deep, the pressure makes every piece of my body go rigid as I struggle to breathe. Then I go pliant in his hands, my limbs too heavy to lift, to hang on, to move as euphoria sweeps through me. The pleasure is so intense, so palpable, that I nearly come apart in his hands, and he never even touches me. Not there.

My body thrums with magic, and it's not until he releases me and I'm gasping, panting, desperate to fill my lungs that I notice my hair is black again, the dark veins gone as if they never existed. I can barely lift my head, and I choose not to fight it, letting it tip back against the stone.

"I said, you guys have to go! I won't have anyone stealing my goods from the alley," the man snarls, rounding the crates we're behind. His eyes become owl-like the moment he sees us.

"And I said, just a fucking minute," Loric's tone is harsh, down right deadly as he buries his face against my throat. His tongue slips over the mark he left there and I shudder in his hands, moaning before I can stop myself.

He grinds his hips against my sex, igniting something within me that burns so hot, so bright, all I can do is melt against the wall and savor the feeling. To anyone looking in, they'd see two people having sex, they'd never know Loric's pants are

still on, that it's only his belt dangling from the loops. My dress covers everything else.

“Look, the festival is over. Take your whore somewhere else before I get the guards.”

Loric's head lifts from my chest with an unnerving slowness, his silver eyes alight as his dragon peers through them. Panic wells inside of me and I grip his face, silently demanding he keep his eyes on me.

“We'll go,” I say, my chest heaving as I wipe my blood from his lips and chin with my sleeve. “Isn't that right?” He hardly nods. If it weren't for my hands cupping his face, I'd never have caught it.

The man turns his back toward us, giving us a sliver of privacy as Loric sets me down, his hand swipes over his mouth before scratching at the stubble on his jaw. I fix my dress, then hurry to buckle his belt while he glares at the man, and if pure, visceral violence had a stare, it would be the way he looks now.

I don't give him a chance to act, intertwining my fingers with his and dragging him quickly out of the alley.

CHAPTER 34

Calamity

I walk inside, the kitten at my heels. Apparently, it waited for me to return, and finished off my plate in the meantime. Loric doesn't seem to argue it, but I'm fairly certain he's in shock. He didn't say a word as we sped through the village.

Jesper, still wrapped in his blanket, is the first person I see. He's heading toward his room, wine in hand, and the moment he sees me, his eyes latch onto my throat, growing wide. "Oh... my... gods... He fucking did it."

I don't know what to say. The only thing I can think to do is take Loric to the room, to try and wake him the hell up, shake him from his stupor. But Jesper must sense his vacancy too. The moment we walk past him, his arm darts out and he stops Loric dead in his tracks.

"What the hell happened?" Jesper asks, trying to get Loric to meet his eyes.

Except, he doesn't so much as lift them from the floor as he tells him about the king, that the plan has changed. He doesn't even look at me.

"Alright," Jesper says, nodding repeatedly. "This changes the timeline, but it doesn't mean the king knows about us. So, we get her to the moons now instead of later. Problem solved."

Brenn clears his throat, making me jump. I was so busy watching them, I hadn't seen him at the table. "It's overcast, the clouds might be enough to hide us if we launch from the mainland. Especially if we go north a bit. There are no villages there and with the line of sight, the mountains should hide anything that peeks through the clouds." He licks his finger, then takes another bite of his sandwich.

Jesper looks over Loric, his brow crinkling with the same worry as mine. He waits a moment for him to say something, then nods when he doesn't. "Alright. Why don't you and Mira go now and catch up to Vik and Faelor. Let them know what's going on. They should probably go to the outer realm just in case the king does get word of us. They can warn them."

Brenn nods, pushing up from his chair. "Sure, but I'll be meeting you at the base of the mountain just north of town. I'm going."

Jesper reels back, his eyebrows scrunching together. "Why would you want to go?"

"My plan, remember." Brenn rolls his eyes. "And I'm also the only one who isn't banished. Calamity hasn't been there. She needs someone to show her where to go for a few days and I owe it to her for not killing me. One of you can go back up to get me."

"You'd do that?" I ask, tilting my head.

"Yeah, when I'm not trying to kill people, some might call me a decent guy." Brenn flexes his brow. "I'll break the news to Mira." Then he wanders off into one of the rooms.



We're packed and on our way out of town within the hour. Jesper didn't want to take any chances and with Loric still out of it, he's taken the reins... both literally and figuratively. He didn't think it would be a good idea to go on foot. It would take too long, so he rented horses and instead of letting me ride with Loric, he put me on his horse. Loric didn't balk about it, he didn't glare. All he did was scoop up my cat and hand it to me, letting it hiss the entire way into my arms.

“Are you really going to keep that thing?” Jesper asks, keeping his voice down.

“What, Loric?”

He frowns. “The *cat*.”

“Oh, I mean I can’t shift, so there’s gotta be some way to get the cat up there with me. Might as well.”

Jesper makes a face, clears his throat and refuses to look at me again.

“He knows something.”

Oh, so you do exist. Nice of you to say hi.

“I’m serious. He knows something, something he doesn’t want you to know. Pay attention.”

I roll my eyes. Where the hell was she when Jekyll started to transform into Hyde? Huh? No where. That’s where.

“What is it?”

“What’s what?” Jesper says, his palms sweaty on the reigns.

“Whatever you’re not saying.”

His shoulders slump as he exhales deeply. “There’s a way to get you up there without you shifting, but you’re not going to like it.”

I straighten, glancing at him over my shoulder. “How?”

“You might or might not have to become a dragon snack.” The horses’ hooves beating the ground fills the silence that falls around us.

“What?”

Jesper tucks his chin to his chest. “You have to ride in Loric’s mouth... but hey, the chicken survived so your chances are pretty good.”

I chuckle, but when he doesn’t join in on the comic relief, the blood drains from my face. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I *really* wish I was.” He fakes a smile as he pulls the horse to a stop at the base of the mountain.

“No... No. There has to be another way. Teach me to shift,” I say, letting him swing off the horse first. Once on the ground, Jesper holds a hand out to me.

“There really isn’t. Learning to shift is complicated, and you just discovered your beast. It’s possible she’s not ready to shift yet and doing so prematurely can cause some serious issues.”

“I doubt there anywhere near as serious as being swallowed whole by a fucking dragon.”

His eyebrows go flat. “Hey now, that’s your mate.”

“Mate or not, I don’t think a gag reflex is going to keep me and Mr. Mittens from becoming gourmet dragon food.”

Jesper adjusts the reigns in his hand. “First, nevercats are all females. Secondly, I think you missed the part where I said we don’t have a choice. Forcing you to shift now could end with you having micro wings. Worse, you could end up with no wings or a tail and be the only fury who resembles a hippo. Do you want that? Your scales might be the prettiest, but they aren’t going to distract anyone from that.”

My face falls. “Fine. I’ll do it.” I steal a glance at Loric who’s now off his horse. “Is he going to be alright?”

“I don’t know, but let’s worry about one thing at a time.” Jesper removes the phantom mare’s bridle and saddle, then smacks it on the butt. It gallops off into the valley while he does the same with Loric’s.

“Where’s Brenn and Mira?” I ask, scanning the forest. The mountain stretches up, the ledge steep on this side of it. Waves gently roll off the coast, the water roaring as it spreads over the rocks.

“They’ll be here.” Jesper holds a hand over his eyes, scanning the coast, then points off in the distance. “There.”

I squint through the light reflecting off the water, finding two little blips walking down the coast. “You’re sure his plan will work? What happens if it doesn’t?”

“You explode in his mouth.”

I freeze. For a moment, I don't so much as breathe as I turn to face Jesper. "I what?"

"You heard me. Trust me, you think he's traumatized now, Loric's never going to come back from that if it happens. So, hopefully that makes you have a little faith in the plan."

No... Not even a little.

"He's going to get us killed. Just stay. Go to the Luminaries. Be with Loric."

I can't. Asmo's tracker runs on blood magic. Who knows how much of ours the king has on hand. He's going to find me if I stay here and going to the Luminaries is just going to help him find out about Loric and his friends, and could possibly get everyone there killed.

"Well, you better find something to rub on you. Make yourself not so tasty or your worst fear is going to come true."

Don't remind me.

When I turn around to ask Jesper what to expect, I jolt, smacking a hand over my eyes as skin—*so much skin*—enters my line of sight. "Oh my gods, you're naked."

"Uh, ya. That's an important part of it. What? Do you think our clothes magically nestled in our dragon butt crack or something?" He smacks my elbow, making me drop my hand.

I look away anyway. "I didn't think that far."

"Well, now you know. And honestly, as the girl who ran around town practically naked last night, you'd think you'd be a little more comfortable with this."

"I get your point, but *no. Nothing* could've prepared me for any of this." I shake my head as Mira and Brenn approach, petting the kitten curled in my arm like a baby. Its little arms rest straight down by its sides, a soft purr leaving it when I curl a finger against its belly.

"Faelor and Vik send their luck," Mira says, taking off her shirt. "Ready to do this?"

“Partially,” Jesper says, looking at Loric. “I was going to give them a moment to work their shit out before we go. I doubt it’ll hurt anything, and at the rate we’re going it might be me she rides in.”

Mira nods at me, before the three of them move toward the pile of our stuff Jesper chucked onto the ground. They keep busy consolidating things for the flight.

Loric fingers the bag draped over his shoulders, gnawing at his lip. His eyes stare at the waves, crashing and rippling out from the shore, but his mind is elsewhere.

“Was biting me that bad?” I say, my brow flattening as I shake my head, trying to understand it.

“No. The opposite.” His voice is quiet but it’s a response at least.

“Then why do you look like someone died?”

His lips twist as he turns to me with a thoughtful look in his eyes. “Because I feel like someone did. I just don’t know if it’s going to be you or me.”

“I don’t understand...” I close the space between us, looking up at him, waiting to see some semblance of a hint but finding nothing.

“You have to leave. You can’t stay here. Had I not agreed to stay an extra day, had you not seen Asmodeus, we might’ve had more time. I could’ve taught you to shift. We wouldn’t be trying something that we’ve never done successfully before.”

That’s really helping me cling to hope...

“And we might’ve been blindsided by the king’s shadow shrouds. You could’ve died, your friends, possibly everyone in the outer realm if they tracked me there. My father would’ve found a way to break the treaty.”

“He’s not your father...” Loric’s silver eyes raise just enough to peer at me from beneath his dark lashes. “I didn’t alter that in Asmodeus’s head. He and Meg brought you into the world and he loved you, still loves you very much.”

My breath hitches and a long silence passes between us, my eyes falling and zoning out on the ground. In a way, I already knew. And even if he wasn't my father biologically, he earned the title in my mind.

Yet, I should feel *something* right? Anything at all...
"Regardless, none of this is your fault."

"Then explain my mark on your throat." There's grit to his words, charging them as he steps closer, making me crane my neck back to hold his silver eyes.

"You did it to help me get control before everyone and everything you loved was laid on the line. I don't hold it against you."

"You should." His glare softens. "I wanted you to stay... I knew when I saw Asmodeus in that bar that things were about to go south. I saw an opportunity to keep you here, a way for me to not beg you to stay with me, despite what staying could bring to everyone I know and love. I did it. And the sad part is I'd probably do it again."

I reach up, cradling his cheek. Loric leans into my touch with glassy eyes. "I can't. I won't. Neither of us would forgive ourselves if the king took his hatred for me out on your friends."

"Then we can go somewhere else. Anywhere else. It doesn't have to be the dragon realm."

My lips form a line as I attempt to stay strong, to push forward as my heart shatters with his. "Where would we go? The rest of the realms besides the moons and this one are ruled by Asmo's father. Asmo was banished here because they feared him. How do you think they're going to look at me? We'd be trading one king problem for another."

"You don't know that."

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "I do... but I can promise you that the day I'm crowned, I'll come for you. It's the only way everyone stays safe."

He sniffs. "You may never shift."

My heart seeps into my stomach and I don't have an answer I could give him for that. "I know..."

He nods, understanding swirling in his sterling eyes. "To the moons then." Rough hands rest against the side of my throat as he bends to kiss me, and I taste his tears on my lips when he pulls away. "Let's do it before I change my mind."

He takes his clothes off, stuffing them in his bag.

"Great. You made him angry and now we'll get to take a trip down his throat... It's supposed to be the opposite, you know. You're supposed to swallow him, not the other way around and certainly not in dragon form."

Do you have any better ideas?

"No."

Good. Then shut it.

Loric steps away from me, finding a wide, clear space. Then his eyes glow, his teeth lengthen, and talons slice through his fingertips. He drops to all fours as his skin ripples and scales flare, springing forth as the sounds of bones snapping and popping fills the air.

More of the same comes from my right as Jesper follows suit. Then Mira, leaving Brenn and me standing here twiddling our thumbs. The kitten nestled in my arm curls closer, as if sensing the laden power permeating the air as their human forms disappear, replaced by three colossal majestic dragons.

Loric's the first to finish, his scales a sea of white. His breath mists like sleet as he breathes. Spikes cover his back, translucent like glass and the scales on his body are so pure that they reflect a pale rainbow of colors as he moves.

They're so familiar...

His gray eyes are still the same striking silver as he stares at me. And my face falls the moment I realize why those scales seem familiar. He told me his sister died in my father's dungeon and that wasn't long before I was born. And as long as I can remember, those same scales coated the white room's walls. *His sister's scales.*

My heart flutters as if it can't take a beat and it breaks for him. What he must've witnessed and lived through while he was there... I just hope the scales were added after he was freed because if he laid on that altar surrounded by her scales... If it was me I don't think I would've made it out.

Burnt ozone singes my nose and I glance to my right to see Jesper. His scales are a dark midnight blue and purple currents slide over his body. He lowers his head to the dirt and smoke blows through his nostrils as his forked tail swishes.

My eyes shift to Mira, a dark emerald whose scales are dull but look far stronger than the others, and red light shines from beneath her scales as they tip.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Brenn says, wagging his eyes and nudging me.

I can't help but wonder where it all goes. They're huge, easily twice as big as the entire cottage we stayed in.

"Well, here goes nothing. I guess I'll see you on the other side." Brenn grabs the bags from the ground and heads toward Mira.

I take a hesitant step toward Loric, pausing to grab a nightgown from my bag and turning it into a makeshift sling for the kitten.

"You need to name it," Hyde says.

Why? What does it matter to you?

"You keep calling it an IT."

I'll work on it. Shit. I'll work on a NAME.

My breaths are ragged as I reach Loric's dragon, his teeth as long as my arm, but I fight to not tremble, to square my shoulders.

"You better not eat me." I boop him in the nose and he flinches. "I mean it."

I got this...

If dragons can smile, I'm pretty sure he just did, revealing every long tooth in his mouth.

“No you don’t.”

Nope. Definitely don’t!

“Will you just get in already? We don’t have all damn day,” Brenn yells, holding open Mira’s jaws.

I swallow and slowly climb in, ignoring how wet it is, or how cold it is when he breathes, though he blows smoke out of his nose as I fall onto his tongue and it makes it slightly warmer.

His teeth slowly come together, his lips staying open as if he’s giving me a chance to get tucked in before he turns out the light. I settle against his teeth and he lays his forked tongue across my lap like a belt.

Don’t panic. This is fine. I’m fine.

Loric’s lips close and I squeal. Plastering myself to his tongue and gripping it for dear life. Loric growls and the vibrations rumble around me so loud my ears scream from the onslaught.

“Sorry!” I yell. And I bite my tongue as he begins to move.

His steps are slow and leisurely at first, then everything shakes like a cat about to pounce and we blast into the air. The force is so strong I have to latch onto his teeth, a death grip on the kitten to keep from slipping. His tongue bunches against me helping to hold me there but delicate enough to not squish me and then slowly we level out, taking on a swoop and dive motion like rocking on waves.

It doesn’t take long before we drop hard on all fours and Loric opens up his mouth, tips his head and discards me onto the ground. Eyes wide, I catch myself, hugging the cat to my chest. My body trembles, hard enough I fear it’ll rattle something loose.

“Fuck yeah!” Brenn yells as Mira discards him in a similar fashion. He jumps up, whooping loudly before coming to check on me. “You good?”

“Define good.”

He pats me on the shoulder. “You’re good. Now go say goodbye to your man before the king finds out he’s here.”

I hand Brenn the cat, wide awake now, and he holds it out as far as he possibly can, like it’ll give him a disease.

Mira shifts but Jesper and Loric say put. She comes to hug Brenn, letting him know she’ll be back in three days. That it’s all he gets. Then kisses him goodbye

I’ll take Loric’s current condition as a hint that he doesn’t want to say bye, and honestly it might make this a little easier if we don’t. Still, I set my palm on his nose.

“I wish you didn’t have such big teeth,” I say, leaning back to look at him and smoke rolls from his nose. “I’ve been thinking what you said last night in my head all day and I realized I never said anything back. I want you to know I wasn’t falling in love with you, Loric...”

His eyes squint.

A tear falls down my cheek as I lean against him. “I *am* helplessly in love with you, and that’s exactly why I have to do this.” Kissing his scales, I step away, letting Brenn guide me back.

Mira, now in her dragon form again, leads them away. Loric launches into the sky, taking a piece of my heart with him. The others follow him, beating their wings as they disappear into the clouds.

“You okay?” Brenn asks, his arm slinging around my shoulders.

“Not even a little, but I will be.”

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CHAPTER 35

Calamity

We're on the edge of Lythanar, the largest moon that's more like a massive floating island than anything. A forest of trees tower over us, stopping a few yards from the rocky edge. As the wind blows, their translucent leaves with vibrant orange veins catch the light, casting a mosaic across the lush green grass.

The forest itself has been carved in two by a river. It's the Eldritch, and I can guarantee if I were to walk around the forest edge, to peer up the river, statues of dragons would stretch up on either side, nearly as tall as the trees here. It flows from the crystal castle all the way to the opposite edge, then runs off the cliff and mists into the world below.

My breath catches as I take in the realm before me, a vivid echo of Meg's stories.

I spin in place, looking off the edge of Lythanar at the two smaller moons, islands just like this one suspended high above the world. One, known as Frost Forge, is nearly white, filled with ice-capped mountains and snowy landscapes, auroras of every color sparkle above it, making it look almost abstract. The other, Wyvern, is made of moss-speckled stone and red crystal shards that seem to stick out in all directions. You'd never know by looking at it that an entire city of dragon

shifters exists inside. It's a massive cavern filled with bioluminescent life.

"Unbelievable," I murmur, cradling my kitten closer to my chest, feeling its soft purr against my makeshift sling. "It's just like Meg described."

Brenn walks beside me, his violet eyes taking in the rolling green hills. "Even though I despise this place, even I have to admit it's beautiful."

I nod, unable to tear my gaze from the breathtaking view. "I never thought I'd actually see it, though. It's like stepping into one of her stories, and just... It's like I can feel her here." Drawing in a flustered breath, I shake my head. "How is that possible?"

"Your connection to this realm runs deep. I mean, your mother and aunts created all of it. It's only natural for you to feel at home here, like you're closer to them, when they've had a hand in everything," he says, his voice sincere and reassuring.

"So, where do we go then?"

Brenn shrugs, looking toward the river. "I guess to the castle. Maybe the king will let us stay, considering you're royalty." He tugs my arm, heading toward the mouth of the river. "This way."

I follow after him, and as we near the river, I glimpse statues arching up on either side of it. They continue all the way down it until the forest stops, turning into green rolling hills that surround a stone castle embellished with crystals, as if the structure itself was pulled from them, reaching up into the sky.

Throughout the island, even peeking over the trees are giant, iron towers, a few in the distance have dragons perched on them. They're so small they almost look like birds from here. Even the water in the river takes on a majestic glow, like the fountain in Ashbourne.

The air smells so sweet, filled with magic, and as we work our way down the riverbed and through the tunnels that

burrow through the large dragon statues dotting the edge, I start to see the villages nestled into the woods. Platforms connect the trunks, as little cottages with round doors and windows are suspended in the treetops.

Everything is so bright, so *vibrant*, the colors almost hurt my eyes.

Exiting the forest, the village continues, working with the land instead of carving through it. Stone structures rise from the hills, winding all the way up to the castle, while one half remains an open rolling green landscape. Some have smoke coiling from chimneys, some are houses or merchant shops. Dragons of every color soar above us, while others perch on the thatched roofs on metal spires.

People hurry about their business, never giving us more than a cursory glance as we make our way to the crystal castle, looming and opposing so high into the sky I can't see the top. The castle glimmers in the hell flame light, tinted hues of reds and oranges reflecting off its many facets, casting rainbows across the stone streets below.

The power alone in this place zings across my skin like electricity, like the way lightning rolls over Jesper's dragon. I can feel it in my soul, filling me up until I can't hold anymore. Though, for being so close to the hell flame, it's not excruciatingly warmer here, but I can feel the heat from it on my skin, like a bright, cloudless day on the mainland below us.

"I can't believe you drew all of this... It's like we walked into the paintings on the wall."

"Are you sure the king will even agree to see us?" I ask, the nerves creeping in the closer we get.

"Relax, Calamity," Brenn says, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You're Megara's daughter. How could he not?"

Maybe he's right.

"For our sake, let's hope. It's not like we can just leave if it doesn't work out."

As we draw nearer to the castle, I can't help but marvel at the intricate details etched into the crystal walls, each one telling a story of the kingdom's history. *Of the furies.*

"Ready?" Brenn muses, his gaze following mine to the expansive front doors of the castle. Their surfaces are covered in carved wooden scales, laden with red crystals. "We'll have to request an audience with the king. It might take some time before he can see us."

The guards at the entrance eye us warily, but Brenn doesn't hesitate, striding forward with confidence.

"State your business," one of the guards demands. A humanoid man clad in black armor so intricate it puts even the golden armor the Solarian guards wear to shame. Though, it's the circling dragons on his chest plate that really stand out the most. His gaze flicks between Brenn and me.

"Requesting an audience with King Everand," Brenn replies smoothly. "Tell him it's regarding the last fury."

The guard's eyes widen slightly before he nods, disappearing into the castle. Moments later, the massive doors swing open, granting us passage. Our footsteps echo inside, and my jaw drops as I take in the skyscraping stone walls, the art hanging from them, the crystal chandeliers and sculptures of dragons that seem to soar across the room above us. It's breathtaking.

Though, I don't have time to look closer, I know based on the three bodies that if I had, one would be of my mother, Meg. Brenn tugs me along, keeping me moving, and we ascend a grand staircase, my heart hammering in my chest with each step.

"Remember," Brenn whispers, squeezing my hand once more. "You'll need to bow-curtsey, *whatever.*" He leans in closer, putting his arm around me as we fall into step so he speaks directly into my ear. "And *do not* mention the outer realm or the others."

"I know," I whisper back, grateful for his presence. I'm not sure what I would've done if he hadn't stayed with me.

Granted, I'm sure I would've meandered toward the castle, but he knows the customs, and even though I have memorized every inch of this place, I don't know anything about their hierarchy or culture beyond the things Meg mentioned about the furies.

We reach the top of the stairs just as a set of double doors swing open, revealing a throne room bathed in sunlight. At the far end, a man descends a smaller staircase, his every movement graceful and commanding.

His graying hair peeks from beneath his red crystal crown, his body covered in dark tunic with red accents, and decorative seams. A long velvet cloak, black as night and rimmed with fur hangs from his shoulders and when his eyes meet mine, I suck in a breath.

My heart clenches as I take in those sterling eyes, just like Loric's and though I'm sure it's a coincidence, that a lot of ice dragons have them, it doesn't mean they don't put my heart and soul in a vice grip.

The king falters too, staring at me as if he's seen a ghost. "Who might you be?" His voice is deep, commandeering, and so interwoven with power it nearly takes me to my knees.

"Your Majesty," Brenn says, bowing respectfully, his hand yanking on my dress as he curses under his breath.

I pull out my skirts and dip into a curtsy, wishing we'd had time to stop at the seamstress and get my new clothes on the way out of town. He's never going to take me seriously in this. To him, I'm plain, likely nothing more than a servant who waits on him hand and foot. At least the clothes Loric had fitted would've looked more presentable.

"May I present Calamity Morningstar, the last fury, daughter of Megara the Flame Keeper and Asmodeus Morningstar," Brenn says before rising. I follow his lead, standing up straight and feigning confidence.

King Everand's gaze lingers on me, his expression unreadable. This is it—the moment that will determine my fate, and possibly the future of an entire kingdom. Yet, the only

thing I can think about is how his eyes look at me, making me wish they belonged to someone else.

Brenn changed my last name, which I suppose given the circumstances and recent knowledge, should've been changed, but it doesn't make this any easier. Not when both Loric and Asmo are so far away. Not when I might never see either of them again.

A shiver runs down my spine, as if the ghost King Everand sees is standing right behind me. He swallows hard, his eyes never leaving mine. "You... You remind me of her..." he trails off, leaving a heavy silence hanging between us.

My heart races, curiosity gnawing at my insides as I wonder what he plans to do with that knowledge. The anticipation swirls through my mind like a storm, and I can't help but feel vulnerable under his scrutiny.

King Everand's gaze finally tears away from mine, landing on Brenn with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. "Megara sacrificed herself years ago. We were told of her death. How could her daughter be standing here? And she was a fury, dragons don't mate with demons. Our queen would've never dared to take one as a mate."

"Well, she did, under the Solarian king's demand," Brenn says, his voice steady despite the tension in the room, and he gives a wry smile, "Calamity is her daughter and grew up in the Solarian dungeon due to her being of dragon heritage."

I glance down at the white kitten nestled in the makeshift sling across my chest. Its yellow eyes stare back at me, silently offering support. My fingers brush against its soft fur, seeking comfort in its warmth and its little paws wrap around it.

"Is this true?" King Everand asks, turning his attention back to me. His cold eyes narrow, studying me as if trying to see past my outer shell to the truth within.

"Yes." I hold his gaze. "My mother survived in the dungeons for years, though not without sacrifice. She raised me there along with Asmodeus Morningstar, the dungeon master."

“But are you certain you’re hers biologically? Not just some stray she took in?”

“*Some stray...*” My dragon flares up beneath my skin, her anger boiling my blood.

“Yes,” I grit, incapable of hiding the snip in my tone. “I’m sure.”

“You know she is, just by looking at her. She’s the spitting image of the queen,” Brenn adds and the king’s eyes slide to him, narrowing further into lethal slits.

Brenn dips his head, lacing his fingers behind him. “My apologies.”

“What are you here for, then? Your mother’s crown? To visit?” His words are clipped despite the touch of sadness that laces his voice.

“To learn,” I say, fighting the urge to look away. “I wanted to see the world my mother spoke of, to learn how to shift. It’s not safe for me in Solaria due to my dragon heritage, and I might not be in any of the other lower realms either, due to my father’s. He’s the King of Hell Hold’s son and they didn’t part on great terms. So, I suppose I’m here for refuge, too.”

“Refuge, then,” King Everand echoes, his eyes flicking from me to Brenn, and back again. “You must understand that I will not vacate this throne on a whim. Your heritage can’t be proven until you’ve shifted, that your dragon can wield hellfire. Even then, the dragon lord, along with those in this kingdom might not welcome a queen who knows nothing about our kind, especially one that’s a halfbreed.”

“Believe me,” I say with a bitter smile. “I have no interest in ruling a kingdom I know nothing about.”

The king seems to mull over this information for a moment, his eyes flicking between Brenn and me. I stand tall, refusing to let my fear show, even though my heart is hammering into my ribs.

Brenn’s eyes are on me in a split second, but he seems to calm after a moment. He’s smart enough to realize there’s no other way I could’ve answered that question that wouldn’t

have ended with us freefalling to the world below. Had I claimed to be interested in Meg's crown, the king would've felt threatened. Had I claimed to not be interested in the crown, I'd be relinquishing my right to it. Saying I'm not interested in ruling a kingdom I know nothing about is a gray area. I know plenty about this kingdom, and I might not be up to speed on their cultures or how to be a dragon, but I know about this kingdom and its history.

King Everand doesn't know that though. An almost sinister smile pulls across his face.

"Then, let me be the first to welcome you to Lythanar," he says solemnly, extending a hand in a gesture of goodwill.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," I reply, taking his hand and feeling the weight of my decision settle on my shoulders.

A soft *meow* spills into the air, drawing the king's gaze downward. He notices not only the white kitten cradled in a makeshift sling but also the bite mark marring my neck. His eyebrows rise, curiosity unmistakable.

"You're mated..." he trails off, an air of disapproval clinging to him as he looks at Brenn, his eyes dropping to the mechanical hinge at his knee. A snarl lifts his lip. "To this?"

Heat flashes within me, anger coursing through my so fast white-hot rage could spill from my mouth. How dare he... I open my mouth to answer, but Brenn cuts me off, sporting a cocky smirk that would rival even the most self-assured nobles.

"Your Majesty, our relationship is not what's important here," Brenn says, stepping closer to me. "What matters is that Calamity learns about her heritage and potential. We humbly request permission to stay at the castle during this time."

"What the fuck is he doing?"

Saving us. I think. Since Loric is a criminal, we can't tell the king he's our mate—even though he's not fully. And with the king believing we are, it'll ensure we stay together until Mira comes to get him.

The king scrutinizes us for a moment, his gaze lingering on the teasing gleam in Brenn's violet eyes before returning to me. I stand tall, meeting his steady gaze head-on, refusing to let my nerves show.

"Very well," he concedes. "You may stay in the castle while you learn about your mother's world and your own identity. I'll have the maids set up the west tower for you and your *mate*. My only request is to know has the bond been made fully?"

I shake my head no, but the king scans over Brenn's throat anyway. I breathe a sigh of relief that you can't see Mira's mark through his shirt.

"Good. You can stay here, but if you return his mark, you'll be asked to leave the dragon kingdom for good and revoke your claim to the crown."

"Excuse me?" I ask, my eyebrows scrunching. "Why would returning the mark force us to leave? This is my mother's home."

Not that we're at risk of it.

"You have no proof of what you are, but regardless, if you intend to wear this crown, you'll be mated to someone worthy of the title of king." King Everand returns to his throne as he speaks, taking a seat and lifting his chin. "What's your name, anyway, boy?"

"Brennelin Stormborn, Viscount of Wyvern, Your Majesty, and we understand your conditions," Brenn says with a bow, his hand on my arm, telling me to stay quiet. "And we thank you for your hospitality, Your Majesty."

Viscount of Wyvern? Suddenly, I understand why his father would be so worried about having a son that couldn't shift, but it doesn't make what he did to him right. It doesn't make it better at all, actually.

I follow Brenn's lead, giving another curtsy.

"However," the king adds, holding up a finger, "I expect to meet with you, Calamity. Starting with dinner tonight. *Alone*."

And should any... *complications* arise” —his eyes narrow at Brenn— “I trust you will handle them accordingly.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Brenn assures him, flashing a wicked smile that sets off alarm bells in my head.

“Then it is settled,” the king declares, his tone final. He gestures to one of the guards near the door. “Take them to the west tower. Get them settled in.”

As I glance at Brenn, I see his grin widen, and I can’t help but shake my head at his antics. “Why would you agree to that?” I ask the moment we’re out of the king’s earshot.

“We need a place to stay, and I have zero intentions of mating you, so what could it hurt?” Brenn shrugs.

“He’s got a point.”

Of course, you’d think that.

“What? Did you *want* to mate with me?” He waggles his eyebrows mockingly.

“No. But you saw the way he looked at us right? Why would he want to have dinner with me alone?”

“Because he wants to stay king and he’s unmated. His last mate died a long, long time ago. It’s also why he had such a case of the ass with me after seeing your mark, and why he doesn’t want *our bond* complete.” He curls his fingers like quotation marks as we follow the guard, winding through hallway after hallway. Brenn looks at me, as if judging my state of mind, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Relax. He’ll try to swoon you through buying you things and being kind. He’s not going to force anything upon you.”

“Yeah? And how do you know that? Mates force marks on people all the time in Solaria. There’s apparently a fucking trade for it, where mates can be bought. Why would that be different here? Especially, when the king has so much on the line.” I don’t mean to snap, but I keep my voice hushed so only Brenn can hear me. However, with the guard so far ahead of us, I doubt he’d hear anyway.

“Because Loric got his charm from somewhere, *sweetheart*. His father might be a prick, but he’s not going to force Megara’s daughter into a courtship. He’ll try to swoon you.”

The blood drains from my face. “His *father?*” I throw a hand out to stop him, not caring that the guard continues, oblivious to us. “King Everand is Loric’s father?”

No wonder his eyes looked so familiar.

He smirks, nodding. “He was Lord Everand until your mommy handed herself over.”

“Don’t you think someone should’ve told me that? Sorry, I suppose I should’ve bowed my head before I spoke to you, *Viscount Brennelin Stormborn.*”

“No, actually. You didn’t need to. None of us have gone by our titles in ages. Loric’s completely disassociated himself with his father, and well, you know what happened to me and Vik.”

“What’s Mira, then? A princess or something?”

Brenn’s violet eyes drop for a second, then meet mine again. “I mean, she is to me. But that’s it as far as titles go. Well, unless you count Jesper being the Lord of Lythamar’s bastard. The point is, none of it matters to us. It shouldn’t matter to you, either.”

Brenn starts speedwalking to catch up to the guard who’s almost out of sight and I fall into step with him.

“You’re right... I’m sorry. It’s just a lot for one day.”

Brenn arches a brow. “I know.”

A long silence passes before I whisper, “Do you think King Everand realized I have a never cat?”

Brenn’s short laugh echoes through the stone halls. “*Gods, no.* They’re indigenous to the Realm of Monsters and I don’t believe the king has ever been there, so I think your secret is safe.”

CHAPTER 36

Calamity

Weeks have passed in a blur.

Brenn is still here with me, since Mira never came back. He must've sat at the edge for days and my heart broke every time he returned to tell me she never showed.

And sadly, I'm still no closer to shifting than I was when I arrived. King Everand believes it's from my dragon being repressed for so long, that it could take years... Or at least he told me so right before ensuring me he'd take care of me as long as I needed him to. So long as no one fully mates with me.

Brenn had been right. Not once has the king tried to pressure me into anything. He's just had someone come get me for dinner every night, and let me meet him at the table. Though he has asked questions about Meg and my time in Solaria, I've danced around talking about Loric and the others like their lives depend on it.

And from what it sounds like. They do.

The treaty is contingent on *all* dragons staying out of the realm and going off of what the king has told me, they've executed anyone that's broken that rule. The only reason he won't treat Brenn as a traitor is due to his injuries.

He's only allowed Brenn to join us at this long wooden table once. Last night. During which, King Everand nearly interrogated the man about how we got up here if his injuries shredded his wings and I can't shift. Brenn had lied through his teeth—or so I thought—claiming to have made a fabric that acts as the webbing of his wings and we were lucky enough for it to survive going through the barrier. He even showed him the fabric that must've come in the bags he brought with him, and since the king has never gone through the barrier himself, he believed it, though he wanted his counsel to examine it. And with reluctant fingers, Brenn let him take it.

It wasn't until we returned to our room—and yes, I do mean *room*—that he explained how it's allowed him to fly, but there's no way the fabric is strong enough to hold up through the barrier. It means, when they do test it—if they do—the king will know the truth, that someone brought us up here. He might even make Brenn demonstrate just to prove a point.

We both agreed to never give up a name if it comes to that, but we've also been preparing for the worst. We prioritized me shifting over everything else, so if we have to run, we can.

Brenn's tried everything that doesn't result in sheer force. My dragon has too. She knows how life or death the situation we're in is, and she's worked with me, pushed with me, and yet, nothing happens.

I've started to fear we may never do so. Which means, I may never claim the crown, never see Loric again... Doing so in Solaria would just put them all at risk, and being here would get him killed. We might not have a choice but to go to Hell Hold and pray Asmo's father accepts us with open arms, but I doubt he will. He tried to kill his own son, then when he failed, he tricked him and locked him away in his prison realm to endure the Solarian king's rule.

What would he do to someone who he can't lock inside there? Who can walk through the barrier? The only answer I can find is death. Though, it's not like Asmo's father is looking for me, either. So, there's a sliver of hope, that if shit goes south, we'll be able to hide our dragon halves, pretend to be some other sort of shifter and never tell anyone our real

names. We might be able to live in hiding... we'll just always have to look over our shoulder.

Still, everything is contingent on Brenn and I making it off this moon without being caught, and me having wings to land us safely on the ground.

The dining room table stretches out before me, a round wooden chandelier hanging above us, full of twinkling lights. Only the king and I sit here, today, a feast splayed out in front of us that could feed a whole village.

"Not much longer and your mark will be gone. How are you feeling about that?" King Everand looks up from his plate, his silver eyes looming across the table.

"Bittersweet, I guess." It's not a lie. I miss Loric, so deeply that he's all I can think about most days. It's been both a motivation for me to shift, and a reason not to, because it means I can see him and I'm not sure I'll be able to restrain myself from going down there... from putting everyone he knows and loves at risk because I simply missed him. Maybe if the mark is gone, I might finally be able to shift without that fear keeping my scales hidden.

However, it'll bring other issues to the table, like how Loric's father will likely try to push me into mating with him, and that feels completely wrong on a soul level. Morality of the situation aside, I wouldn't. King Everand can be kind, and he's powerful, could likely offer me anything and everything I asked for but one. He can't offer me that same feeling of being with Loric. My heart won't flutter when he looks at me, my body won't ache for his touch, and there's an intimacy that I have with Loric no one else can compare to. Things are just simple. His hard, jagged pieces fit perfectly with mine, and anyone else would just fall flat in comparison.

"Interesting," he hums, chewing a bit as he squints at me from across the room. "How so?"

"Well, I love him... I loved him before the mark was even placed on me. And sure, my feelings are stronger now, more amplified, but I don't think that'll just go away when it

disappears.” My fingers linger on it, feeling the smooth skin, the bite that’s slightly more silky than the rest.

“Love him? You scowl at him most of the time.” The king takes another bite.

“And how would you know that? You’ve only seen me around him a few times, and not for long.” Doing my best to keep my heart rate even, I take a bite, chew my food, and keep my eyes on my plate.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but the castle does have windows. My rooms are relatively high up, and from them I can see just about everything going on around the castle. I’ve watched the two of you, even chuckled when you tossed your boot at him once.” This king tips his head, looking at me beneath his lashes.

Brenn had tried to use anger to drag out my creature. He’d told me *my mate* would move on, that if I wasn’t woman enough to shift, then I wasn’t woman enough to mate him. I knew he was saying it to get beneath my skin, but it hurt more than I cared to admit, and due to his terminology, if anyone had overheard us, even the king, they’d assume Brenn was talking about himself in the third-person.

“He’s been trying to teach me to shift.” I steal a glance over the rim of my drink as I take a sip of the ale the maids set out. It’s not faerie wine, though...

“Did the instructor I set to help you not please you?” He arches a silver brow.

“He gave me two tries, then asked me to pick between electrocution and free falling off the edge of the moon. Neither of those sounded pleasant to me, so I think I’ll keep those as a last resort, thanks.” I fake a smile, crinkling my nose.

“Fair enough...” he trails off, wiping his face with a fabric napkin, then setting it on the table. His voice has changed, gone is the flirtatious ring and now it almost sounds disappointed. “I have something for you.”

No... Please... No more gifts. I don’t think I can pretend to be excited anymore.

He claps his hands twice and the silent guards along the wall open the door, letting a maid scurry inside, a velvet pillow in her hand, holding something gold. The king stands from his seat, grabbing the golden chain-like piece from the pillow and slowly coming toward me.

Leaning over the back of my seat, he brings his mouth to my ear. “May I?”

No... Why did he have to say that? Why did he have to say it like that... in the same tone Loric did when he asked to remove my dress and paint my body in Ashbourne. I’m never going to be able to unhear it now.

Still, I grin wide, sucking in a deep breath. “Please,” I say, gathering my hair, assuming it’s a necklace. The king runs his fingers down my throat, over the fading mark there and my gut flips. Bile rises in my throat, nearly choking myself on it, and it’s all I can do to swallow it down.

“It’s not for you, love. I mean, it is, but for your pussy.”

I drop my hair, looking up at him. He nudges my seat away from the table and gets to his knees in front of me and panic fills my bones until they tingle with it. He looks up at me for a moment, like he’s asking for silent permission, but I’m too numb to move or speak. He lifts the hem of my dress, just slightly, his eyes on mine, then reaches one of his ring-clad hands beneath it.

Time slows and I don’t so much as dare to breathe as he leans closer, really digging to gather the fabric of my dress. There’s easily five layers of skirts. It’s a dress given to me by him, of all people and I’ve never been so happy to make things so difficult to get to.

“*Ah*, there she is,” he says with a smile, making me jump.

I press my lips together, my eyes narrowed.

“Is it? I think it’s been too long for him. He’s forgotten what it should feel like,” Hyde says in my mind, and I have to bite back a smile, feeling my cheeks burn. I rest my elbow on the chair arm, bringing my knuckles to my lips.

Then the king pulls back, kitten in hand. My heart stops.

“I had my scholars look into this little one. I saw her when you got here, all snuggled up against your bosom and I just had to know. They told me it’s called a pussycat.”

“No... He was looking for Meg!” My dragon screams.

A burst of uneven air escapes my nostrils as I bite my lip, desperate to get myself together.

“No pussy named after our late queen should go unspoiled. So, I had a collar made for her.” The king holds up the golden chain, a small flame dangling from it, the word Meg etched into the charm. He clips it around the kitten’s throat, then gently sets her in my lap.

“Well, thank you. It’s lovely and has made my day,” I say, smiling wide enough for him to see my teeth.

He grins down at me. “I’m glad...” For a moment he doesn’t move, like he’s working up the courage to say something. “I’d like you to consider an offer. Judging by your mark, you have maybe a week before it’s gone. If you mated with me, you’d be queen. You could rule this land at my side, like Megara’s daughter should. You don’t need to decide right now, but I’d like you to take the night to consider it.”

One night. I get one night.

What happens if I say no?

The king reaches into his pocket, setting a small diamond ring on the table. My blood turns to ice in my veins, not sure where *that* is going.

“Give this to Brenn for me. My servants say he left it in the library,” he says, walking toward the door. “It was lovely to have dinner with you, Calamity, darling. I hope you can see the motivation, and that you’ll have an answer for me in the morning.”

CHAPTER 37

Calamity

“Don’t say that. There was a lot happening when we left. Maybe they had to stay to fend off an attack or something.” My words feel hollow, even to me. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to convince him otherwise, when I’m fearing the same thing.

“Mira didn’t argue when I said I wanted to help you. She didn’t flinch. She told me to do what I felt was right... I don’t think she’s coming back for me. If she was, she would’ve by now.”

“What happens if she doesn’t?” I ask. Mates are for life, but what happens when they abandon you?

“I don’t know. We’re supposed to be *true mates*. It doesn’t seem right. I’ve loved her for as long as I can remember, long before I even fell. Why would she just leave?” He says it to himself more than to me, but I don’t have the answers. I wish I did. The only thing I can do is try to distract him from it all.

I come out with it. “If it makes you feel any better. I had dinner with the king, and he lifted my skirts, claiming he had a collar for my pussy.”

Brenn’s mouth gapes as he turns to me, hands propped behind his head. “No...”

“Yeah.” I grab Meg from the foot of the bed, putting her between us. “Turns out, that’s what they call cats here, and she was underneath my seat.”

Brenn’s eyes are the only things that move, shifting toward Meg. His cheeks blow as his face turns blood red, and both of us laugh until our ribs ache.

“I mean, I told you he’d be chivalrous.” Brenn drags a hand down his face, shaking his head, wiping the tears from his eyes.

“He also gave me until tomorrow to decide if I wanted to mate him, so I’m not so sure about that, anymore.”

Brenn’s face falls, expressionless as he turns to me. “What?”

“You heard me, and he gave me this. Said you left it in the library.” I grab the ring off the end table next to the bed and hold it out to him.

Brenn’s face goes ghost white as he stares at the ring. His eyes glued to it like it’s the only thing giving him air. The atmosphere in the room changes instantaneously as he rushes forward, snatching it from me. Brenn sits up to get a closer look, then his violet eyes drain of color as they meet mine.

“He gave this to you?” he asks, my heart settling lower in my stomach. The room feels tighter, like the walls are closing in.

Something is wrong. *Very* wrong. I nod.

“This is Mira’s. She never goes anywhere without it. She even wears it on a chain when she shifts, and puts it between her teeth. I’ve worried for years that it’s going to slip off one of them and she’s going to end up choking on it mid-flight.” Brenn panics, flipping off the bed and shoving his boots back on.

“What are you doing?” I inch closer, but he’s moving so fast, I’m not sure what else to say.

“I’m going to go ask King Everand where the fuck my mate is, that’s what I’m doing.” He kicks the bed and the hinge on

his knee whines. “*Gods...* I should’ve known something was up. She’d never just leave me.”

“*He thinks the king has her? Or does he think he sent her away?*” Hyde’s voice echoes in my head, and even she can feel the tension in the room, peering through my eyes.

I don’t know.

“He’ll consider you a traitor the moment you admit to that. Just wait.” I yell as he storms toward the door.

Hand on the doorknob he turns back to me. “What?” The word is flat, void of emotion.

“We need to be smart about this. If he’s holding her somewhere, we need to know, but bringing it up to him is only going to get you thrown into a dungeon and scheduled for death row.”

Slowly, he nods, stepping away from the door. “Fine. I know where he’d keep her. I’ll look around, but you’re not going with me. It’ll be easier that way.”

“Fine, but oil your damn hinge first. You’re not exactly going to sneak anywhere when it squeaks with every step you take.”

His lips almost pull into a smile. “I will. I’ll be back before you wake up, and if I’m not, assume the worst. Try not to scream all night.”

“Good luck to you too,” I say as he slips through the door and out into the hall.



Hours pass, and I lie awake, incapable of even falling asleep until I know about Mira.

Regardless, the king knew. It was his *motivation* for me to mate him and that alone churns my stomach.

How dare he... How does someone so perfect come from a man like King Everand. Where Loric is kind, selfless, and brave, his father is deceitful, manipulative, and conniving.

They're nothing alike and I don't blame Loric for wishing to keep his distance.

But Mira... if he has her locked away somewhere, he'll kill her if I don't agree. I can't let that happen. Brenn would walk off that edge himself.

A weight settles heavy on my chest as I lay in the dim room, showered in the faint colored light. My finger skims the mark. Shivering at the thought of that touch being Loric's, how his rings would send an icy chill through me, how his warm breath would follow it, a part of me shatters. I don't want him to be gone. I don't want anyone else.

But the mark is fading, and soon—way too soon—he will be.

Tears sting my eyes and I squeeze them shut. My lip trembles and I pinch it between my teeth, bringing a pillow up to cover my face. I cry, letting everything out at once. The pain in my chest, the thought of what I might have to do, the loss of Loric and Asmo and Meg. I cry until I'm numb from the inside out, until my heartbeat is the only thing keeping me alive. And I don't dare to move an inch until there aren't any tears left to shed.

My dragon is nowhere. Whether that's to give me space to grieve or because she knows we might not have a choice but to agree to King Everand's offer because Mira's life depends on it. And if Mira's does, it won't be long before the king goes after Loric and the others. As his queen I might be able to convince him otherwise.

I went from my life being meaningless, to no one knowing I exist, to being the queen's daughter, Asmo's daughter, to people depending on me for their hearts to keep beating and I don't know what to do with any of it.

Meg set me up to fail.

She kept this secret. She and Asmo both did, and now I have no idea how to rule a kingdom, how to change King Everand's mind, how to save my friends or the man I love.

Fuck that wishing well.

I wished for happiness, to be with Loric, in a place where we could exist in peace.

Now I have nothing. No mate, no crown. I'm not remotely happy. I simply exist to look pretty next to a ruthless king's side.



I'm shaken awake, rough hands curling around my shoulders. Violent.

“Wake the fuck up, Calamity!” I dare to open my eyes, meeting a sea of violet. “Gods, woman. For someone with nightmares you sure sleep like the goddamn dead. *Get up!*”

Brenn.

My eyes snap open and he jumps back, tucking his extremities close like he fears he'll lose them.

“What did you find?” I rub my eyes, scrambling out of bed. I take my fingers through my hair trying to hurry to get ready in case we have to leave now.

“She came back...” There's a definitive pause in his voice that makes me freeze. I drop everything and turn to him.

“What is it?” I hold my breath, hoping the king hasn't finished the job.

“Loric came with her. Jesper too. He came back for you.”

My heart beats so fast it bruises ribs as my eyes round... *He's here.*

“Where are they?” I force the question from my life, terrified to know the answer but needing it all the same.

“The dungeon. The king announced their execution first thing this morning.” His eyes won't meet mine, but I can see the dark circles beneath them, how tired, how scared he is.

I feel it too. My chest collapses in on itself, denying me air as I process what he's said.

He came back for me... and now he'll die because of it.

“What do we do?” I ask, the words spilling out of me so fast I’m not sure they make sense. “If I accept the king’s offer, he might—”

“No. I told them and they made it clear... they don’t want you to.”

“Then what do we do?” I ask again, the nerves clawing up my throat as I close the distance between us. “How do we save them?”

I’m going to be sick.

Brenn shakes his head. “I... I don’t know. We can break them out but I barely got down there to talk to them through a wall. I don’t know how we’ll actually get them out. I’ve never been locked down there.”

“That sounds like suicide,” I scoff, folding my arms over my chest and taking a seat on the bed. My knees are too weak to stand.

“I have to either accept King Everand’s offer or shift. If I prove myself, maybe it’ll be enough to dethrone him publicly.” I meet Brenn’s eyes. “He said he’d only vacate if I had proof and if I prove it at the execution, before it happens, then everyone will see it. There will be witnesses. The throne is supposed to belong to the furies. Furies maintain balance. Yes?”

Brenn nods once, tucking his chin. “Yes, but we’ve tried everything.”

My eyes zone out on the floor as I press my lips together. “Not everything.”

Meg swarms through my legs as I breathe, trying to slow my heart.

“Okay... let’s talk it through. We need a plan.”

Rage flares in an instant, all consuming as I level him in a lethal glare. “We’re well past plans, Brenn.”

“Calm down,” he says, coming a bit closer but keeping his distance.

“I’ll calm down when my mate’s head isn’t on a chopping block.”

A smirk tilts his lips and that only makes my blood boil more. “*Your mate*, huh? He has to survive long enough to finish the bond first.”

I meet his eyes, fury coursing through me. “Then we’ll make it happen. I don’t care if I have to get electrocuted or get shoved off a mountain. I want King Everand’s head on a pike, that crown off his head, and Loric out of the dungeon. He’s been in shackles enough for one lifetime.”

Brenn’s lips pull into a wide smile. “Yes, *Your Majesty*.” His face softens as he joins me on the bed. “It’s in your blood. The furies didn’t know how to lead when they built this place but people just followed them because it felt right. You on that throne feels right, and I’m not just saying that because Mira’s life depends on it.”

“I hope you’re right. And I really hope Asmo was wrong about me possibly not being able to shift.” My voice is so silent, I’ve given myself whiplash. My heart is out for blood, it wants to keep them safe, but my mind is terrified of going through what Brenn did... “Do you remember it? Falling?”

“No.” He grips my hand. “That’s a lie, I do, but I’d do it again. It gave me her, and she might grind every one of my gears, and I hers, but if being pushed off the moon meant saving her, I’d jump.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I nod. “So it was the edge of the moon, then, not a mountain.”

“Not a mountain.” He smiles at me then tugs me to my feet. “Come on, *Your Majesty*, let’s get your wings.”

CHAPTER 38

Calamity

“Why falling?” I ask while Brenn leads me through the castle.

“Fear is one of the strongest emotions you can experience and that’s likely why you started to experience it in the market. You felt so strongly about seeing Asmo that it forced your dragon out to protect you. If you fall, they *have* to take over or you’ll die.” His steps are so long, I have to take two to his one. He’s not as tall as Loric, but still easily a foot or so taller than I am.

“Then why lightning? The instructors suggested it. There’s no fear or emotions that come with that beyond pain.” He presses me flat against the wall as the guards pass through the space we’re about to enter. Brenn raises a finger, silently telling me to stay quiet.

Once they pass, oblivious to us, he nudges me forward. “Lightning causes your body to go into shock, your fight or flight instincts kick in and forces the change, but it leads to more complications than falling. It can literally melt your brain or turn your organs to mush if used too many times. Your body can’t heal from it fast enough. So, it’s only used for criminals.”

I stop, jerking him to halt as we start to descend the stairwell. “Criminals...”

He tugs me forward, urging me down the steps. Our feet rush over the concrete stairs as he speaks, “Yeah, they execute us by forcing the shift and clipping our wings. They push us off the edge and we fall to our deaths.”

“But you didn’t die,” I say over my shoulder.

“I wasn’t a criminal. I shifted on the way down, just not fast enough. My wings were shred to bits from the force, but it slowed me down enough to survive it.”

The second we hit the ground floor, we’re out the door. We take nothing with us, not even Meg—she’s safer here—and Brenn leads me around the side of the castle.

“My father pushed me off the ledge countless times, but he always caught me. Then one day, he didn’t, but other’s go through it all the time and get their wings. So, if you’re freaking out, you should be. There won’t be anyone to catch you. I don’t have my wings and King Everand took my only alternative, but easily half of those who get pushed off get their wings on the first try.”

Half... “Those aren’t great odds.”

He stops, peering through a cluster of crystals that jut from the side of the castle. “Yeah, well it’s either that or mate King Everand.”

“There isn’t a choice.” There’s no contesting it. He senses that as he stiffens, a silent understanding passing between us.

“Loric wouldn’t ask you to risk your life,” he whispers, his eyes leaving mine.

“He wouldn’t want me agreeing to the king either. I can’t let him die. Not when there’s something I could’ve done to stop it.”

“Well, in that case, I know the goal for today is to shift, but I need you not to for a second, alright?” He steps toward me, arming his arms tight around my body and I crane my neck to stare at him.

“What are you doing?”

He waddles us backward. “Think skinny thoughts.”

The ground gives out and I scream as we plummet down into a dark tunnel. We plunge into some sort of crystal slide, and it wraps and wraps and twists and turns and my lungs spasm trying to find the air as I squeeze my eyes shut. Then we shoot from a tunnel with a *plunk* followed by nothing but air, becoming weightless for a moment and Brenn let’s go, shouting for me to hold my breath.

There’s not enough time. Before I can draw in one, I smack into water. My body dives below the surface, and I flail my limbs, desperate to reach the top. My lungs ache, my body trembles and I fight against the thick liquid to reach the top.

The moment my head pushes through, I gasp in a breath, choking as water goes up my nose, the second I level out. My limbs thrash as I fight to keep my head above water.

“What the fuck, Brenn!” I shout, turning, trying to find him. He pops through the surface, dragging in a breath before treading water.

“Do you think I enjoy this? No, but it’s also the fastest way to the edge. We don’t have hours to walk, do we? No.”

My face slips under and my body starts to go weak, lacking the energy to push me up.

“What’s wrong? Answer me woman!” Brenn says, disturbing the water as he swims toward me.

“I... Can’t swim....”

He curses loud enough that I can hear him as I slip under the water. I try to force the magic from my fingertips, anything to push me up, but it doesn’t work. No smoke forms around me, no golden strings, nothing.

“We’re going to die. Great, and we didn’t even save Loric.”

Not the fucking time!

Brenn snatches me up, yanking me to the surface and clutching me against his chest. I vomit water, my lungs

bubbling. Then as things calm, I realize we're floating. I jerk my head to the left, then the right. It's a pond of some sort. Not the river we saw when we got here.

Brenn's voice is in my ear. "For fate's sake, kick your legs before we both drown. You can choke later."

I start running in the water, kicking us toward the edge. "You should've asked if I could swim before you sent us spiraling through the gods damn crystal mines."

He doesn't say anything until we reach the edge, and we crawl out of the water. The rocky sand bites into my palms as I cough again, still trying to clear my lungs.

"I'm sorry, I thought swimming was common knowledge," he says and I push him over.

"Dungeon!" I yell before going into another coughing fit. "Fuck!" Soaking wet and run through, I sit on the edge of the pond, trying to catch my breath.

"Well, the good news is, maybe drowning you is a safer option. I can't fly, but I can do mouth-to-mouth." He lays on the rocks, his limbs stretched out as heaves in air.

I glare at him. "We're going with what works."

"Yes, what works for *most*..."

"Okay, Mr. Know It All. Ever think you might've finally shifted because you realized your father wasn't coming to get you? You hesitated because you believed if it didn't work, he'd save you."

Brenn pauses, sitting up in a fluid motion. "I suppose, yeah. My mother and Vik were flying around the first time he pushed me off. I knew they'd save me. Then every time after that, I knew he would, until he didn't. It wasn't until I realized he wasn't coming for me that I started to shift... So, it might be why I didn't shift in time."

"I have to go over that edge, Brenn. Drowning, I'll know you can bring me back. I can't force her out. We tried that."

"I know... I just don't want to be the one to push you over if it doesn't work." At least that's honesty... He gets to his feet,

offering me a hand. “The edge is this way,” he says, pointing toward the trees.

It doesn’t take long for us to get through the sliver of forest. It was void of all movement the entire way. Not even the wind blew, as if it wasn’t ominous enough.

“Megara was a night fury. Her scales were black and she could fold her wings back and dive so fast she sounded like a whistle,” Brenn says as we reach the edge of the trees.

“Why are you telling me this?” I shake my head.

“A distraction, duh,” he chuckles soundlessly. “If we get there and have to fight, let your dragon take care of it. She’ll know what to do, it’s an innate thing. And when you go over, don’t point your feet. Stay flat. You’ll fall slower.”

“What if it doesn’t work? What if we don’t get there in time?” I ask, my vision blurring the closer we get to the edge.

“Then kill the king. By default, the crown will fall to Loric.”

Shaking out my fingers, I jump in place. “Okay, then how are you going to get there?”

He looks out into the distance, like the clouds could give him the answer. “You. To tell your dragon, if she shifts, to come get me. I can’t ride her there, and I’m not risking falling out of her claws so...” He frowns as we come to a stop. “I need you to put me in your mouth. You can spit me out when we get there.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What if she eats you? She’s threatened it.”

He shrugs, fidgeting in place. “Yeah, well, we’re all taking risks today... You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Good, then I’m going to need you to strip.”

“You don’t have to put it like that.” I say, quickly shedding my clothes and handing them to Brenn. He tucks them under his arms. “Could be worse, I could be making remarks like

Jesper, and it's not like this is the first time I'll see you naked. Probably not the last."

I gasp. "You have not."

"That dress was sheer, Calamity. I saw the *whole* nipple. I saw so much that I know you have *Lotus* carved on your upper thigh."

"Mira told you?" I narrow my eyes, leaning back an inch.

"No. I saw it with my own two beady eyes. I also know that judging by how bare things are down there, that you've used your talons to shave."

"No, I just don't grow hair down there." I roll my eyes, trying not to look at the edge.

"Well, that's fucking weird."

"Or just genetically altered."

"Touche. Now, please don't make this awkward and say goodbye."

Fine... I won't.

Slowly, I turn, walking toward the edge, Brenn at my side. He stops about three feet from it while I keep going until my toes reach the very edge. Daring a glance down, I can't bring myself to go any farther. Fear claws at my throat, turning it bone dry. The air feels too thin to breathe. "I'm going to need you to push me."

"Oh hell no. I can't—Please don't make me," Brenn whines.

"It's alright, Brenn... but I need you to push me. I can't let Loric die."

Tears bubble over as I turn, taking one last look at Brenn, eyes bloodshot and tears sparkle across his cheeks too.

He takes a hesitant step forward. "Alright."

"In the next life."

"In the next life."

Then he shoves me.

I fall, drowning in the fear that suffocates me. The scream that leaves my mouth is blood curdling as I plummet, then my teeth lengthen and talons push through my fingers and the hair dancing around me in the air becomes white. My skin begins to distort forming into scales and bones crack loud, splintering. I can see the barrier below, growing closer and closer and my body stops moving on my command as Hyde takes control.

Dark as midnight wings flare out on either side of us and we soar feet above the boundary. They flap once, then again, and our body bunches before seemingly kicking off the air and spiraling up and over the edge of the moon. Over Lythanar.

We did it!

Brenn shouts and jumps, becoming so small as we fly up and then Hyde dives down back toward him, slicing through the air like it's nothing. His eyes grow wide as he stumbles, then turns and starts to run, one side dropping heavily with every step.

I barely hear him scream before we snatch him up in our mouth, and it's not until he squirms around on our tongue that I know he's alive. Together we soar through the clouds, shredding them with their wings as they beat the air, heading toward the crystal castle. A crowd has already gathered, some sort of contraption is rigged with a harness large enough to fit a dragon. The guards move three little blips, all strung together. Loric, Mira, and Jepser. They drop down to the ground next to the contraption.

As we circle overhead, my guts spins until my nerves fray. Anger until I've ever felt drips into my veins and Hyde beats her wings a little faster... *We aren't going to make it.*

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CHAPTER 39

Leric

We're shoved to our feet, the stone slab biting into my knees. Mira fights, and then all of our collars zap, making our spines bow as white hot pain sears through our necks. The collars are similar to what the solarians wear, what their king uses to control his people, laden with gemstones that keep us from using their magic—our gifts.

Breathing hard, I survey the crowd, looking for dark hair, for golden eyes. For Brenn. Yet, I don't see them. Instead I come face to face with a silent crowd. The dragon shifters of the kingdom have gathered, but no one cheers for this execution. Not when it's the king's son. Not for the bastard son of the Lord of Lythanar. Not even for Mira.

It's somber. Eerie. It almost makes it worse. Lightning zaps as they test what our kingdom calls the Vetrias. It channels electricity into a rod of lightning that will zap at the very center, where one of us will be chained down. It forces the shift if the criminal isn't willing. It rips their dragon out, piece by piece if it has to, just so their wings could be cut off. Then the bottom will open up and the criminal will be dropped to their death into the ocean below.

I've seen it countless times. It's been our way of punishment for the worst of crimes for years.

King Everand shouts, despite the unnerving quiet, listing out names and crimes as he stands before his throne. His dark robes stand out against the shards of crystals that surround his throne, matching the crown on his head.

He's barely spoken to me. The only time he came down to the dungeon was to see for himself that his traitor son was still alive and to rip Mira's ring from her neck.

How dare he offer to mate Calamity... My mark is still on her fucking neck and he offers something like that... If it weren't for the chains around my wrists, I'd strap him down to the Vetrias myself. Shifters don't touch others' mates. Regardless of species, it's a crime punishable by death. He should've known that until that mark fades, he had no right. Unfinished bond or not.

My father finishes his manifesto, telling the crowd how I'm responsible for my sister's death, that we nearly broke the treaty between the rebels in the outer realm and Solaria, by being in the Realm of Monsters. That we're traitors of the crown. That the punishment for these crimes is death.

Guards yank me up from the ground, dragging me faster than my feet can move as they shove me onto the Vetrias. I barely get to my hands and knees before they're ripped out from under me, attached to the four posts that arch into a point above me.

"We will not cooperate. They will not toss us through that hatch." My dragon slithers under my skin as he grits out the words. For once, we're on the same page.

A metal dome dangles from that point, and I don't get a warning before a blast of lightning shoots through it, pinning me to the ground. The sheer force could crack my teeth. My heart doesn't beat, my lungs inhale air, and my spine contorts in ways I didn't know were possible. My dragon screams inside my head so loud my ears bleed. Crimson spills from my nose and mouth, dripping onto the ground as the power is cut.

I collapse, gasping for air, my dragon silent. My teeth bared for everyone to see, talons gutting from my fingers as I look

up at my father, seated on his throne. The perfect image of royalty as he smiles at me.

Bastard.

I push up to sit on my legs. “You will not take my wings... If you want to kill me, *you’ll* have to do it. You’ll have to see my face, not watch my body plummet to the ground below.” My throat is so dry, there’s not enough spit in my mouth to wet it. Only blood.

“Again,” my father says, and the guards start to move.

I drop my head back, closing my eyes. Waiting.

The air whistles, growing louder by the second. My heart is so erratic, I fear I’m imagining it. I can barely force my eyelid to open, the Vetrias seeming to spin as I fight the urge to pass out.

Then I catch a black blob in the sky, bursting through the clouds. As it nears, wings lash out on either side of it, sending the wind blowing so fast that people fly. If it weren’t for the chains, I would’ve too.

It lands to my right, spitting something out of its mouth right before its claws hit the ground. That something rolls off the fabric awnings, tumbling to a stop on the ground. It lurches up, blond-haired and violet-eyed. *Brenn*.

He takes off toward Mira and Jesper as Calamity’s dragon tucks its wings, its claws scraping over the stone as it crawls over the ground toward me. It’s huge... Our dragons are supposed to be a manifestation of ourselves. Their kinds, ice, ground, fire, lightning, are all determined by heritage, but the size and the display of their scales are a direct representation of the person that houses them. And Calamity’s dragon is no exception to the rule. Sharp, taloned wings, blade-like teeth, scales that are practically all spikes in themselves. She’s ferocious, and fuck it makes me love her more.

She crawls closer, and the crowd flees, and screams fill the air. Then she opens her mouth, flashing long pointed teeth, light building in her throat. I glue myself to the ground as hell flame explodes forward.

I barely get a glance at my father, half-shifted like he stands a chance at fighting her. His guards have abandoned him. They have no intentions of fighting a fury. Calamity's flames level him to cinders in seconds. All dragons can withstand fire, but only furies can breathe and walk through hellfire unscathed.

The moment they're gone, I jerk upright, checking over myself. Not a single burn.

I turn toward her, her dark scales flare as smoke spills into the air from beneath them, her golden eyes pierce through the dark haze of shadows that are coiling around her like snakes. The only guard still remaining is frozen in fear, but she snaps her head forward, chomps her teeth around him and chucks the body so far, he flies into the clouds.

The lords scramble from their thrones, having just had a front row seat to the king being fried, but Calamity's head reels back and this time it's not flames, but the darkness she wields that bursts forth and snatches them up. The coils spin around them and before they hit the ground they're dust.

People run screaming. Some stand in horror as they watch Calamity slowly shrink into her human form. Brenn works to free Mira and Jesper, while I'm still chained. Calamity gets to her feet after a moment, her steps sluggish, and two guards come bursting through the castle doors.

She stands up straight, holds up her hand, and dark wisps of smoke coiling around it. "I suggest you start undoing his chains." The guards skid to a stop. Trembling in place as they reach me, unlatching my shackles.

Calamity steps toward where the king sat on his throne. The crystals have become molten, but his crown must've fallen off and rolled to safety. She picks it up, her fingers sliding over the stones.

Her golden eyes meet mine as the guards back away, and I rub at my wrists, too tired to get up. I'm not sure my legs would work. Calamity stops in front of me, her skin covered in dark soot in some places and as she stands proud. I've never seen something so beautiful as the way she looks right now,

her hair still turning back to the dark black locks I've wanted nothing more than to bury my hands into.

I haven't even gotten off my knees, but I bow my head.

"I told your father I wasn't interested in his crown. I have no idea how to run a kingdom, or how to be a dragon. But you... You've been doing it for years on a smaller scale, protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. You deserve this." She lowers my father's crown onto my head, then kneels before me, bowing her head.

I jerk upright, confused, but I can't think of anything else but the fact she's here, before me, in arm's reach. My eyes slide to her throat, breathing a sigh of relief when I see my mark still there.

"All hail the king," Brenn yells, hitting his fist to his chest twice and kneeling. Jesper and Mira join him, then dozens follow as the crowd slowly creeps back in.

I can't move... The crown means nothing to me, and I never expected it to be mine, but all I can do is yank her toward me, crush her to my chest, and kiss her lips like they'll take the pain zinging up and down my spine away.

"I never should have left," I whisper, pulling away just enough to look in her golden eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"But you came back and that's what matters." Her mouth curls into a grin, her eyes so bright with life I'm not sure how I'll ever look away.

I need her to know that she's all I'll ever want in this life, but I can't bring myself to find the right words. I pull her mouth to my throat, lengthen my neck. There's no words for this.

Calamity hesitantly kisses my pulse, leaning back to flick her eyes to mine for just a short moment then her teeth sink into my throat, and euphoria explodes through my body. Lights burst, full of so many colors, and for a second I can't breathe, my body coiled so tight. I melt into her, my eyelids fluttering shut with a groan.

She sits back, releasing me as I pant, desperate for air. My blood drips from her lips as she stares at my throat and I lift a hand, but the skin is smooth, healed already.

Following my gaze, she turns her head and I catch sight of her mark. It's not silken skin, no longer just a scar. It's flecked with gold.

When her eyes meet mine, I can feel her heart soar as she throws herself into my arms, straddling me as she crushes me into a searing kiss. My muscles are too weak to hold us up and I fall back against the stone, knocking the air from my lungs.

We're true mates... Once in a lifetime—a DOZEN lifetimes chance...

"My mate."

As she pulls away, I lift the crown from my head, placing it on her own. "Look at me, Chaos."

Calamity peers down into my eyes. "This is yours. You might not know how to lead, but I'll be there with you every step of the way, as Lord Everand of Frost Forge, as your *mate*, and your king consort. I only have one condition."

She's breathless, and I can feel her desire coursing through the bond already. "What's that?"

I smirk, tipping her chin and running my thumb along her lower lip. "I'll spend every moment of my life putting you on a pedestal, fighting to put that crown on your head. You'll bow for no one, because there is no one in this realm more powerful than you, but when you're on your knees and I'm between these lips, you'll look at me like you like I'm fucking king."

Her golden eyes flash bright, her dragon peering through to look at mine. "Deal."

EPILOGUE

Calamity

Towel wrapped around my body, I enter the bedroom. It's the same one Brenn and I have stayed in the last few weeks, but it felt right. For now.

Though the sight that meets me isn't even close to what I expected. Loric rests in the chair, tucked into the corner of the room. His skin clean, hair wet. There's a book in his hand but I don't think he's reading it.

Next to him, bathing in the light along the windowsill, is Meg. The kitten is stretched out along the thin board, her soft striped fur gleaming as her fluffy tail swishes back and forth, but her yellow eyes are locked onto the hand inching closer. She hisses and Loric retracts his hand, his eyes shifting to her for just a moment, then he tries again.

The closer he gets, the more her lips roll back, but it's the effort of trying to pet her that gets me.

"What are you doing to that cat?" I ask, letting the door close.

"Trying to make it like me." His brow furrows, and when Meg hisses again, he drops his hand.

"Why would you do that? You hate that cat. You wanted me to leave it." I come closer, leaning against the wall just to the

side of the window and scratching Meg's chin. She purrs loudly and I smile.

Loric shuts the book with a slam, grips my towel and pulls me closer, positioning me between his legs. Those sterling eyes meet mine, as he rests his chin against my sternum. "You love that cat. That's enough for me. Even if it might eat someone someday."

"You don't have to do that..."

"Do what?" he asks, his fingers wrapping in my wet hair.

"Make friends with her for me. It's okay."

"I'd never..." His brow flexes, a smirk curving those full lips.

My eyes drop to the bite mark on his neck, tracing my fingers over it, watching him shiver at the touch. I'll never get used to the way it shines, the gold and what it signifies.

"Look at me," he whispers.

I do.

"I'd do anything for you. Got it? You didn't want your father to lose his memories? I found a loophole. You needed me to take you to another realm? Well, here you are. You wanted to keep that damn cat?" He gestures to Meg. "Can we please not pretend that if you told me to jump off the moons, I wouldn't use both feet?"

"Is that your way of telling me you love me?" I lick my lips, holding his stare.

"That's me telling you that you're my everything. That I'll always do my best to make you happy, because I love you."

I arch a brow. "So, you'd jump with no wings?"

"No wings," he whispers, then plants a chaste kiss on my chest.

"You know... I literally jumped off the edge of the moon for you..."

The smirk that pulls his lips could stop my heart. “Oh yeah? Is that how you shifted.”

I nod. “Both feet. No wings... because I love you, too. More than you’ll ever know. More than even I can comprehend.”

He pulls me into his lap, hand gripped behind my head as he crushes his lips to mine.

“You can’t say things to me like that.” He groans against my lips.

“I will always say things like that.” I smile against him, and he kisses me again.

“I hope you’re right, Queen Everand.”

The End.

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ABOUT AUTHOR



Best known for her #1 Amazon bestselling series, *Dark Halos*, Amanda Aggie writes steamy dark fantasy romance. She’s a wife, a mother to two beautiful tiny humans, and has a stellar caffeine addiction. More importantly, she writes choking-hazard fantasy romance that will have you laughing out loud, swooning, and biting your nails all in one sitting.

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Check out the link below for extra goodies and places you can find Amanda!

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