

THIS  
WICKED  
FATE

AMANDA AGGIE



*A Realm of Monsters Standalone*

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About Author

For all the girls who feel like they haven't quite found their place yet.  
This one is for you!



## 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:

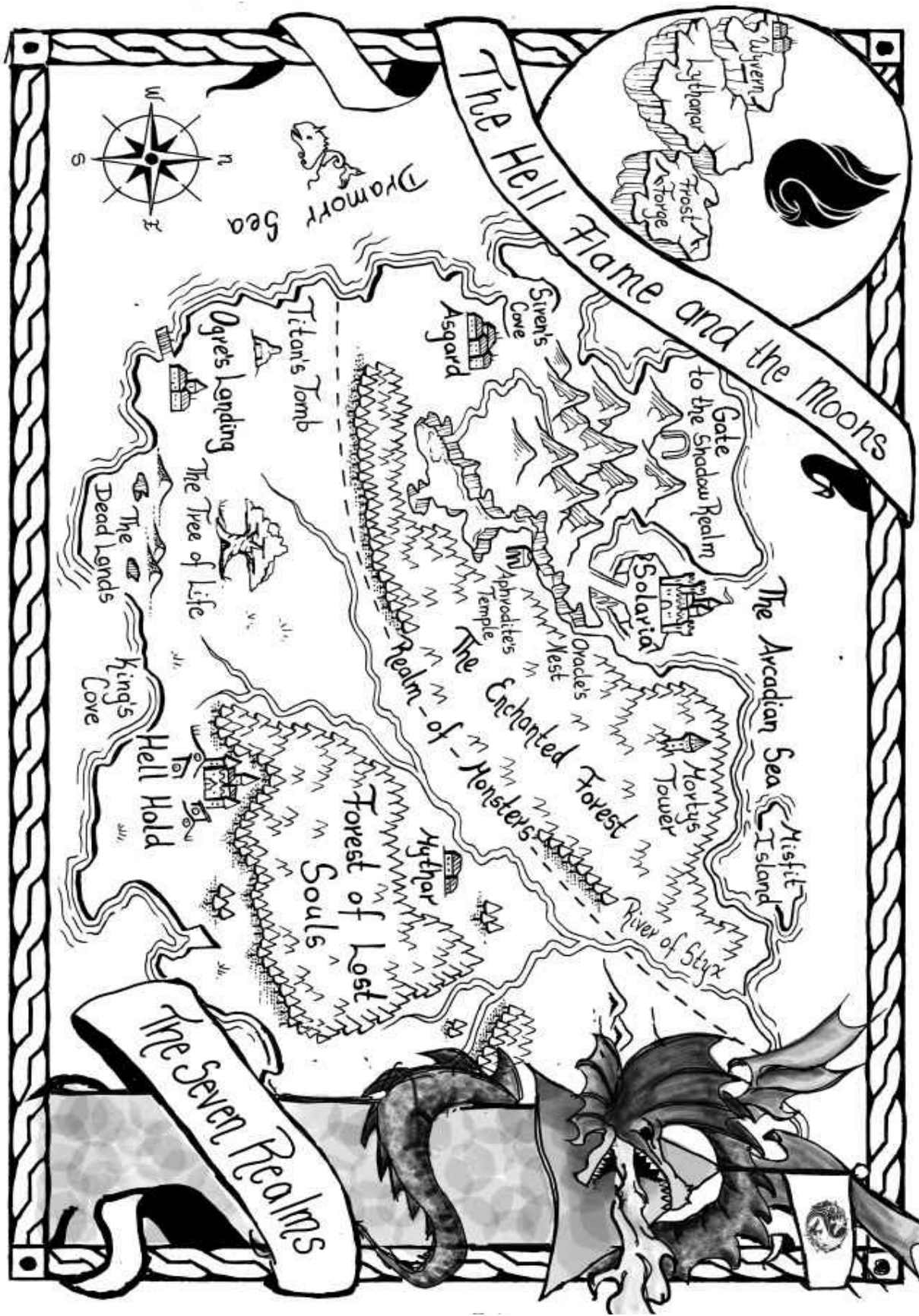
Gore, murder, blood, skeletons, dead bodies, other disturbing images that might not be suitable for all audiences. There are prisoners of war, cages, captivity, dismemberment, amputations via animal, animal attacks, graphic sex scenes, choking, monsters, and violence.

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 a only a star value. <3

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. ;)



## Eva

I used to be a sweet, obedient princess. One who knew her place among the wolves. I did as I was told, crossed every ‘T’, and blindly dotted every ‘I’. How naive of me to believe if I played my part, I’d turn twenty-three and not be forced to marry a monster.

The red ribbon tied around my neck threatens to close my airway like a noose, placed there by my father, the King of Solaria. It’s a symbol, displaying my current status. *A gift* to my future master—I mean, dearly beloved husband, whom I pray won’t end my life upon the completion of our nuptials.

If only I could be so lucky...

Tonight is the gauntlet, and by the time the hell flame shines tomorrow, I’ll be some stranger’s bride. The mere thought twists my gut, wringing it mercilessly until acid scorches its way up the length of my throat. Even as my stomach pinwheels, I can’t discern if the bitter taste in my mouth stems from the anxious flutter of nerves or the betrayal that weighs heavily upon my heart.

My father made me a promise. He swore I'd never face the same unfortunate end that befell my sisters before me, and like a fool, *I believed him*. The echoes of his lies reverberate in my mind, proclaiming me as his favorite, his *precious jewel*, that he could never subject me to such a fate. Now, the truth has never been more clear. It was nothing more than a well-rehearsed script. A twisted narrative spun for the ears of his children. A tale of hope to make us behave.

He commanded me to conceal his affections, only to cast me away once the gauntlet was announced, like a discarded doll. I was isolated from my sisters, trapped inside this stuffy room. There was no time to warn them of our father's false tongue. They too will one day fall victim to his ruse.

The king stands before me, his animalistic eyes fixated upon my vulnerable throat. My lips curl into a snarl as his fingers delve between the ribbon and my flesh, ensuring it's snug for the thousandth time. He's had his mages alter it, infusing the satin strip with magic to detain my beastly alter ego.

Trembling, his hands drop aimlessly to his sides. Fear seems to seep into his very being, just as magic courses through mine, smothering out every hint of my other half. A flicker of delight ignites within me. Even in my current predicament, I possess the power to make the King of Monsters tremble, a fact that fills me with an odd sense of pride.

He should be scared. If not for the enchantment that confines my beast, I would gladly make this castle bleed red before offering myself to some monster. I'm not a toy my father can share. I'm a person, but in this kingdom, I might as well be dirt.

Unfortunately, he anticipated my fractured loyalty. With this accursed spellbound ribbon around my neck, I am unable to shift. My beast is

imprisoned within the confines of my human guise, and considering my father houses the power to topple realms, I find myself entirely at his mercy. A sentiment he's yet to exhibit.

Do I blame him? *No...* It would hardly be fitting for his prized daughter to transform into a grueling beast in the great hall. Such a spectacle would undoubtedly scare away the pledges, and to him, that would be an unforgivable travesty.

"Prepare your belongings. We'll be needing this room once you're in your new home," my father says, and I scoff out loud.

If by home, he means coffin in the family crypt... *Sure*, I'll get right on that.

My father is ready to suck up to Cera, the next shiny new daughter to partake in this horrid ritual. His next *disappointment*, lacking for what's between their legs—or rather, *isn't*. My blue eyes flash bright in the mirror's reflection. It's the only hint that my monster still lurks within me, prowling just below the surface, yet entirely out of reach.

It's as if I mean nothing to him. Though, I suppose he said it best this morning. His words still cling to the air like a foul stench. *'I need an heir. Not a broodmare, Eva. No daughter of mine will ever wear my crown, but your child, or perhaps your husband, will.'* He said it so coldly, as if there's never been any semblance of attachment between us. The raw meaning behind it made my spine shiver while he flayed open emotional wounds I fear will never heal.

"Chin up," he coos, lifting my face to his with a gnarled finger. His touch is graceful, poised, and practiced. If I were oblivious to the game he's playing, I'd almost consider it loving.

How many times has he put on this act? At least a dozen to my memory,

but surely there were more daughters to marry off before that. The man is immortal, making his reign an endless nightmare.

“You look like I’ve driven the stake in your coffin.” His tone is warm, and I have to force down the tears welling up. I refuse to cry for him. I refuse to show weakness to a predator, for I won’t be his prey.

“You have.” My voice is dry, and my throat is grated like sandpaper. “All that’s left of my older sisters lies in boxes inside the family crypt. Am I to expect I won’t be next?”

The low chuckle spilling into the air around me has a lump swelling in my throat. “Fear not. I’ve already picked my champion. I’m sure he’ll win with my advantage. You, dear daughter, will live to see tomorrow.”

The more frightening question burning a hole in my mind is, *will I want to?*

Only one of the five sisters married before me lived past their wedding night. The odds aren’t exactly in my favor. Even if some ‘gentleman’ does have the king’s advantage, he’ll have to be strong enough to survive the gauntlet, and no one with a gentle hand survives. *Ever*. Only monsters.

“You’re the strongest I’ve brought into this world, darling girl. If anyone will come out of this alive, it’s you.” He lets his eyes rake over me one last time before smoothing the front of his tunic. “Well... Best not to drag out the inevitable, yes? Can I get you anything?”

“Cyanide. A sharpened blade. An open window in the tallest tower. Any of those will do.” The king growls low in his throat, his detest palpable in the vibrations of the air. Yet, for the first time in my life, I can’t care less about what he thinks. He’s about to hand me over to the angel of death. Only instead of putting me out of my misery humanely, he’s going to subject me to

an end so gruesome and grotesque my ghost will get to watch as my body is devoured by monsters.

*No...* A merciful king would let me jump.

“We all must play our parts... And yours is to look pretty on a throne, to smile and wave, and serve your kingdom.”

I shake my head from side to side. There has to be more for me. I refuse to believe that all I’m good for is birthing babies, and what I can do on my knees. I’ve studied him along with every aspect of running this kingdom. I’ve watched and taken notes. I’ve been his star pupil.

“There’s another way,” I say, stepping closer. “Name *me* as your heir, just like you promised. I’m capable of it.” My voice is barely more than a whisper, but it catches him all the same.

“Stupid girl...” My father casts a glance over his shoulder, pausing in the doorway. His thin pupils pin me in place, trapping the air in my lungs. They steal away any further protest I have planned. “The creatures of our realm would rip you apart and feast on your bones. I suggest you put to bed those *wicked* ambitions of yours.” He runs his fingers along the wooden frame of the door to my room. “You look glorious in red, though. It’s no wonder why there are more suitors this year than the last three combined.”

Without another word, he leaves me alone with my thoughts. My father’s footsteps echo down the hall until they come to a stop. Even with my beast suppressed, some things remain of her presence. She can’t talk to me like she used to, but I can feel her, and her senses still enhance my own.

“You may enter,” he says to someone, his voice barely above a whisper, “but if you know what’s good for you, you won’t touch the ribbon around her neck. I’ll revoke my blessing, assuming you live to tell the tale.” His voice is clear as day, as if he has spoken the words right in front of me.



Another set of footsteps creep closer, stopping near my bedroom door as the king's fade. My guest doesn't jump to open it immediately. They can't even bring themselves to knock before a handful of minutes slip by. Finally, knuckles rap against the wood, and I will myself to open it, revealing a familiar face on the other side.

"Ash," I breathe as he slips inside the room, his dark eyes sweeping the space as if he's questioning whether we're truly alone. "What are you doing here?" I barely get the sentence out before my father's words wash over me and my blood runs cold. He threatened to revoke his blessing... My father bet on *him* to win the gauntlet.

His dark stare holds mine, silently confirming my worst fear. "I asked the king for his advantage this morning."

"My father will understand if you change your mind. I'll make sure of it. My life might end tomorrow, but yours doesn't have to."

I reach for the handle, desperate to catch up to the king before Ash's admission to the gauntlet is permanent. Once his pledge has been announced to the public, there's no going back. He'll be deemed a coward, and for someone like him, it's a fate worse than death.

A strong hand latches around my arm, the grip unforgiving. "It's done, Eva. I'm entering."

Tears sting my eyes as Ash removes his hand, the imprint of his fingers etched upon my flesh. I'm sure it will bruise... My skin will be stained purple when he lets go.

Even with the king's advantage, he's not strong enough to win. In fact, he's so far from it that my beast won't even allow him to kiss me. Not without threatening to take control and end his life.

"Please, reconsider." My plea falls on deaf ears as he shakes his head, his

lips pressing into a fine line.

“I might not be what you want in a husband, but I’ve loved you since we were children. I won’t stand by and watch you become some monster’s pet.” He tilts my chin, lifting my gaze, his eyes searching mine.

Don’t get me wrong, Ash is everything I should want. He’s been nothing but kind to me, beyond his obsessive nature to want what he can’t have. Yet, when I look at him, my heart doesn’t race. My knees don’t grow weak. I don’t get butterflies swirling in the pit of my stomach. The beast within me won’t allow it.

My other half repulses his affection with every fiber of her being. It’s not that she despises him personally. It’s that she doesn’t believe he’s capable of protecting us. Still, if the fates lend us their grace and help him win, I’ll find a way to reciprocate his feelings. Somehow, someday, I will, because a sparkless marriage is a much better future than what I’m facing.

Air hitches in my lungs the moment his thumb swipes against my cheek, and the simple gesture has my beast thrashing against the magic containing her, throwing what I can only describe as a hissy fit. She doesn’t need to say the words to get her point across. The way my skin pricks as if it’s been set ablaze is proof enough of her disapproval.

“You know she’ll never accept you. She’s made it clear—“

Ash’s jaw clenches, grinding his teeth as he roots me in place with a lethal glare. “I’m not doing this for her,” his words drip like venom, poisoning the air.

*Her...* He can hate my creature all he wants. At the end of the day, she’s a part of me and there’s nothing he or I could do to change that.

“I’m still an alpha. She’ll submit,” he asserts, lowering his eyes to peer at the ribbon around my neck, and releasing a heavy breath. “Your father is

going to help me make sure of that. She just needs to know there's something between us. If I try to make her see that while she can't do anything about it, maybe she'll give me a chance. Maybe she'll do it for you."

Before I can even react, Ash leans in. His hand clamps around the back of my neck, dragging my face to his. Lips crash as my stomach whirls with a flood of sensations. Every ounce of my soul seems to recoil, but I can't pull away. He holds me to him, devouring my senses, and demanding love that's not just mine to give. When he finally breaks away, my lungs are starved for air, and the faint scent of whiskey fills the space between us.

He's never kissed me before. There have been attempts in the past, a fleeting touch or two, but we've never ventured this far. We never got a chance to.

"Well?" His question stings more than it should. Honesty is supposed to be easy, but this is far from it. There's only one answer he wants to hear, and I can't give it to him. Instead, I do my best to hide the grimace pulling at my features. "Nothing?" His brows furrow as he scrutinizes me. "Surely, you must have felt something... Right?"

As if a single kiss could change our doomed fate... I refuse to feed him false hope, and if shattering his heart means he'll revoke his pledge to enter the gauntlet, then I will do what must be done.

"I'm sorry, but no..."

"Perhaps you require more," he murmurs, running a heavy hand along the sharp contours of his jaw before allowing it to fall limply to his side.

"More of what?" I barely get the chance to spit out the question before he tries again. Bile climbs up my throat as my other half strains against the magic suppressing her.

If it weren't for the iron grip my beast has on my heart, I could see myself

with him. All I've ever wanted is to be loved unconditionally. Now more than ever, but it's awfully hard to swoon at his affections when my creature makes it too torturous to enjoy it.

Ash's grip tightens around my neck as he presses me firmly against the wall.

"What are you doing?" I manage to grit through clenched teeth, feeling the ribbon loosen slightly as two of his fingers slip beneath the enchanted fabric. If the magic binding my beast breaks, he's as good as dead. She's threatened to kill him for far less.

He growls, low in his throat, lacing power into it, demanding compliance. My heart flutters in my chest, and for the first time, my other half settles. There is a fleeting moment that stretches on, as if time itself has come to a standstill. The weight of the impending doom that hangs over my head seems to disappear and it's in this instant, I feel a semblance of peace. It's just him and I, and the silence. There is no looming war with Hell Hold, no gauntlet or wedding bells. I am overwhelmed with the desire to savor it, to bask in this moment just a little longer.

His breath fans my cheeks. "What I'm about to ask is a lot, but if I die in the gauntlet, chances are you will meet the same fate at the hands of whoever wins. So, please... Just allow me the opportunity to persuade her. Allow me to try to save you."

He wants me to accept him as our mate... It's risky, but then again, I only have two choices.

What he's asking of me is forbidden, and it might be my only chance at a happily ever after. If I allow him to claim me while she remains powerless to resist, she will be forced to submit. However, if I proceed with this plan and Ash meets his demise in the gauntlet, I will be sealing my own coffin as well.

My father will execute me to save face with his kingdom. He won't have a choice. He promises them virgins, as if the suitors who pledged will have died for nothing, and those left standing will be furious enough to attempt anarchy unless my head rolls. But Ash is right... If I don't and I let this wretched ritual continue as planned, I could endure far worse than a quick death.

My teeth clamp down on my trembling lower lip as I weigh the gravity of my decision. The fragile peace we found is shattered and my beast surges within me, and the sheer intensity of it steals the very breath from my lungs.

"Okay," I whisper, my voice barely audible. His lips meld with mine, consuming me, and I desperately cling to the distraction. Anything to take my mind off her. My beast fights against the magic containing her. My skin prickles and stings, as if her mental talons flay me down to the bone. My head spins, but I stay the course.

The fabric of my dress shuffles as he gathers it at my hip with one hand, and with the other, his fingers adjust around my throat. He's gentler than before, sensing my climbing unease. It's unfamiliar territory for me. My father ensures his daughters maintain their chastity until their twenty-third birthday with magic, but those wards are gone now. And for shifters to form a proper mate bond, *this* has to happen.

The rings on his fingers catch on to the ribbon, and my eyes flare open. I push against Ash's chest, but his sudden backward movement is all it takes. The bow slips, and the magic trapping my beast dissolves into the air, leaving a sweet taste in its wake. My heart stops, and the color drains from my face.

She's free.

"Run," I manage to squeeze out. My beast stirs within, lurching to the surface with such an overwhelming force that it plunges my world into

darkness.

## Eva

When the darkness fades, a pinpoint of light slowly grows wider, and my vision holds a blue hue. It always does right after I shift. I blink until the crimson splatter on the walls sharpens and the putrid scent of death assaults my senses. My torn and tattered clothing barely hangs on to my body. My gaze drifts downward, and my heart sinks as I take in the gnarled bones strewn at my feet.

“What did you do?” I demand, my voice breaking as I take in the carnage. The thumping of my heart fills my ears, drowning out the world around me as tears cloud my eyes. I should’ve stopped him. I should’ve stuck with breaking his heart.

“I did what needed to be done. He was going to die anyway,” her voice echoes inside my head, as if the thought came from me. She falls silent for a moment while I stare at what’s left of my only hope of a happily ever after. “Now we have a chance to survive, and should some wicked beast take our hand tomorrow, we’ll kill them, too.”

The bones clink together in a macabre symphony as I shuffle forward, my feet dragging along the floor. Trembling hands cling to my bare chest,

attempting to steady my racing heart. Despite my fingers clenched into fists, they feel weak, lacking the strength to truly grip onto anything. The taste of copper floods my mouth, a metallic reminder of the violence that has unfolded. I swallow hard, forcing down the lump that threatens to choke me, even as the faint sound of approaching footsteps reaches my ears. *Someone is coming.*

My chest tightens, constricting my lungs until they scream for air. Each breath is shallow, insufficient, and panic courses through my veins. I stumble towards the vanity, snatching the robe from the chair and wrapping it tightly around my shivering body. I wait for my world to crumble, knowing damn well who those sinister footsteps belong to... and he's not going to be happy. As if on cue, the doorknob turns.

There is no knock, no warning of the king's impending entrance. He simply pushes open the door, his progress halting halfway as his eyes fall upon the crimson puddle on the floor. With measured steps, his gaze travels up my form, absorbing the nightmare that has become my reality.

"What an unfortunate turn of events." His voice is dark and deadly. The very air seems to vibrate with power, emanating from every pore of his being, and causing my head to spin in its presence.

"I didn't mean—I tried—" The tears sting my eyes. It's pointless to fight them. They'll spill over anyway. This is too much. Today has been too much.

His teeth clench as he grinds his jaw. "Well, luckily for you, I've waited to announce my advantage. Had I not, you would've made me look like a fool. I've never been wrong. Not once, in the thirty-two gauntlets, have I bet on a losing pledge." He scoffs, threading his fingers into his shoulder-length blonde hair. "I hope you're happy..."

I hang my head, closing my eyes in a feeble attempt to shield myself from



the horrors my beast has unleashed. My heart is already crumbling to pieces, and my resolve is in shreds. There's only so much one person can take, and in one day, I've been shoved past that line so far, it's not even in sight anymore.

A sigh escapes my father's lips, "I'll send in a maid or two to help clean, but please, for the love of all that is sacred, please don't eat them. They're in short supply these days."

*"Try to put that ribbon back on, and you'll be in short supply."* My beast seethes inside my head. I can sense her presence more than ever.

I don't speak, but I don't have to. Her thoughts must be written all over my face.

"Don't you even think about it," my father says, taking a step forward. "You, just like every other one of my creations, cannot harm me. It's written into your very essence, and should you try, your heart will stop. Even to think such patricidal thoughts is to hover a line you can't uncross."

"It wasn't me who had such thoughts."

"Then control your beast. I've spent years teaching you to do just that. Clearly, it wasn't enough." He scrubs a hand over his beard. "Have you learned nothing?"

"No, I—."

He straightens his shoulders and dismisses my comment with a wave of his hand. "The maids will be in soon."



“P rincess.” I barely make out the faint sound of the maid’s voice through the numbness. Is it possible to be so full of emotion that you feel nothing? “Princess,” she says a little louder.

Twisting my neck, I look at the young woman. I've seen her dozens of times, yet I know nothing about her. How is it that I've managed to live in this castle for twenty-three years and I've never wondered about the staff? I suppose that's probably because my sisters and I usually help each other get ready. There's only been a handful of times that a maid has helped me inside my chambers. Mostly, I see them in passing or moving around the dining hall.

"What is your name?" I inquire, raising my arm—the very action she has been trying to coax me into for the past ten minutes—allowing her to delicately cleanse my skin with a warm cloth.

"Eretrae," she responds, her eyes briefly meeting mine before flicking away.

"Hmm." I'm not sure where I was going with that, but I should probably know the name of the person scrubbing me from head to toe, right? That seems like a requirement. "I'm sorry that you've had to come here."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all." She's so cheery it hurts, like she's here to taste test pastries rather than dispose of my dead best friend or wash his blood from my body. "I've become quite accustomed to the... *luxuries* of working for the royal family. This is nothing. You should see how many messes we've had to clean for the king. He's taken a liking to the maids as of late."

*I'm sure he has.*

Like the woman who brought me into this world—may she rest in peace—women all around Solaria volunteer to carry his children. Why? Because the king has decreed that any woman who can give him a male heir will become queen. A deal fit enough to sweeten the pot, especially when most of his surrogates die.

However, it will never come to pass, for the king is cursed. It doesn't stop

him from buttering up the maids with lies. Every woman in this land would kill for a seat by my father's side and he uses such knowledge as bait, so he can carry out his darkest desires. And he calls me the monster.

Eretrae's gaze lingers behind me, staring into my bedroom. Ash's remains might no longer be scattered there, but I know for a fact the floor is stained. A permanent reminder of my deadly mistake. One I'll never make again.

"Are you excited about your reception? I had to take some things to the great hall earlier. It's beautiful... And the suitors?" She fans herself, spinning to grab a towel off the table behind her. "There are some mighty fine men, and to think they're all here to try to win your hand. You must feel so *wanted*."

Only my eyes turn toward her. She can't be much younger than me, but surely everyone in Solaria knows what happens to the King Ares' daughters. Rising from the bath, I take the towel from her hand and swiftly wrap it around myself.

"I don't need any further assistance. Thank you. You can see yourself out," I declare, not bothering to wait for a response. I stride into the bedroom and begin pulling my belongings from the wardrobe, tossing them haphazardly onto the bed. Amongst the heap of garments, my gaze lingers on the dress my older sister wore for her reception night last year—a dress that my father had someone bring to this room after banishing me from the rest of the castle. One day, it will be passed down to the next unfortunate soul destined to partake in this wretched ritual.

"The king requested that I prepare you for the reception dinner, Princess. I apologize if I've offended you." Eretrae doesn't miss a beat, doing her best to lay the dresses sitting in a heap flat on my bed, and adjusting the hangers.

"Offended? You must be new here," I retort, my eyes narrowing at her.

“Let me enlighten you. The gauntlet isn’t some glamorous fairy tale where the prince wins the hand of the princess. It’s *gory*. It’s *vulgar* and *inhumane*. It shouldn’t exist. So, no. I’m not looking forward to it. At this point, the only thing I’m doing is praying I live to see the hell flame rise.”

Eretrae’s lips part, frozen in mid-inhale. “I... I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“Now you do,” I say, tossing the dress onto the bed. One of its sheer sleeves hangs over the edge, while its voluminous skirts form a pile.

Eretrae wrings her fingers, glancing back and forth between me and the door. “The castle mage will be here soon. We should get you dressed.”

“*They will not bind me again,*” my creature says, and as much as I admire her fire, there’s no other option.

“There’s nothing we can do about it. The sooner you understand that, the better.”

“*Of course there is. We fight, and we don’t stop until we take our last breath or we’re free from our father’s clutches. Where is your fire, human? Why choose to sizzle out now?*”

I ignore the odd looks from the maid, but she quickly catches on to the fact that I’m not talking to her. Instead, she decides to take advantage of the distraction by lifting my arms and sliding a dress over my head. The sheer fabric spills down my body, pooling on the floor. Dark twisted lines stretch up the dress like tree branches. It’s both beautiful and haunting at the same time.

“And how do you suppose we do that?” I ask my beast, knowing this is it. We’re going to be given away and there’s no hope in stopping it.

“*We run. We disappear into The Enchanted Forest and go from there.*”

“It’s not like we can just walk through the castle, and last I checked, we were stories up inside a tower. Do you expect me to jump?”

*“If you must.”*

Eretrae begins pulling at the laces to the embedded corset. I grunt when she cinches it tight, bending my ribs into the shape it provides.

*“If that witch binds me, you’re helpless. Would you rather take your chance with the window, or at what will come? It’s not like we can enter the gauntlet.”*

My body stills, and I tilt my head. “What if we could?”

A soft knock draws my attention and the door cracks, revealing a robed woman with jet-black hair and striking purple eyes. Her cheekbones are high, her expression full of power, and her dewy, dark complexion would have any woman jealous. Behind her is my father. His hands clasp together with an audible smack, as he strolls into the room.

*“Whatever you’re cooking up, I’m in,”* my creature replies as he comes closer.

“Eva, love, it’s time to replace the ribbon. Let’s not make a deal out of it.”

“I’ll wear the ribbon, but not the enchantment. It’s no longer necessary. I’ll go willingly and play by your rules.”

He arches a thick brow. “And why would I risk that? You just killed a man a couple of hours ago.” The mage takes another step, lifting her hands, ready to cast at the king’s signal.

“Because if you attempt to suppress her again, I’ll jump out that window. What good is a daughter who’s dead? They can’t give you an heir. They can’t be your prize. I’ll be nothing more than a body filling a coffin.”

He flexes his eyebrows. “Unless you’re immortal.”

I scoff, glancing off at the dress on my bed. “Are you willing to take that risk? The only way to find out is for me to die.”

His yellow eyes narrow as he studies me. “Fine, but the mage will come

with us to the great hall, and should you act out of line, she'll place the enchantment."

Bowing my head, I let him hand me the ribbon. "In that case, I'm ready."

## Eva

I find myself in the great hall, the biggest room in the Solarian castle. My father is seated on his throne, and I sit in a much smaller one at his side—the queen’s chair. My two younger sisters are behind us, but even with them feet away, I’m not allowed to speak to them.

A veil has been placed over my head. The lace fabric obscures my face from view but gives me the privilege to see the room and the people. The pledges kneel before the king and recite the creed to enter the gauntlet. Each one asks for my father’s advantage, but none so far have received it.

The room is adorned with crystal chandeliers, and intricate tapestries hang from the stone walls. Golden embellishments scatter the light, and an orchestra plays softly on the far side of the great hall. Men from all over the realm have traveled to our castle, vying for my hand in marriage, and almost all of them stare at me.

Some gaze with curiosity. Others, I’m not sure how to take. Hunger? Infatuation? Hatred? Unease creeps over me, and my hands sweat. I wrap my fingers around the armrests of the throne until my knuckles turn white from the strain.

In the distance, men and women dance and mingle, twirling around and around, without a care in the world. What it must feel like to be so free... I'll never know. I was born into one of the most powerful families in existence, yet I live in an invisible cage.

My father stands, the last suitor having finished his spiel. Clanking his sword tip against the stone floor, the others in the room follow suit, replicating the pattern with their fists against tables or anything else they could use to make noise. When he stops, the orchestra has ceased playing, and the room falls deathly silent.

"Welcome," my father begins. "Tonight, we feast, and by dusk, the trial will begin. As always, the last man standing will be rewarded with my daughter's hand in marriage," he gestures to me, "and in the event of my death, will have a claim to the throne of Solaria."

He steps down from the raised floor where the thrones are placed, strolling forward through the masses that have returned to the plethora of tables on either side of the dance floor. "I've received the final pledge, and my daughter, like those who came before her, will decide when the gauntlet will begin. I've thought long and hard about whom to give my advantage to—"

"Here goes nothing," I whisper to myself. My creature stirs, still in the dark about my plan to escape our fate, and I grab the sword my father leaned against his throne when he decided to venture into the crowd. "You haven't received the final pledge," I say, the nerves creeping up my throat, attempting to suffocate me.

The king stills, remaining motionless for a moment before spinning on his heels. His eyes have turned into predatory slits, the hammer of his jaw ticking away. "Excuse me?"

"You haven't received the final pledge," I repeat, stepping down off the



raised platform and lifting my veil. I drag the tip of the sword behind me, stopping a few feet away from him. This is it. No going back now.

Bending a knee, I bow my head, resting it against the sword hilt. “I, Eva Midicious, Princess of Solaria and daughter of King Ares, swear my fealty.” Holding my hand up, palm toward the king, I continue. “I bleed for my kingdom.” Clutching my hand around the blade of the sword, I let it slice my flesh until my blood drips down the mirror-like steel. “And should the fates deem me worthy, I will rise as your heir.”

Lifting my head, I stand, clenching my hand into a fist so my blood bleeds and drips onto the floor, joining the rest of the suitors’ pledges from the day.

“You want to enter?” His voice holds a humorous tone, and his eyebrows disappear beneath the edge of his crown before scanning the crowd.

“I plan to fight for my own hand.”

“And should you die? Who would the winner marry?”

“I won’t, because I’ll have the king’s advantage.”

“My advantage?” He all but laughs out loud. When I don’t join him in his comic relief, his face falls. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“*Did we stutter? I think not.*” He can’t hear my creature, but sometimes I wish he could. She’s much braver than I am.

His head falls back, and he stares up at the chandelier above us, shaking his head. “Stupid girl... Fine, I’ll bite and let you pledge, but there’s no way I’m giving you my advantage. You have enough of one already.” Stepping forward, he stops right before me, cups my chin, and violently jerks me to my feet. Our guests stand in shock. A sea of wide eyes and gaping mouths watch our every move.

“I understand, and I accept your terms,” I say, willing my backbone to hold when all I want to do is crumple. The room stays silent as the king’s lips twist

into a mischievous grin full of blade-sharp teeth and cunning. A smile that has a cool bead of sweat trickling down my spine.

“Fantastic. Let’s see if you can play the game, dear daughter. Show me how monstrous you can truly be.” Roughly letting go of my chin, he spins, putting his back to me as he addresses the crowd. “Without further ado, my advantage has been given to Lord Peregrine Grey, of the Moonfire Elves.”

A dark elf... They once belonged to the Elven Islands, but long after the boundary that separates us from the other realms was erected, their people believed the magic had gone to their heads. When their skin lost its color, they were deemed to be corrupt, and thus they pushed them through the magical boundary with only one way in and no way out.

My eyes travel to Lord Peregrine, his steely gaze on me and all-knowing. There’s something about him that makes it seem like he’s peering into my very soul, thumbing through my darkest secrets. He flashes a set of perfect teeth before turning his attention back to my father.

“What do we get if she dies? Why would we risk our lives if the prize isn’t guaranteed?” One of the men in the room shouts, but I’m too focused on the elf who won my father’s advantage to see who it is.

“Yes... Of course...” My father paces in front of me, blocking out the rest of the room. “If my daughter dies, the winner will still be announced as an heir, and should he wish to wait, I can offer one of my other children in Eva’s stead.”



**T**he last of the hell flame has disappeared, leaving behind glowing torches scattered along the tree line of The Enchanted Forest. The

king's advantage is everything to a pledge. They can use it to be the only one with a weapon, or request changes to the game rules and more. They can even request a pledge to be removed or bring in someone to assist them—someone they won't have to kill in the end. They can even use it to spare a life.

Some things always stay the same, though. The offered daughter gets to choose the location of the event and when it starts. I requested the arena be moved. Normally, the king pulls a stone platform from the sea. It's a large open circle, where no one can hide, but I asked for a more beast-friendly location. The Enchanted Forest. Since everyone will start in different locations, scattered around the boundary the royal mage has set with salts, they'll be easier to pick off one-by-one.

From where I stand on the outskirts of the forest, I can just make out the cart holding the large golden bell rolling down the dirt road. Normally, the offered daughter will be the one to ring it and start the challenge, but since I'm participating, my younger sister is going to do it for me. It won't be long now.

*"We've never been in there. How do you know it will help us?"* my beast asks, and I can feel her unease spinning in my middle.

"Because Ash had been, and he told us about it. We won't be the only thing the other pledges have to fear in there, which means it won't be up to us to kill everyone, just those who get close."

*"There are spiders, and it's their mating season."*

"I'm aware," I whisper, staring into the wood. "There are also trolls near the river, and other creatures who wish to swallow anything that moves whole."

*"That's not helping."*

A breeze slips over my flesh, making goosebumps rise in droves. I chose to wear a chemise and a cloak. Something quick to untie from around my neck and easy to shed should I need to shift. Others piled on armor and strapped on swords, but for me it's best to keep things simple, even if my teeth are chattering.

*"Something tells me you plan on me taking the reins for this."*

"Not yet. If we can stay hidden, we will. We'll let the others fight amongst themselves. Then if someone finds us, it's all you."

*"Great."*

"Are you scared? We had another option, you know. We could've trusted Ash, but you had to go eat him like a horrid beast." I'm not sure I'll ever fully forgive her for that. He was a good person. He didn't deserve to have his life ended so soon.

*"I'll take that as a compliment. As much as I'm dreading this, it's still a better choice. And if it makes you feel any better, I killed him quickly. Everything else came after."*

"Oh yeah, that puts my heart right at ease."

*"Really?"*

"No. Now shush," I hiss, propelling myself forward into the depths of the dark forest. A sense of foreboding hangs heavy in the atmosphere, as if the woods themselves hold secrets too sinister to be shared.

For a place so feared, it's quite beautiful. The air is thick with an otherworldly chill, making me shiver despite the warmth of the cloak around my shoulders. Twisted branches leer at me from every direction, reaching out like skeletal fingers. Their sharp thorns beg to dig into my flesh.

The forest floor is carpeted with a tapestry of fallen leaves. Their once vibrant hues have now faded to a desolate palette of somber grays and

browns. I can't see them, but I feel eyes peering at me from the shadows, as if the forest itself is watching, *waiting* for my blood to be shed.

I got an eyeful of the monsters in this wood when they pledged their allegiance to my father. Creatures of every shape and species. Hideous beasts with scales that gleam like onyx and eyes that burn with malevolence. Some malformed and twisted, and others with jagged teeth and talons that drip with venom. They are all driven by a primal hunger for power, for a crown, and the chance to claim me as their bride.

With each step I take, twigs snap beneath my boots, betraying my presence. The velvety darkness engulfs me, and I can barely see beyond a few feet ahead. Every rustle, every crackle has my heart battering against my ribs, so hard that I fear it might fracture bone.

"How lovely," I mutter beneath my breath. "It's something out of a fairy tale, isn't it?"

*"Keep your mouth shut. They'll hear you."*

The deeper I go into the Enchanted Forest, the darker it becomes, but the pitch black doesn't last long. When the canopies drown out any semblance of the triplet moons, the ground begins to take on an iridescent glow. Quirky mushrooms sprout and twist along the forest floor, moving in a swaying rhythm and twirling gently around my feet as if they're dancing... as if they're alive.

It's beautiful, yet haunting at the same time. Bending down to run my fingertips over the velvet tops, I hear a twig snap, and my body jerks upright on its own accord.

*"Hide."*

I can't see who or what is lurking in the shadows, but I'd rather not find out. Whoever it is, they're distant enough that I have a brief moment before

they close in on me. Spotting a fallen log, I glide toward it, making every effort to remain as quiet as possible. The log's core is hollow, a mere remnant of the gnarled trunk it once was. I clamber inside, maneuvering deeper until my back meets the interwoven tangle of roots obstructing the other end.

My heart races, pounding fiercely against my ribcage, its rhythm reverberating like a primal drum in my ears. Leaves rustle, drawing closer with each passing second, and my breath catches in my throat. My wide eyes fix onto the entrance of the hollow trunk. Trembling, I press my hand against my mouth, desperately trying to stifle any sound that might betray my presence.

Every muscle in my body tenses, bracing for the inevitable, as I find myself locked in a silent standoff with the encompassing darkness. Then, the footsteps fade away. I strain my senses, allowing them to take flight, scouring the forest around me for any hint of the lurking entity, but there is nothing.

Just as I begin to entertain the notion that I've eluded its notice, a tendril of magic wraps around my ankle, yanking me from my hiding place with a violent jolt. I'm dragged across the mossy ground, my eyes clenched shut in a futile attempt to block out the impending horrors that await me. The chilling wind howls against my face until I come to a sudden stop. The sting settles into my flesh as scrapes, caused by the twigs and jagged stones peeking through the carpet moss, welt up my back.

"Well then," an unfamiliar voice coos. "What do we have here?"

A haunting laugh rolls through the air and I pry open a single eye, peering through the sliver of my lashes to find him—the dark elf from the reception. The man who won the king's advantage. His features are sculpted in a way that defies mortal beauty, his silver hair cascading around sharp, ethereal features. In any other circumstance, he would be the epitome of a dark,

brooding romance novel hero. But this is no fairy tale, and his presence could mean my end.

For a moment, we lock eyes, an unspoken understanding passing between us, the tension heavy in the air. It's a battle of wills, a dangerous dance on the precipice of an unknown fate. I gather my strength, my creature rearing up, ready to take control, but the elf raises his hands. His magic smothers her in an instant and shoves my beast down so deep, I can no longer feel her presence at all.

His palms glow with oily magic, the same kind of power my father used to bind my beast with the ribbon. I freeze, my body rooting in place, my muscles refusing to obey my frantic commands. He steps closer, his presence looming over me like a shadowed veil, his piercing gaze breaking through my defenses. The lord's nostrils flare as he takes a deep breath, a snarl curling his lips when he detects hints of something he's not fond of. I wish I knew what it was. I'd gladly douse myself in it if it meant he'd go away.

In this fragile moment, I am captive to his power, my life precariously balanced on a knife's edge. Will he bring my end? Only time will tell.

## Eva

**L**ord Peregrine's leather armor is thin and sleek. It's easy to move around in but will provide little defense toward my creature's jaws. If only I could shift... My fingertips burn and it's only now that I realize he froze me just as she began to transform. Long dark talons jut from my nail beds, sharp and lethal. My teeth have become honed, tapering into razor-sharp points.

His eyes trail over me, taking in every inch before crouching down at my side. "Before you do something you'll regret, you should know that I'm on your side. I can't exactly be named an heir if you're dead. No pledge is going to willingly hurt you in this gauntlet unless you attack them. It would be pointless to do so." Reaching forward, he wraps a white lock of my hair around his finger before letting it fall with a smirk. "I'm going to drop the spell. Alright?"

The magic dissipates and I gasp in a breath, clutching a hand to my chest. "So what? You're just going to ensure I live long enough to be named heir?"

"Something like that."



I'm propped on my elbows, still on the ground as he towers over me. He scans the woods as I take in his gray-blue skin, his long silver hair, and his *empty* hands.

"You had the king's advantage, and if you didn't use it for a weapon, what did you use it for?" Pushing myself to my feet, I put more distance between us.

"I owe you nothing." His voice is deep, commanding, and dripping with the syrupy sweet scent of power. "Look. I know you just met me, but I can assure you, hiding in that tree won't do you any favors. Now, we can fight this together until it's just us left, or you can hide out in that log and wait for some creature—one that's not here for your hand, but rather your head—to crawl out of those woods. What will it be, Princess?"

"Why should I trust you?" I ask, straightening my shoulders.

"From where I stand, I don't think you have much of a choice."

The silver shackle around his wrist gleams in the mushroom light. My father makes every beast in this realm wear one. It gives him complete control over their magic, so he can dampen it with the push of a button. It's one of his most renowned experiments. Tonight, those who pledged will be free from the cuffs' restrictions. They'll be as powerful as ever.

"Well?" Peregrine holds his hands out at his sides. "We don't have all night."

"Fine, but I can't speak for my beast. If she turns and decides to kill you, there's nothing I can do about it."

"A deal is a deal. She needs to comply, or I'll be forced to suppress her."

*"Tell pointy ears I'll comply."*

"She'll do it."

"Good. Now, no more hiding."



We weave our way through the dense forest, Lord Peregrine at the forefront while I trail closely behind. The knotted trunks of the trees twist into intricate snarls, and the mushrooms cast long shadows around us. Long before we stumble upon the body, the unmistakable scent of death assaults my senses.

Lord Peregrine kneels beside it, delicately prying a sword from the nearly dismembered man's grasp. "Here, take this," he says, gripping the blade and offering me the hilt. "He has no use for it anymore."

"What did this?" My eyes survey the carnage. Whatever was responsible, it showed no interest in taking the man's weapon. Which means Peregrine didn't use his advantage to be the only one armed. So, what did he use it for? Perhaps to be the sole creature with magic?

The man's shield is warped at an uncanny angle. His armor has been mercilessly torn away, leaving him exposed and vulnerable. Regrettably, this grim sight is not the first we have encountered. It is the eighth lifeless body we have come across, each one more gruesomely mangled and mutilated than the last.

"Likely the ogre who pledged. You didn't see him at the reception dinner because he'd already come and gone before you came down."

"Well, I don't think this will help me much. I don't know how to use it," I say, trying to lift the sword up.

Peregrine slowly turns his head, his eyes vacant and unseeing as he absorbs my admission. "You entered a gauntlet without knowing how to fight?" he questions, a mixture of disbelief and curiosity lacing his words.

“My beast knows how to kill. So, no. I don’t know how to fight, but she’s quite murderous when she feels threatened.”

He shakes his head, his disapproval wafting off him like a foul stench. “You might as well leave that then.” His finger barely flicks toward the sword as he brushes past me, his magic sending the steel blade soaring through the air until it stabs into the ground.

“You didn’t have to drag me along, you know? I entered. I didn’t ask for you to protect me. I had a plan—*a good one*—and I would’ve been just fine.”

He stops, spinning on his heels to march back toward me until he’s inches away from my face. “What? To hide? Because that was going so well for you. I found you before the first body dropped. Tell me, princess, what kind of person belittles themselves to hiding while everyone else dies in their name? That’s a survival move pulled by rodents, not royalty. Certainly not someone with fae blood coursing through their veins.”

“Someone who was forced into this. Someone who didn’t have a choice and is just trying to live and see tomorrow. Sure, I could’ve chosen to sit on the throne. I could’ve plastered on my best smile and waved at the pledges as they entered, praying they show me mercy. What good would that have gotten me? I’d rather die trying than lie down inside a coffin.”

He grunts, turning back to the woods to continue tracking the beast who made the mess at our feet. I chase after him, being careful to smother the sounds of my footsteps. “You don’t get to walk away from me.” I grab his arm, and he whirls, lifting his hand as if he planned to pulse out power.

“Do not touch me,” he grits. “You’re lucky that I need you alive.”

“Ah, how could I forget? Your deal. Except you lied to me. I was there when my father announced that the winner of the gauntlet would maintain

their right to the throne, regardless of whether or not I survive tonight's events. So, tell me, Peregrine Grey. What do you really need me for?"

His face softens for a moment, his jaw unclenching. "You act as though I have to answer your questions. I regret to inform you, I do not." With that, he continues into the woods.

"You're just full of secrets, aren't you?" With a huff, I continue after him.

Gripping the chain that drapes around my neck, I flip open the lid of the pocket watch-style necklace. All the pledges are wearing them tonight. It's spelled by the royal mage to let the king know when your heart has stopped beating. Where the face of the clock should be is a number, showing how many pledges are still alive. Four. Two other contestants and us. The number has dwindled quickly. Between the forest and the ogre, this might be the fastest gauntlet in history.

I barely have time to look up as a war cry rattles the air. The metal glint of a sword slashes in front of me, and my body arches away. Peregrine reacts in a flash, tossing a hand up as he spins, flinging the druid man into a nearby tree. His back collides with the bark, and the crack of bone hits my ears, a sharp pain sliding through my teeth. The man cries out, his hand grabbing at his ribs. Still, he lifts his sword, panting as he forces his body to stand up tall.

"*My turn?*" my beast asks inside my head, and I can feel the anticipation creeping over my flesh.

"No, not yet," I answer as Peregrine twirls his wrist and the man's body contorts into an obnoxious shape. His sword drops to the ground as he flexes his fingers. It's as if he's trying to use magic, but his powers evade him.

It confirms my suspicions. Peregrine used his advantage to be the only one with magic. That's why the other pledges have weapons. It's also why the

ogre is killing so easily. They're practically mortal humans set against mythical monsters.

The druid man drops to the ground, his skin pale. His bright eyes are bloodshot. *Lifeless*. I stand amidst the chaos, my heart pounding in my chest, my breath ragged. The Enchanted Forest doesn't waste a moment. The roots of the trees creep up from the ground and spin like a web around the body, small tendrils penetrating the fallen man's flesh. It pulses with both danger and wonder as the scent of magic permeates the air. Just like the other bodies we've stumbled upon, the forest will consume him over time. The decay feeds the mushrooms, and the remnants of magic within their souls give them their green glow.

"Only one left to go," Peregrine says, nudging me along.

As if on cue, the ground rumbles and we both search the woods frantically, scouring for the ogre—or whatever creature is making its way toward us. Branches snap and trees bend, until finally the ogre's scarred face comes into view. A slash cuts from the right side of his forehead and across the bridge of his wide nose, flaying open the flesh all the way to the bone. His feet pound into the ground as he leisurely strolls forward.

"There you are..." he grumbles, and Peregrine holds his hands up, pulsing out power to slow the ogre's already lazy pursuit. It doesn't work though. The creature simply pushes forward, unphased. Peregrine twists his hands, casting more magic. The air tastes sweet on my tongue as he releases spell after spell, but his opponent knocks them away with ease.

I stumble backward, putting space between me and Peregrine. The ogre lifts his heavy battle ax off his shoulder and swings, missing the dark elf by a sliver of air. He throws up a shield as the ax barrels toward him again,

connecting with nothing but magic. Peregrine strains, sweat beading on his brow as he grinds his teeth, desperate to stay alive.

*“Now?”*

“Now,” I answer, and with a surge of feral strength, my beast lunges forward, taking control.

Our body shifts in a blur of fur and primal grace. Fangs clash, claws shred through thick flesh, and the forest reverberates with the echoes of the ogre’s screams. Every instinct hones my movements, every swing of the ax encourages me to keep going. The scent of blood and magic mingles as she sinks her teeth into the ogre’s throat and jerks her head side to side. Our claws slip through ribs until the ogre falls into a heap. My beast listens for a heartbeat as the creature stills, and only after finding none does she let go. Blood and Saliva drip from her sharp jaws onto our kill as her eyes meet Peregrine’s. His gaze widens, but more so out of surprise than fear.

Locked in a stare down, my beast growls until the air shakes. The low, lethal sound causes the hair on our back to stand. Our lips curl, and we flash a smile of razor-sharp teeth. Slowly, she prowls forward, circling him. With a flick of his wrist, he suppresses her, and my beast is forced to forfeit control.

I land on the ground in a heap. My dress is gone, and the cloak is still hanging around my shoulders, the knot is still tied loosely at the base of my throat. It’s drenched in blood from the ogre, but it’s better than nothing. I meet the dark elf’s gaze, and the forest holds its breath, knowing that the final act is about to unfold.

Then the bell tolls.

That only happens when a winner has been declared, but there are two of us left standing. Hurrying to my feet, I keep my gaze on him, watching as a sinister smirk stretches across his lips. He knows something...

*“Run.”*

“Already ahead of you,” I answer, spinning on my heels and breaking into a full sprint.

*“I can’t help you until we’re far enough away that he can’t stop us from shifting.”*

I tear through the forest, using my arms to swipe at the brush, forcing my way through. My bare feet fly across the leaves on the forest floor, smashing mushrooms as rocks and twigs cut into my flesh.

I don’t stop. My beast sings directions in my head, and I’m grateful for the fact she made notes of how to get back to our starting point. My cloak hangs up on a branch and I quickly shove the loosened tie up and over my head, leaving it behind.

Twigs slap against my skin, creating reddened welts on my arms as I push myself to go faster, feeling Lord Peregrine’s presence not far behind me. Once through the last bit of trees, I stop in the clearing. The cool air nips at my naked body as I search for my father. People are gathered around the outside of the salt barrier. Tents have been erected and the thrones brought to the clearing. I find him standing not far from them, talking to some of his nobles.

My sisters, Cera and Aerness, are seated firmly in their seats. Their expressions are blank, their eyes locked on the treetops. It’s what we’ve been coached to do since we could walk, allowing us to keep a stoic expression even as those we love are ripped away from us.

We’re instructed to shove the emotions of never seeing them again down, to paint our faces with strength. We’re told not to show weakness, that emotion is the biggest one, and the most often exploited. Focusing on the treetops gives them something else to think about and if they zone out

enough, they won't see what happens next to the offered daughter... What will happen to *me*.

"We have our winner!" My father's voice echoes through the clearing. The crowd goes wild and my heart sinks. I can feel him... Peregrine. His very presence is unnerving, and his aura alerts me to his proximity. My beast can sense it growing closer as he comes to stand next to me. "Lord Peregrine Grey of the Moonfire Elves will be named my heir come dawn, but only after he's claimed his—"

"It's not over until only one man is left standing," I yell, cutting off my father. My backbone has never held so straight. The king glares at me, his cat-like eyes trying to break through my resolve. The moment a gray-skinned hand touches my shoulder, I know I've fallen into a trap before it's been voiced into existence, and my betrothed was in on it. All it took was for me to say the rule out loud.

The king chuckles. "Precisely, and from what I see, only one man is."

My father, ever the trickster. My gaze has dropped and I'm not sure how long I've been staring at the grass, but the moment the lord's hand slips down the curve of my spine, I jolt. Our eyes meet and he grins down at me.

"But you accepted my pledge," I say, loud enough for the king to hear, even though I'm not looking at him.

"He did, Princess," Peregrine answers for him, "but I had the advantage, and therefore, only I could change the rules."

"You tricked me," I mutter, my voice losing its pride. My clothes are long gone, but it's not until now that I feel raw and exposed.

"I did what I needed to in order to win. It wasn't me who tricked you. I just didn't tell you, which only makes me an accessory."

My father reaches us, draping his cloak around my naked form, and I pull



the thick velvet tight around me as the king squeezes between us. Gripping both of our wrists, he thrust our hands into the air, and the crowd cheers. There's an unsettling spark worming through my veins, and I know the dark elf has yet to take his haunting eyes off me. As soon as the king lets go, I take two steps away.

“Now, let's get you married. Shall we?”

“Yes, My King,” my betrothed says, sending a wicked smirk my way. “As soon as possible.”

“Indeed! There's no time to waste. I've received word this morning that we've finally breached the boundary separating our realm from the other six. We've been left to rot in this realm for far too long and it's time we take back what's ours.”

“The Devil won't know what hit him,” Peregrine says, and the king pats him on the shoulder.

“He certainly won't.”

This could be worse. At least Lord Peregrine is somewhat handsome. Sure, he's not exactly 'prince material' and is just as cunning and obstructive as my father, but I don't believe he plans to end my life. He had multiple chances tonight, yet didn't. He needs me alive. Though, for how long, I'm not sure.

The priestess splits the crowd, her crystal headdress standing out amongst the sea of my father's subjects. The light from the moons above shines brightly, reflecting off the patches of silver scales on her skin. Though her body takes a humanoid shape, it's far from mortal. She's lived thousands of years. She's seen the rise of our empire and lived through The Great Fall. My father smiles, revealing every blade-like tooth within his mouth as she nears.

Lord Peregrine and I approach her as I accept my fate. Fighting in the gauntlet was my only shot to get out of this ritual. There's no running. At

least, not now. I'd be caught by any of the abundant guards controlling the crowds. I've officially been checkmated.

"From what I understand, you wanted this done as quickly and as simply as possible," my father says behind me, causing Lord Peregrine to glance over his shoulder.

"That would be correct, My King."

"Are you certain? We can honor your Elven customs should you choose to."

The sound of teeth grinding hits my ears. Looking out the corner of my eye, I catch the muscles of Peregrine's jaw flex. "No. I haven't been one of them in ages. I'd rather forget they exist than honor their traditions."

"As you wish."

The priestess holds out her hand, beckoning for mine. She pulls a dagger from the sheath on her hip and sets the cool blade against my palm, but Peregrine snatches her wrist before she can break the skin. Her white eyes roll in their sockets toward him.

"*Can she see? I always thought she was blind,*" my beast asks.

"There will be no blood oath. Just your blessing for the spirits," Peregrine grits, releasing her arm from his vice-like grip.

"That's not a good sign."

Not a good sign at all. The blood oath binds one soul to the other. It's a mate bond for non-shifter beings, and like shifters, there's only one way to end a bond like that. *Death*. If he plans to hurt me, he wouldn't want to feel the agony I'd endure, meaning he wouldn't want that link in place.

My father stiffens at my side, but it's not from sympathy. He knows Lord Grey might kill me, and even though my father has earned an alliance with the dark elves because of this union, he might have to encase another

daughter in the family crypt. It's a hassle for him. An *inconvenience*. Yet next year, when my sister, Cera, comes of age, he'll do it all over again.

My vision blurs, but I keep my shoulders square. This isn't over yet. It can't be.

"Very well, My Lord. No oath," the priestess says, sheathing the dagger and holding her palm out, allowing him to set his in it. "You have my blessing." Her grip tightens around us, and a sigil burns beneath my skin on the top of my hand, forming a reddened circle in my flesh with quirky letters, and a star overlapping it. At each point of the star, there's a symbol for the elements. Air, water, earth, fire, and spirit.

I've been taught what to say for this ritual, over and over, for as long as I can remember. At this point, it's second nature. Standing up a bit taller, I look at the priestess. "Under the spirit, I vow. A union of souls."

Peregrine repeats the phrase, his voice steady and calm at my side.

"Under the spirit, you are wed," the priestess says, grinning from ear to ear as if we're star-crossed lovers getting our happily ever after. "You must speak your vow to the other elements. Once they're all complete, and you've consummated, your claim to the throne will be solidified, and your marriage is permanent until your souls pass into the next life."

Glancing down at my hand. The spirit sigil glows in a bright orange hue. It's been done.

## Eva

The king escorts us to my room, ensuring I can't run for the hills—a smart move on his part, considering I've scouted every possibility to do just that. It's my father's duty to oversee our wedding. Once the sigils all glow, I become Lord Grey's problem, and he can wash his hands of me.

"Here we are," the king says, pushing open the door. "I'll leave you to clean up. Maybe you can speak your vows to the sigils while you're at it?"

"I'm sure we can." My all-too-eager betrothed sends me a look out of the corner of his eye, and I'm not quite sure what to make of it.

Just a couple of hours ago, he was sour and nearly snarled at the idea of me 'hiding' in the woods. Still, in my nightmares, my husband wasn't even remotely handsome, and he certainly didn't toss me sultry side glances. The night is young, though.

"That's a lad." My father claps a meaty hand on his shoulder. "We need those sigils glowing by dawn. I've waited hundreds of years for revenge on the Devil, and I don't want to wait another minute. So, get to marrying my daughter. I want my new son by my side when the Devil's blood runs cold."

By the Devil, he means the King of Hell Hold, the Ruler of the Seven Realms, and the immortal man who locked us all away inside this one, like an eternal prison. When he and his flock fell from the sky, they brought nothing but war. They slaughtered without mercy and massacred entire villages. Anyone who refused to bow at the Devil's feet died, and those he couldn't kill were banished to this place. They call it the Realm of Monsters. To us, it's just Solaria, named after the very castle we stand in.

Before that, my father used to rule The Seven Realms. Somehow, even after we were locked away, he maintained his reign and has been waiting for the moment to reclaim his land and seek revenge. Now, he's finally gotten his chance. It's likely why he's placed his bet on the dark elf beside me. His kind make up a significant portion of the magic users in Solaria. My father would have wanted as many of them protecting his forces as possible, and marrying me to their leader would secure that.

As my father takes his leave, a sachet is shoved against the lord's chest. Peregrine barely catches it before his gray hand swallows mine. "Come, wife. We have matters to attend to."

Way to lay on the charm. Clearly, seduction is not one of the Elven magics. I barely get the door shut before he's dumping the contents of the sachet on my bed.

"What is it?" I step closer to get a better look.

"Elements." His tone is dry as he picks up each vial. One contains dirt—*earth*. Another holds an enchanted green flame—*hellfire*. And the last two elements needed to complete the ritual are readily available within this room—*air and water*. "Let's get this over with."

"More romantic words have never been spoken," I say, plastering on a fake smile. His gaze toggles to me as he exhales heavily.

Turning, he lifts the earth vial. "Please."

"Only if you answer one question." I cross my arms over my chest, feeling the flaking blood splashed on my skin. "Do you plan to kill me?"

"I can't promise not to." At least he's honest.

Chewing on the inside of my lip, I pluck the vial from his hand and hold it up in front of my face. "Why?"

He makes a tsking noise before taking it back. "You only get one question."

"What will get me another, then?"

He pops the cork on the vial and gestures for my hand. "A vow."

Reluctantly, I give in, allowing him to pour a tiny mountain of dirt into my palm. He adds some to his own before nodding at me, signaling for us to speak our vow. As we do, the earth sigil on my hand begins to glow.

"Why can't you promise?"

His silver eyes might seem hollow, but for a brief second, they almost look empathetic. "Because you have fae blood."

"My father made me. Neither of my parents were fae, but he's always tweaking his daughters, adding species DNA that shouldn't be there. He's always trying to create new monsters for his cursed kingdom, and his children just happen to be his lab rats. So, I'm sure there's fae *something* within me, but it's not natural. Therefore, I am not fae."

Peregrine holds up the hell flame vial, then drags me toward the hearth in my room. He drops the glass into it, and the logs burst to life. As the hell flame roars and flicks wildly at the air, we again say our vows.

"Any more questions?" he asks, staring at the embers.

"Will I be treated well by you?"

"It depends. For what I need you for, I can't guarantee you'll live through

it, but if you do, yes.” My chest tightens at his omission. Once again, my life hangs in the balance like a puppet on strings, controlled by its master. Someone else holds the reins of my destiny.

Peregrine takes my hands in his, and we say our solemn vow to the wind, which gently swirls around us, making my hair wispy. There’s only one sigil left. Water.

“Now,” his hands slide up my arms, brushing my blood-tinged hair over my shoulders before pulling back the velvet of my father’s cloak. It pools on the floor at my feet. “I don’t know about you, but I really want to take a bath. So, why don’t we say our last vow, and then we can rid ourselves of the remnants of war before proceeding... with the rest.” My gaze remains locked on his feet. I don’t need to see his gaze to feel it. It travels down my naked body, leaving an icy trail in its wake, and my inner self stirs.

*“We need to leave. We can’t go through with this.”*

Sucking in a breath, I blink away the tears and let him lead me into the bathroom. He twists the handle on the clawfoot tub, and it starts to fill with water.

“Why do you wish to become king?” I ask, trading my question for a vow. It’s an honest question, and something his wife should know. I can’t believe that someone who enters a fight to the death does so solely for a bride. No, he did it for the throne, and there must be a reason why someone would go to such lengths beyond a mere desire for a crown.

His silver eyes lock with mine as he holds out a hand, helping me into the tub as he fills it with water. Usually, this would be a maid’s job, but I lost all rights to the castle’s maids the moment I became his prize. And unless he brought his own, we won’t have any help.

“Are you going to answer?” I ask, wrapping my arms around my middle.

I've never been shy. As a shifter, it's hard to be when your clothes are torn to shreds so frequently. It's something I've become accustomed to in my twenty-three years of life. But today is different. He can see me, and the way his predatory gaze could swallow me whole has me wishing I could shrink away.

"Vows first," he says, pouring the last bucket.

*"You can't possibly be thinking of going through with this, can you?"* I don't answer. Instead, I tuck my chin to my chest and give in. Together, we recite the same ritual, earning the water's blessing. The symbols on my hand glow brightly.

"As for your question... My people were wronged by the fae, yes. However, your father didn't just seal the fae within the shadow realm. There were others who were trapped inside, including someone very close to me. A woman."

Scrunching my eyebrows together, I shake my head slightly. "What does that have to do with the throne?"

"Nothing... but it has everything to do with you."

Me? What could that possibly have to do with me? I'm disposable. As if reading my silent question, he pushes up from the stool he has been sitting on beside the tub, towering over me. His leather armor is still covered in the blood of our fallen pledges.

"You're the first daughter the king has incorporated fae blood in. Therefore, you're the only one who can open the gate to the shadow realm. I plan to use you to get my wife back."

My eyes grow wide, tearing away toward the bath water. "I think you're mistaken. I don't know how to unlock your gate. Even then, my father nearly



died to seal them away. He'd never stand for someone releasing those savage creatures into our realm again."

"You don't need to, Princess. *You* are the key. *Your blood*. It took a Fae's magic and the king's blood to build it. You contain both ingredients within your veins, and therefore, you can unlock it. I don't need the king's help. I just needed his daughter. He could never withstand the temptation to experiment. It was only a matter of time before one of his spawns would have what I need."

"I won't do it," I seethe, pushing from the tub. My hair drips, and the water splashes onto the tile floor.

"You will, because you can either help me and live in peace or fight me and I'll make sure you pray for the day that you're granted death."

"My father locked them away for the same reason the Devil did us. The same way your Elven brethren did you. They're chaotic and unmanageable. They wreak havoc on anything within reach. They're the true monsters and some of the most vile things in existence."

"Conveniently, I agree with you, but it doesn't change the fact that you will bleed on that gate. Willing or not." I kick my feet over the tub edge, gathering my towel in a rumpled heap, and storm from the bathroom. "Don't bother trying to escape. The king sealed the door and the latch on the window."

*"But not the glass... He didn't mention the glass."*

The bathroom door creeps closed behind him, and the latch rattles as he locks me out to take his bath. I have until he exits that room to figure something out. He can't open that realm. It's no longer just my life on the line. If the fae are released, they'll come for the royal family. My father might deserve it, but my sisters don't. They're innocent, but it won't matter.

The fae will rip their souls to shreds, just to make a point. I can't let that happen. My sisters still have a sliver of hope to find their happy ending, and peeling open that gate will rob them of any chance of one.

Now alone with my beast, I pull the towel tight, trying to slow my racing heart. "We need a way out."

"A way out? *I gave you one, human. There is a window.*" My gaze flicks around the room, all too anxious to think clearly. But her term of endearment helps, even if it's just a little. She's been a part of me since birth, yet refuses to use my name. Though, I suppose the sentiment is returned, since she doesn't have one either.

"We're also stories above the ground. That's a last resort."

"*We'll survive the fall. I'm sure of it. We can run.*"

Panic climbs up my throat, my chest rising and falling in rapid succession, and my skin begins to prick as my beast pushes the boundary between me and her.

"*We're doing it.*"

"Just give me a moment," I grit, trying to keep my voice down as I shove a satin chemise over my head.

"*We don't have a moment. We need to run and get as much of a head start as possible... Time's up,*" my beast snarls, surging to the surface and forcing the shift. Our body gallops toward the window, smashing through the stained glass. Shards rain as we fly through the air. Our claws connect with the stone side of a nearby tower, scratching and sparking against the jagged rock as we slide down. "*Will you shut up! I can't focus through the sound of your screaming,*" she seethes. Our descent slows and she leaps to another wall, repeating the process until we're close enough to the ground to jump the rest of the way.

Her head turns up, glancing at my bedroom window, where Peregrine is leaning through the jagged hole in the glass we made. His mouth hangs open before he shakes off the surprise and starts yelling orders. Guards rush along the top of the castle ledges, some taking aim, only to be stopped before they can pull the trigger, and others trying to rush to the bottom story.

My beast swirls on her hindquarters and launches into a gallop toward Skull Bridge. The bones of dragon wings arch beside us as we power through the handful of guards. Her nose tosses them over the edge, letting them fall to their death. Once across the bridge, we make a beeline for The Enchanted Forest, barely slipping through the tree line as arrows thud into the ground near our feet.

“We’re free. By the gods, we’re alive!” My heart flutters as a feeling of euphoria washes over me.

*“Not for long. We have to put as much distance between us and them as possible.”*

## Eva

**I**t's been a week... Seven days of running, not wanting to sleep or rest. If it weren't for my beast, we'd be starving. I might not have the heart to hunt for my food, but she certainly does.

Bending down, I form a cup with my hands and scoop up the crystal-clear water. I bring it to my lips. It's icy cold as I swallow, feeling it chill its way into my stomach. I'm so thirsty... It takes everything I have to resist the urge to gulp it down.

I didn't bring much with me, just what I could scavenge for in the nick of time. However, I was able to grab a handful of satin dresses, the slips that go beneath the large gowns I'd wear around the castle. They're plain, but they cover up what I need to, and considering shifting almost always leaves me naked, it's nice to have something to wear. Something to protect me against the elements, even if it's thin.

Having also snagged an amber bottle from my room, I dip it into the river, filling it up and stopping it with the cork. I used to use it to keep water near my bed, and it's small, clearly not meant to be used like a canteen, but it's better than nothing. It allows me to travel within the woods that surround the

river, to stay hidden from anything—or anyone—who might be searching for me in the open. Along the shore, I'll stick out like a sore thumb. Occasionally, I chance slipping through the trees to fill it up, but I don't risk staying out in the open for longer than I have to.

I've studied the maps of Solaria, not willingly, but I have. Ash used to bring one when he visited me, so I could visualize his stories of traveling through our realm. He was once part of a legion responsible for collecting payments for the crown from villages and settlements. It required him to travel endlessly, only returning to the castle to hand over what they gathered.

Unbeknownst to me, it prepared me for this. At the time, I listened intently because my father wouldn't let me leave the castle without an escort, and even then, I was forbidden from venturing outside the main city. It left me curious and daydreaming about what it would be like to journey through these lands.

Sitting near the bank, I take a moment to rest my legs. I won't dare rest in the woods, having learned from the gauntlet what sitting on the forest floor for too long can bring. There's no tonic strong enough to erase the image of roots wrapping around mangled corpses from my mind. I'm not sure if it's just this section of the forest or if the entirety of The Enchanted Forest is as bloodthirsty.

The maps I've seen have divided it into three major sections, or groves if you will, which have all blended into one. The Poison Grove is located to the north. It was once maintained by my grandmother, Hera, and is filled with fruit trees that possess poisonous properties. Nestled among those trees is Mortys Tower, an abandoned keep that my father uses to hide his secrets. They're sealed off within the walls, and not even Ash has witnessed what lies inside.

The Weeping Willows occupy the central part. It is home to my father's spiders and the magical trees I now see lining the river's coast. It is said that the plant life within this grove is alive, a fact I can attest to after witnessing it consume the fallen during the gauntlet. The trunks of the trees are knotted and twisted into coils, harmless until provoked, at which point they become deadly.

Ash shared stories with me about how he and the guards traveled through this area. He recounted an incident where one of them slashed at the trunk of a willow. Black ooze oozed from the wound, and Ash said the men could hear it cry. He claimed it was one of the most excruciating noises he had ever heard, especially when the crooked roots started yanking the men into the ground.

The last grove is in the south, The Hollows. It's a forest near The Falls of Bones and Teeth, known for the soulless creatures that live there, most of which were creations my father made before the boundary was erected to deter anyone from crossing into our realm unannounced.

*"Have you figured out what we're going to do?"*

Leave it to my beast to bring that up right now, as if I could stomach anything more than doing what I need to in order to survive. My only premeditated plan was to win the gauntlet, and honestly, I didn't even think I'd get that far. I've never lived outside the castle, nor do I have family to run to. I'm on my own.

"I've barely thought about what's going to happen a minute from now, so no," I answer, picking up a flat stone and attempting—and failing—to skip it across the water.

This is the first time I've slowed down long enough to think about what comes next. My father said the boundary has weakened, that people might be

able to cross. If I could get there, I might be able to reinvent myself and live amongst my father's enemies. But how long until they discover who I am?

There aren't many white-haired people who haven't had their hair turn silver due to age. In Solaria, its lack of color is a dead giveaway. I doubt it would be any different in the other realms. My father has had children with all sorts of species. Orcs, witches, sirens, shifters... You name it, he's been there. However, all of his children have colorless hair. It's a side-effect of the gene altering he does. Regardless of skin color or heritage on their mother's side, it never fails.

"*We should get moving,*" my beast says, and I groan, hating how sore and tired my legs are. I wish I could curl into a ball and sleep, or at the very least, have shoes that aren't flats. These weren't created for hiking in the wilderness. They were meant for fancy ball gowns and to share tea in the gallery.

"I know... Just one more minute."

Something clangs from the far side of the river. I crossed the bridge near the castle, wanting to put as much distance and hardship as I could between me and the guard my father sent after me. I've been working down the far side of the river toward the boundary ever since. Scanning the area, I find nothing but the subtle flow of water. The trees are still, and nothing moves along the coast as far as I can see. It clangs again, and I scurry to my feet, gently slipping to the cover of the tree line and waiting to see what I'm up against.

Slowly, a wagon holding a cage comes into view, then two more behind it. The men are clad in my kingdom's armor, the crest of wolves circling each other etched into their chest plates. They sit on the rocks, completely oblivious to my presence, and I'd like to keep it that way.

The Solarian castle isn't on the mainland. It's held up on an island of its own in the ocean and connected to the cliffside of the mainland by a bridge—Skull Bridge. When my father addresses the public, he stands on his balcony of the tallest tower and speaks into the crystals. They project his voice over the crowds gathered on the bridge and in the near side of the city on the mainland. Even from the forest, I could hear his speech the day after I ran.

He went to war despite my absence, not bothering to pause his excursion to find his 'beloved' daughter. This can only mean one of two things. Peregrine has decided he doesn't want me after all, which I doubt, considering my blood is the key he needs to gain access to the shadow realm. Option B: the king told him he'll sink all his resources into finding me upon their return. It would explain why I haven't been followed for a while, and why this group of men is strolling through. They followed behind the army, bringing a cage for prisoners of war, all to be sacrificed for the king's pleasure and supplies.

All of this makes my plan a little harder. If the war is still ongoing at the boundary or if the army has settled there, I'll have to go around or hide in the woods long enough for them to leave and head back to the castle. If my memory is correct, waiting would be my best option. Going around would mean venturing deeper into The Enchanted Forest, and who knows what exists that deep or what creatures I'd run into. It's safer along the edge.

"Over there!" a man yells. They're not far behind me on the other side of the river, but they shouldn't be able to see me. The brush blocks them from view, growing thicker the closer I get to the boundary. "I swear I saw the princess." My beast's gifts enhance my own senses, allowing me to hear over the trickling river.

"There's no way that girl survived out here," another man says, his voice deeper as he clangs something against the ground—likely the same noise I



heard earlier. “The princess is as good as dead.”

“I don’t know. She managed to live through the gauntlet. That must account for something.”

“Only if your piss-poor eyesight does, too. That’s the third time you’ve thought you glimpsed the girl. The reward has gone to your head,” the man with the deeper voice says. I can nearly hear the snarl in his words.

“Hey, if the king wants to offer up a prize that big for her return, who am I to not oblige? If I find her, I’ll drag her back kicking and screaming if I must. The reward will be worth the risk.”

*“They act like we haven’t killed for sport.”*

“No,” I whisper, weaving through the brush. “You’ve killed for sport. I’ve been a victim of circumstance. Now, hush. We need to get ahead of them.”

## Finn

**M**y sword clangs, colliding with the axe being swung at my head. The elven man before me clearly has skill; he's been trained for war, moving with lethal speed. He spins, planting a foot, and the axe barrels at me again.

“Not the face,” I squeal, slipping beneath the blade, jumping just out of reach and into his blind spot. My sword's hilt swivels around my palm as I adjust my grip, and I drive the steel blade through the man's throat. Blood sprays as I yank it free, and as the Elven man turns, his haunting, vacant eyes are stretched, and his body folds to the ground. “You, sir... Good riddance.”

My lip curls and my stomach flips as I shake off the sight and find my next opponent. The wicked high king somehow managed to bring down the boundary we erected to trap him and his monsters inside a prison. If it weren't for Alice noticing the difference in the boundary, we might not have mobilized in time to get to the breach before he and his heathens got out.

What a fucking nightmare that would be. It gives me chills just thinking about it. He belongs in his prison, and gods help me, I'll die on this battlefield before I let him escape. The people within the other six realms

have lived in peace, have thrived, since that bastard was banished. I prefer to keep it that way.

My eyes scan the wreckage, a sea of clashing swords. Man versus creature. Blood stains the once lush grass red. I wish I could say we're winning, but we're far from it. We're losing more men by the second and if something doesn't change soon, we're not making it home.

Someone steps up next to me and I whirl, stopping my sword just before hitting Kai. The Prince of the Seven Realms, and my best friend.

"Sorry," I mutter, composing myself. "What's the verdict? Is your father going to come play, or continue to watch us all die?"

"He won't budge, but I broke the magic band you gave Alice. At least she's safe within the castle," his voice is deep, graveled, and irritation seeps from his words.

Alice is his soon-to-be wife, and quite frankly, my star pupil. I've been training her in the ways of the warrior for months and this—sadly—was her first real battle. The guard generals and royalty all have these wristbands, spelled with teleportation magic, that can transport us back to the castle the moment it snaps. I gave mine to her. It's a last hope, sort of thing, but I'm glad he sent her home. I love the woman too much to see her die here.

There's a tick in Kai's jaw, his eyes locked on where his father sits in the distance. Watching... Waiting. The prince is just as pissed as I am that the Devil, one of the most powerful beings in existence, won't help us win this war. He'd rather watch us fail. What sort of king does that?

I'll give you a hint. A shitty one.

The King of the Seven Realms has outlived his prime, and if it were up to me, the man to my right would be wearing his crown. Kai was born for the

role, both literally and figuratively. Covered in blood spatter and looking like a goddamn snack, he's ready. I know it.

"We're losing," I voice the obvious because... Well, someone has to.

If we can't turn the tide, then we're all done for. The mad king will go for Hell Hold next, and we don't have enough men to protect the boundary and the castle. Our only hope is to hold this line and keep the high king from escaping.

"My father knew Asmodeus was going to be here," Kai mutters, digging the blade of his sword into the dirt. "Why would he not tell us?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I don't get why he does a lot of things."

There's a second Prince of the Seven Realms. A banished one. A prince no one talks about. Asmodeus is one of the deadliest creatures in existence. His ever-growing power changed him. Finally, after he massacred everyone inside the castle of Hell Hold because of an adult-sized temper tantrum, his own parents shoved him through that boundary. The one that crumbled and unleashed these beasts on the realms. It used to be a one-way ticket into a prison. Now, it resembles more of a revolving door of evil.

We hoped, after he was pushed into the Realm of Monsters, that something would take care of him. At the very least, he'd be trapped there and unable to hurt anyone else. Obviously, we were wrong.

We knew there was a slim possibility he had survived. However, no one expected to be fighting him on this battlefield, much less see him sporting Solarian colors and leading the high king's army. Not a single person expected that. My soul wasn't ready, yet here we are. The Seven Realms most wanted is alive, and healthy, sitting on the back of a black horse. It doesn't get more symbolic than that.

"He nearly killed you today, Finn," Kai says, his teeth grinding out every

word.

“But he didn’t. Your girl stopped him, at least for a bit. Who knows how the heck he survived a Valkyrie blade to the heart, but his ticker is ticking and apparently not going anywhere.”

Asmodeus has the power to reanimate the dead. For every soldier on our side that falls, his army gains one. It’s an impossible battle, but if we fail, hundreds and thousands of innocent lives will suffer in the mad king’s hands. There’s no choice but to keep doing what we’re doing. We have to hope for the best and pray to whoever is listening that we live to see tomorrow.

What’s worse, is most of the creatures we’re fighting don’t even want to be here. The king controls them through these metal collars and wristbands. His mages are forcing them to fight, and each time we see one of them run back into The Enchanted Forest, the mages set off the collar and put them through agony until they return to the war at hand. It makes killing these things weigh heavy on my soul, but it’s for the greater good.

“Alice and I killed most of the mages, but someone is still pulling the strings. Asmodeus, maybe?” A nearby corpse crawls back to its feet and picks up a sword. I kick the dead man in the stomach, sending him crashing to the ground. It’ll take a few minutes for him to figure out how to put his limbs back together, giving me a moment to roll my eyes at Kai.

“I don’t know, and I don’t think it matters,” he says, and I’ve never heard Kai sound so defeated before. He’s always been headstrong, unrelenting, and by the gods, if he wants something he doesn’t stop until he gets it.

More creatures rise from the ground, stacking their mangled bones and broken limbs.

“Kai,” I say, nudging his shoulder. His vacant, soulless eyes watching the chaos unfold.

“Hmm?” he grunts, rolling his fingers together to discard the dried blood covering his hands.

“We need to do something. Now.”

“I’m thinking.”

“Well, think faster.” I knock the dead guy down again, hoping this time he takes the hint and stays there. “You won’t have a chance to think if we don’t act soon.”

“This shouldn’t be my job.” He drags a hand down his face, pinching his jaw, and leaving bloodied streaks behind.

“I know. Trust me, I know. But you’re the prince. The king hasn’t made a move. It’s your call now.”

The Devil watches us from the sidelines like a coward, clearly having lost his touch. His crown should be removed from his head after this, but I know better than to show such thoughts around him. The Devil can sniff out mutiny like a bloodhound.

“For Hell’s sake, Kai. Your father was going to let Asmodeus kill me and he came very close to getting the upper hand on Alice. That should be enough. Get fucking mad already.”

Kai’s eyes flick jet black and the veins raise across his cheeks, swimming beneath his skin. Claws jut through his bloodied fingertips and his arms look like they’ve been dipped in soot. If it weren’t for the fact I’ve known this man his entire life, I’d be shaking in my boots, but he’ll never hurt me. We might not be blood, but we’re still family. We’ve had each other’s back through thick and thin and that’s not changing now.

“I am fucking mad, Finn. I’m *furious*, but going against my father’s orders means I’ll be enacting an attempt to take his crown. That’s not a simple thing. It’s not a ball you can stop once it starts rolling.”

“It’s either you supersede your father and make the order, or hundreds more men won’t make it home to see their families tonight. We’ve lost too much. Hell, we might not be able to fall back and defend Hell Hold with the men left on this field. You’ll be dooming all the women and children hiding scared inside the tunnels beneath the keep to some mad man. Think of them. Think of what the king would do if he got his hands on Alice.”

Alice is a witch, but so much more. She’s nephilim. The product of true love between the strongest witch in existence and an archangel. The high king would use her to strengthen his family tree, in who knows how many ways. She’s the one most at risk here. At least our torture will end quickly with death.

Something tugs at my pants, and as I glance down, I see the dead man’s severed hand trying to climb up my pantaloons. With a swift kick, I send it sailing through the air and straight into an orc man’s head.

“By the gods... Those things are determined,” I shimmy, feeling like I’ve been violated. The orc shakes his head and his dark eyes lock on us. He doesn’t waste a moment before rearing his weapon back and charging our way. He knocks through the men between us like dominoes and Kai lifts his dual blades, crossing them into an X. With a swift motion, he severs the orc’s head from his shoulders and sends it rolling across the ground.

My stomach flips, sending bile up my throat, but I swallow it down. The orc’s body capsizes, and blood as black as the night sky leeches into the grass. I hardly have time to breathe before another rushes the line. I flip my sword, take my stance, and wait for it to come near, using its speed against it and swinging low at the last second, taking out a leg and sending it tumbling to the ground. Driving my sword through its eye, I add more blood to the already red battlefield.

Orcs... Why do there have to be orcs? They're massive, hobgoblin-looking men with the brute strength of a damn rhino. It's exhausting. Finding a dead man sneaking up on Kai, I lift my palm, summon my magic, and blast the bastard to smithereens. Its charred body lands a few feet away.

The war continues to rage around us, causing the smell of iron and burnt ozone to fill my nose. Metal clinks, rattling my eardrums as I cut down dead man after dead man. Until a hand grips my shoulder and I turn to find Kai, just before the light pours in around us, and we're teleported away from the battle. That's his power. He can manipulate time and cross distances in the blink of an eye.

"Hey! I was winning that." My green eyes seek him out as the light dims and I narrow my gaze until I take in the space around me. The Devil stands to my left and I inadvertently jump a step back.

"We're losing. We need to fall back to the castle. Are the barriers up?" Kai asks his father, pretending we don't want to wrap our hands around his throat for leading us into a losing battle, *knowingly*. The Devil always has the upper hand, and somehow, he always knows when things are going to happen before they occur. Yet, he clearly forgot to warn us about this. Or else, we would've stayed at the castle and defended our home.

"Yes, but..." the king's voice trails off. He doesn't need to finish that sentence. Asmodeus is of their blood, which is likely how the King of Monsters pulled down the barrier surrounding the prison realm in the first place. Any boundary the Devil or Kai erect would be useless. When Asmodeus has his power, he can rip it down in seconds, meaning there is no secondary defense for our home. Not with Asmodeus on the high king's side. Not when he's clearly not spellbound anymore. The spell his mother cast to smother his magical powers didn't hold.



We never stood a chance. The mad king knew attacking us by surprise would be his best shot, and he took it. It made us vulnerable and without time to call for backup. At this point, our only option is to compromise and make a deal with the high king from my nightmares. We must save who we can and live to fight another day.

“What did the mad king want?” Kai asks, reading my thoughts. His jaw ticks and his hands flex, raising veins to the surface.

“Something we can’t give,” his father finally says, and my heart sinks. The high king wants what he’s always wanted, and the only thing he’d ask for over reclaiming The Seven Realms is the Devil’s heir. Whether it’s to convert Kai to his side, or to take out the only other male with claim to his throne, who knows... It’s either that, or he wants Alice. Neither of which I, nor anyone in this kingdom, are willing to trade.

“I didn’t ask whether it was possible. I asked what he wanted. He wouldn’t have marched out there before the war broke out if he wasn’t in the mood to make a deal. I’ll ask again. What did the high king want?” Kai demands, taking a step forward. His dark hair drips with sweat as he fights to stay calm. His eyes flicker between their normal dark amber rings and the demonic black I saw earlier. He’s five seconds away from losing his shit, and I’m right there with him.

“He wanted you or Alice in exchange for civility.” The Devil’s eyes drop, likely knowing that Kai is the man we need for our kingdom. He’s the man willing to risk it all for his people. For his true love. The Devil knew Kai would take the deal in a heartbeat if it meant keeping those he loves safe. It’s why he didn’t want his son to know about it.

The mad king wants to either use them, kill them, or steal their magical abilities for himself. He’s a mimic, someone who can copy any power with a

single touch. It's why he's lived for so long. During the war to trap the man behind this boundary, he touched the Devil, and the Devil is immortal. The point is, there are more uses either Alice or Kai could give him than this war ever could. It's the perfect deal for a psychopath.

Looking out onto the field of soldiers and monsters, gnarled corpses are all that remain of most of our men. Some are broken into pieces. Others mangled and crunched. Still, our numbers dwindle, and the odds are stacked four to one.

"We have to make a deal," the prince says with a heavy exhale.

My head swivels toward Kai. *He can't seriously be considering this...* Surely, he knows I'd never support it. His father wouldn't either. Alice would have a conniption fit. It's not an option.

"I'm going to make the deal," he repeats, stepping off toward the field.

"*What?!* No. Absolutely not," I shout, snatching him up by his sword sheath. "You're the heir to the throne." I pin him with a deadly glare, unlike anything I've conjured up in years.

"What choice do we have?" He starts to take off the plates of his armor, setting them on the ground.

"There's always a choice. You just have to look for it," I say, picking up the golden metal pieces and trying to strap them back on his person before he can remove any more.

"My father has seen how this plays out. It's knowledge that should've guaranteed us to win, yet our people are dying. I can't trust that he's going to stop it."

"Then don't. What if *you* don't have to do this?" I plead, "Hell Hold needs you. Alice *needs* you. What if we can give the high king what he wants long

enough to get everyone back inside the keep? Then you can show Alice how to put up the barrier with her blood. Asmodeus won't be able to touch it."

"What exactly are you suggesting?"

I drag my hand down my short beard before undoing my own chest plate and digging for something. The moment my hand latches on to what I'm looking for, a wicked grin spreads across my face, stretching from ear to ear. I hold the contents out for him to see, revealing a spelled sticky mustache. It's from the costume closet at the castle theater. We used to use them to disguise ourselves as normal people. It allowed us to leave the castle and not have people be weird because the prince was around. They can make you appear as anyone, and it's the perfect disguise for this.

"The mad king will get someone. It just won't be you. He'll realize it eventually, but it'll buy you time."

Kai attempts to reach for it, but I snatch it away before he can take it from me.

"No... I won't let you do this. If I'm going to sentence someone to death, I'll be the one to carry out the order," Kai says, trying once more to take it from me.

"I am no one. I have no family. I have no woman in my life that'll miss me. The world will move on. You can't say the same. Let me do this. My only request is that a *true king* takes the throne once I'm gone." I jab the sword in my hand into the ground, bowing before the rightful king and swearing my fealty. The Devil watches as the first of many support his son's pledge to supersede him.

"He'll kill you," Kai says as I stand to my full height.

"I know, but I gave an oath. It wasn't signed in blood, or sealed with magic, but I promised to always protect you and yours. At the time, it was a

promise made to a six-year-old boy who swore he was being held hostage inside the castle, but I'm choosing to honor it now. Let me buy you time." My vision clouds as I speak, but I push down the urge to waver. Kai stares at me for a long moment, trapping his lip with his teeth and sucking in a deep breath. He knows this is goodbye, that if I take his place and go with the mad king, I'll die.

The prince finally turns to his father, and I flex my lips into a fake smile. "Well, you heard the man. When we get back, I'll be calling on the lords and contesting your leadership upon their arrival. By the laws of the seven realms, should the sitting king become incompetent to lead, his heir can supersede him. With that said," Kai holds his hand out to me, and we both shake, gripping forearms. Tears rise, glossing my eyes, but they never fall. "I think we should change clothes if we're going to sabotage, don't you?"

"Yes, *My King*. I do."

## Finn

*Well, this is going swimmingly.*

I knew I'd be taken prisoner and that my fate would look grim on this side of the boundary, but I deserve better than getting fed to a scraggly orc. I'm a hero, for Heaven's sake. My bones have been honed for purposes far greater than being someone's toothpick or cricket stick. I don't even know what bone you'd use for that, or if orcs even play cricket...

Still, my comment stands—What in the *absolute fuck* is that?

Some creature with a disjointed eyeball has shoved a piece of flesh through the bars of the cage they've locked me inside of. It almost looks like a—*Oh, hell no...* It's a humanoid hand. Knobby fingers and all. The bastard must've taken it from the battlefield as a to-go snack and for some unholy reason, he's offered to share.

Though, I wonder if I should turn down an act of kindness... It's not like I'll get many of those in the coming days, assuming I live that long. Maybe this is an olive branch. Deciding on a middle ground, I grin at him, nodding my appreciation.

"No, thank you. I'm allergic."

That's gotta work, right? The creature snorts, reaching back inside and yanking the hand away. *Thank the gods...* I have waged more wars and battles in my immortal life than I care to admit, but seeing that thing up close and personal is making bile crawl up my throat. I don't do gore. Never have. Never will.

It's a peculiar dynamic. In the heat of the moment, blood and guts don't phase me much. I'm too concerned with staying alive and making sure our enemy doesn't to worry about the mangled bits. Afterward, though? Let's just say there's a reason Kai has someone tote along a bucket while we collect our dead.

Silence descends on the camp. We've stopped somewhere for the night, deep within the woods of the forgotten lands. As much as sleep tries to sweep me away from this bloody shit show, I'm way too scared that one of these assholes is going to find my asshole and ruin it the moment I close my eyes.

I'd much prefer it stay as is. Never used or abused.

It's a moot point to stay awake, though. I'm a druid with no magic, my hands are cuffed together, and well... It's not like I could run. If someone tried, I'd be helpless to stop them, but at least if I'm awake, I can scream with some dignity. That's what I'm telling myself, anyway.

Crickets sing loudly into the night, drowning out the whimpers of some poor sap locked in a cage. *I wouldn't want to be that guy.* My nose sniffs as I wipe away a stray tear trailing down my cheek. *Yup... Definitely not that guy.*

The cuffs rub the skin around my wrists raw. They're made out of the same metal the creature's collars are from. Somehow, they've drained every ounce of magic from my person. It's sickening to feel this vulnerable... It's a new feeling that I don't think I can ever get used to.

Someone rattles the cage door at my back, and I nearly pee myself,

skittering to the opposite side of my enclosure. My eyes lock onto the worst creature of them all. Kai's brother. Asmodeus smirks at me, dropping a canteen of water and bread through the bars.

"Eat up, Peasant."

"Ha ha. Very funny." I reach for the bread, using both my hands since a damn chain connects them.

"If it makes you feel any better, the mad king doesn't plan to kill you," he says, leaning against the bars. Of course, due to the glamor I'm wearing—aka, the spelled mustache—I look just like the Prince of the Seven Realms.

"Pardon me, but I don't wish to be chatty with my mortal enemy." I tear off a bite of bread and force it down. Whoever baked this should be fired. Or maybe I'm just used to the castle staff's cooking in Hell Hold. Clearly, we got the better chefs out of the deal.

"You've never met me. How can we be enemies?" He looks at me over his shoulder, as if he's guarding my cage.

"You tried to kill my soon-to-be wife and my best friend." *That was awkward to say.* "I think that's reason enough."

The sound of a woman screaming tears through the camp, and creatures run toward the woods to get a better look at the commotion.

"Hey! Looky who I found!" a man yells, shoving a frail woman to the ground. "That reward is mine, boys!" Her snow-white hair is matted, and a muzzle has been strapped around her head as if she's known to bite and they're getting ready to visit a veterinarian. What's left of her clothes hangs on by threads, barely clinging to the figure of her body. Harsh blue eyes glare at the men crowding around her like a freak show as she struggles to break her hands free from whatever they've used to restrain them behind her.

Asmodeus pushes off the cage, slowly stepping toward them until he

stands in front of the woman, no older than Alice. He reaches down, latching a thick hand around her arm, and hoists her to her feet.

“I suppose you’ll have company tonight, brother. A prince and a princess locked inside a rickety cage... Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.”

*Princess?* One of the high king’s daughters? Why would they treat her like this if she’s royalty?

Asmodeus gently walks the woman toward me, opening the cage long enough to put her inside before securing it again with a large padlock. There’s barely enough room for us both to sit without touching. Her iridescent blue eyes flick over me as she breathes heavily into the mask. My head shifts in her direction and she coils up, her limbs shaking as she tries to disappear into the corner, desperate to put as much space as possible between us.

“Relax, doll. I’m not going to hurt you... So, what brings you to my humble abode?” I ask, gesturing to the four feet wide cage we sit in.

She blinks at me, but otherwise doesn’t move or respond. But she blinked, and little as it may be, it’s a step in the right direction. “*M’kay*... Well, would you like some terrible water? Some even worse bread? I could help you take off the...” I trail off, pointing at my face so she knows I’m meaning the mask thing.

The woman stares at me for a long moment before wiggling to spin around. Her hands are cuffed with thick metal, but the strap to undo the mask is relatively easy. I undo the two belts holding it across her face and set the leather mask aside.

Slowly, she flexes her jaw, turning back to face me. Her skin is pale, but deep red marks are present where the mask sat, cutting into the bridge of her



nose. “I’m sorry they did this to you. If I could, I’d kick that asshole in the nuts. He looks like he deserves it.”

Her face stays expressionless as her eyes jostle between mine. “Why are you using magic to appear like someone else?” Her voice is soft and powerful, each word rolling off her tongue with pure grace.

“That’s a long story, but what gave it away?” Fear creeps through me, and I gnaw at my lip. Maybe the enchantment on the cage did take away my disguise... Surely, Asmodeus or someone would’ve said something by now, though.

“I’m part fae, so I can see magic. I’m not immune to it per se, but glamours like this, I suppose I am, since I can see the... *sticker*. There’s also a shadow of the face you’re wearing. It’s odd.” Her eyebrows draw together as she peers at me in the dim light.

“You’re a princess, right?” She nods, tearing her intense stare away from mine and looking through the bars of our cage at the crowd of monsters and men, shuffling about the camp. “Why would they lock you up?”

“My father tried to sell me off to a monster who passed his test. I chose to live and ran. I take it you’re one of the prisoners they captured during their battle near the boundary?”

“Yes... Finn. That’s my real name, anyway.” Tearing off half of the bread, I hold it out to her, only to think better of it. Her hands are secured behind her back. She won’t be able to eat on her own. Instead, I pull off a bite-sized piece and hold it out. “Here.”

“Eva,” she says, leaning forward and watching my face intently as if it’ll give away my deepest, darkest secrets. She’s careful to only touch the bread with her teeth, then leans back to chew. Her throat rolls as she swallows. “Who are you pretending to be?”

“Malikai Morningstar, Prince of the Seven Realms.”

Her eyebrows bounce up, but she doesn't say anything. Instead, she accepts the next bite of bread I offer her and patiently awaits another as we split it. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Asmodeus cutting across the camp. His dark hair is slicked back, wet as if he's just taken a dip in the river or poured water over it. Mismatched eyes are locked on the cage as he heads toward us with a ring of keys swinging in his hand.

The camp is illuminated by torches now, the hell flame having disappeared for the night. Still, his eyes are as dangerous as ever. One amber, one alabaster, with a large scar running through it.

“Cuffs,” he says, reaching the cage. Quietly, I lift them toward the bars and he yanks my hands between them. Making quick work of removing the heavy metal cuffs, he hangs them off the edge of the cart and starts to walk away. “Remember, *Brother*, you still have no magic. The cage siphons it.”

“Wait. You didn't remove hers,” I call, shivering as the night air slices across my bare flesh. They made me remove Kai's armor and left me in nothing more than leather pants and a thin shirt. When the hell flame goes out, it grows colder and colder until the three moons unblock it again. I won't freeze to death, but in the dead of night, I'll feel like I will.

Asmodeus stops in place, slowly turning around and heading back. “You really want to chance that? The enchantment of the cage won't stop her from shifting and killing you in seconds. The girl is rabid and considering she and her betrothed murdered dozens during the king's gauntlet... Trust me, I'm doing you a favor by leaving them on. If you know what's best for you, you'll put the mask back on her, too.”

I scan over the woman opposite of me. She doesn't look like a monster. Fuck, if you gave the girl a bath, she'd be one of the prettiest I've ever seen.

Even now, with the leaves and dirt in her snow-white hair, and the bloodied, tattered clothes, she's beautiful.

"Take them off... Please," I say, turning my gaze back to Asmodeus. He huffs but does as I ask.

"It's your funeral." He pulls her arms back so he can undo the cuffs, causing her to wince as her shoulder bends unnaturally. The metal clangs against the bars as he pulls them from the cage and hooks them near mine.

Slowly, Eva wiggles, wincing harder as she moves her arms to her lap. Something pops in her shoulder as if they partially dislocated it while putting the cuffs on. Her bright blue eyes find mine as she drags in a breath.

"Thank you," she says, reaching up to grip her left shoulder as a shiver rakes through her. Her teeth latch into her full bottom lip until a bead of blood seeps from it, muffling a cry of pain.

I've dislocated many things in my lifetime and can attest to the fact that every little movement fucking hurts, and shivering is going to be excruciating for her. I'm cold and at least my clothes don't have tears in them. The torches illuminating the camp go out one by one as the creatures and men get ready to rest for the night. With each light around us that goes out, the air grows colder until my teeth chatter and rattle my skull.

Someone shoves a small blanket, the size you'd wrap a baby in, through the bars. The scratchy fabric lands on my lap as a man with a husky voice and a face I can't see says, "You'll have to fight for it. We only have one. We weren't planning on moving two prisoners."

I lift my gaze to find blue glowing eyes staring into me as something, whether her or someone else, growls low in their throat. "We don't have to fight. You can have it. I'll be fine," I offer, holding out the blanket. It wouldn't have done much for me, anyway.

The fluorescent blue fades away until her side of the cage falls into darkness. I don't see her hand, but I feel the fabric pull as she takes it. Then small, bony hands press against my thighs and snow-white hair comes close to my face. I gasp and trap the air inside my lungs, holding up my hands as if to surrender to enemy forces. Eva methodically moves, curling her body against my chest and tucking her head, leafy hair and all, beneath my chin.

“You shared. So can I,” she whispers, tugging the blanket up around her shoulders so it drapes down my sides.

My heart races in my chest as I take deep breaths, trying to calm it. Gently, I feather my fingers across her injured shoulder, carefully finding where her arm bends over her stomach. I wrap mine beneath it for support. The cool air claws at my back as I pull her close, but the warmth her tiny body offers is enough to keep me from shivering. She's like a space heater, although all shifters tend to have higher body temperatures than other creatures.

Resting my head on top of hers, I breathe in the earthy smell of mud and leaves, mixed with something sweeter—almost flowery. It makes my rapid heartbeat slow to a steady thump, and reluctantly, sleep overtakes me.

## Finn

I wake to the sound of horses' hooves against the ground, accompanied by rattling metal cuffs and shaky cage bars. It takes me a moment to realize that we're moving. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I cringe and lift my back off the bars, feeling my spine crack in twenty-seven unnatural ways.

It's still dark, and the dewy scent of the night surrounds us. They had made camp... Why wouldn't they stay there until dawn? There is a weight pressing heavily against my chest, and I stiffen as I catch sight of Eva, the princess they shoved into the cage with me.

*Eva.*

My hand reaches up, desperate to find my mustache, and I breathe a sigh of relief when I feel the furry patch still attached to my forehead. It's an odd place to stick a fake mustache, I know, but when you already have hair on your upper lip, it would've been an unnecessary risk to try placing it there. The sticker has a better chance of holding if it's stuck directly onto the skin. Sadly, the enchantment isn't strong enough to change my entire body, just the limb it's attached to, which is why it's stuck to my forehead.

There's a whistle, slow and drawn out for emphasis, and from the tone, I can tell I'm not going to like what comes next. Moving only my eyes, I spot a streak of midnight accompanied by a torch moving next to the cage. The jet-black phantom mare struts, nearly prancing with every step. Its ghostly green eyes are hollow and unseeing. It's beautiful... Under different circumstances, I would've petted its neck and fed it carrots. But considering the thing sitting on its back... I'd rather not risk getting my fingers bitten off.

Animals have a tendency to adopt traits from their caregivers, and Asmodeus Morningstar is not the friendly type. My throat still hurts from him choking me out on the battlefield. No... He's a damn force to be reckoned with.

The forgotten prince rakes his fingers through his dark hair. It's longer than Kai's, but if it weren't for the ugly scar streaking across his eyebrow and cheek, they'd be hard to tell apart. They weren't twins, but if someone told me they were, I'd believe them.

"The king is going to have a conniption with you," Asmodeus' voice rings in my ear. Kai's is deeper, more serious, and he hardly ever jokes around for the heck of it. The man to my right, however, his voice is packed full of humor and snark. It's like he and his brother were two halves of a whole that broke apart in the mold. One got everything royal: the bravery, the pride, the strength... And the other got the airy happiness, the cunning, and their father's wit.

He pulls his horse closer, tucking his chin so he can smile down at me. His perfect teeth reflecting the torch glow as his lips pull into a sinister, up-to-no-good grin. "Just how long did you expect your ruse to last?" he says, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Excuse me?"

He swirls a finger in the air in front of his face. “The disguise. It started wearing off a few hours ago, and lo-and-behold, it’s not my brother in the cage, but his god-awful wizard pet.”

My lungs deflate as I close my eyes. I knew it was going to happen. I’d never used the glamour spell for more than a couple of hours, and it was bound to lose its oomph eventually.

“Druid. The respectful term is either Druid or Warlock. Take your pick.”

“I don’t care what you are. The truce only stands if my brother is in that cage. So, I suggest you fix your face before we get to Solaria. If the king finds out, he’ll force us to march on Hell Hold, and I’d prefer not to take a trip down memory lane.”

Eva stirs on my chest, lifting up and jumping the moment she realizes who and what she’s been using as a pillow, even though she’s the one who crawled over here. “I’m... I’m sorry,” she mumbles, her voice so quiet I fear I imagined it.

“For what?” Her bright blue eyes meet mine for a single moment, but she doesn’t answer. Instead, she retreats to the opposite side of the cage. Her face is cast in the torch glow, illuminating its contours, along with the dark circles below her eyes. Her bare feet have been caked in dried blood, and tiny cuts mark her perfect skin. It’s as if she’s been running through the woods for days. I take her silence as a plea for space and honor her wishes.

Turning my attention back to our zookeeper, my eyes roll. “If you don’t want to fight us, then why do so? I don’t see a collar around your throat like the other beasts,” I snap, crossing my arms over my chest.

Asmodeus holds up his arm, revealing a metal cuff around his wrist. “Don’t worry, if the king lets you live, you’ll get one too. He controls everything in this realm and everyone. Those he can’t bend to his will with

fear, he cuffs or collars and lets dark magic do it for him... Even his own flesh and blood. Isn't that right, Auntie?" He nudges his chin at Eva, but she doesn't pay any mind.

This war is as complex as they come. It's built upon treachery and deception that runs so deep the wounds will never heal. The Devil didn't just lock King Ares away. He took his oldest daughter, Persephone, as a bride. As far as I know, she was the only daughter born before the mad king was cursed, essentially making the Devil's sons the only true male heirs to Solaria. It's why he wants them so badly, and why they're the only thing he'll accept as a consolation prize. In the event of his death, if Asmodeus and Kai are still breathing and haven't renounced their claim, the Solarian throne will fall to his mortal enemy's children.

King Ares must either kill the Devil's sons or persuade them to forfeit their claim, especially since he promises those who win his demented gauntlets a claim to his throne. They wouldn't have any claim at all and likely wouldn't enter if they knew who truly holds the right. This leads me to a single question...

"If the mad king already has you, why does he want Kai? You're under his control, fighting for his army... You're the oldest and the first in line. Clearly, you've proven your intent to support his reign. Why not just accept you as the rightful heir? Why go through all of this?" I gesture to the army. Part of me knows that Asmodeus won't give up information that can be used against him, but so far, he seems chatty. Maybe, just maybe, he'll be willing to fill in the gap in my curious brain.

"Because I renounced my claim already. He tricked me after I was shoved into this realm. It was either renounce my claim and live or get eaten by one of his beasts. Only, his deal came with fine print, and I was too young to



know better.” He holds up his cuff again. There aren’t many ways to kill an immortal being, but being eaten is one. You can’t regenerate if there’s nothing left to regenerate from. “The point is,” he continues, “Kai is next in line, the right falls to him now, and unless he renounces, the king will have no choice but to kill him.”

“He’d have to get close enough first,” I huff, swiping my tongue over my teeth. Over my dead body.

“As far as he knows, my brother is in chains. I wouldn’t want to be on the blunt side of his anger when he finds you in the prince’s stead. So, good luck with that.” A long silence passes between us, filled by nothing but the clank of horseshoes and the jostling wagons. Even Asmodeus’ men have hushed their conversations to a soft lull. “Who was the woman? The one who saved you?”

Ahhhh, that’s why he’s being so nice. He wants to know about Alice. I knew this would come around at some point. My lips slant into a knowing smirk as I snort out a laugh. “What? Are you smitten with her now? Alice drives a sword through your heart, and now you’re in love?”

“No.” His voice is gravelly and cold. Emotionless. The playful tone I’ve finally gotten used to is gone. “I’m curious. She wields a Valkyrie sword, and it’s not every day that someone can do so. They have to be someone with a true heart and moral strength. Blessed by the gods, so the legend goes.”

“That’s because you know nothing about her. Alice is everything the realms need. As for your curiosity, it’s not every day that someone survives being shish kebabbed by one, yet here you are, in all your shirtless glory. Mind sharing with the class how that’s possible? Maybe then, I’ll tell you about Alice.”

His eyes fall to where his fingers twist into his horse’s mane. It’s the only

look that resembles the teenage boy I knew from before he'd been banished. We weren't close, by any means, but it's easy to forget it's Asmodeus I'm talking to and not Kai.

"I take precautions. I fell victim to King Ares once, and it was only a matter of time before someone would be able to use one of the Valkyrie blades. I didn't need him manipulating them to kill me. You should know exactly what I mean, or you wouldn't have all those tattoos."

My gaze skims over the visible inky lines across my arms. Wards. They protect me from demonic possessions, from battle magic, and enhance my abilities. Apparently, Hell's most wanted has figured out how to ward himself from the only weapon in our world that could kill him, short of being chewed up by some insidious creature. It's a smart move... Yet, damning for someone on the opposite side of the fight.

"Now, your redheaded savior. Who is she, or rather, *what* is she? My brother's betrothed, I know that much, but she's something... different."

"She's a witch, but not like anything from the seven realms. Her lineage is from Earth. That's all you'll get out of me."

"Very well then," he grits, his horse's feet clicking against the hardened dirty path. He glances at Eva, his body rocking along with his horse's gait. His torso is bare, wearing nothing but a web of scars. How is he not cold? Sure, he has leather pants and boots, but I'm in the same thing and this thin long-sleeve shirt is doing nothing for me.

"Eva, dear," he coos, earning a feral growl from the petite woman across from me. "You'll be happy to know your beloved elf is alive and well." That gets her attention. Her eyes round as she lunges from the bars, as if getting closer will reveal more of the secrets she's been deprived of. "He threw quite the fit after you launched yourself from that window. He thought for sure that

you'd die in the forest. I'm sure he'll be delighted to know you're doing well and all in one piece. If I were you, I'd run into that blue fellow's arms, because if he turns you down, you know exactly what your father is going to do."

Eva lets go of the bars, falling back on her heels and slumping her shoulders. "He'll feed me to it."

"Yes, precisely. I tried to spare you. Even commanded my men not to go off looking for you on our journey back to the castle. If things don't go your way, I'd rather you hear it now... It was a brave thing you did, entering the gauntlet. I might not be able to help you, but I can commemorate the guts it took."

"Thank you," she mutters.

"Don't mention it. I might not like what my grandfather does, but if I can avoid taking part in it, I will."

An orb-like light soars through the sky, flinging in the air toward Asmodeus. He lifts a hand, stopping it just in time before the fiery magic could harm him or his horse. His spine stiffens, and the color drains from his face. For a moment, I catch his amber eye flicking toward me before he nudges his horse on, galloping toward the front of the group. "We'll stop here. I have to check on something. Set up camp. We'll rest a bit and then carry on when the hell flame rises."

## Eva

“Am I missing something?” Finn asks, twisting a blade of grass in his hands. “It should be daylight by now.”

He’s right, the Hell Flame should be bright overhead, but it’s still dark as night. “It’s the blackout. Every few months, it takes a bit longer for the moons to move out of the way. Their shadows still cast on our land, but it should only last another day or so. Then things will resume their normal night and day cycle.” Lifting my chin, I squint. “Does it not happen where you’re from?”

“No... It doesn’t.” He doesn’t notice my stare. His eyes are glued to the treetops, peering through the bars at the roof of our cage. “Nothing like this has ever happened in Hell Hold.”

Birds sing, chirping above the static trickle of water from the river. Finn mimics their songs, as if he expects them to answer with another melody. The wagons are parked just inside the wood line of The Enchanted Forest, and the army has set up pop-up tents, supported by thick stakes that have been driven into the leaf-covered earth.

Most of the men are soundlessly asleep now, waiting for their general to return from... who knows where. The few soldiers and guards who remain awake are posted around the camp. Their torches glow a bright amber, setting the ambiance.

A long, dramatic exhale draws my attention back to Finn. His fingers pick at the sticker on his forehead, and the spell crumbles away, revealing the man beneath the mask. "This thing might as well come off. I doubt the magic will last much longer." Catching the edge, he rips it away, leaving a reddened stamp behind.

Finn's dirty blonde hair is swept to one side, tousled by the rough abuse of his fingers, but otherwise, it's neat. He has a beard, as if he hasn't shaved in a week or so, short enough to not be full but long enough to dust his jaw, part of his throat, and around his mouth. Emerald eyes stare at me as if they've seen a ghost, yet I can't look away.

His skin is tanned by hours in the sun, and intricate tattoos cover what's visible of his arms, peeking at me from between the laces of his shirt. He untied them hours ago, pulling the collar loose. Now, that space confirms the tattoos continue across his chest and up the column of his throat too. He's beautiful, but in a stoic, war-honed warrior sort of way.

His eyebrows lift in question. "Is there something on my face?"

"No. Sorry." I quickly tear my gaze away, resisting the pull that threatens to slant my lips into a smirk.

"You apologize a lot."

"Am I not supposed to?" I thumb the hem of my slip, rolling the frayed edges of the satin between my fingertips.

"You're a princess. You don't have to explain yourself to anyone. Least of all me." He leans nonchalantly against the cage bars, taking a bite of the stale

bread the creatures gave us a bit ago.

“Maybe in your kingdom, but not in mine.”

His face softens, his eyes drifting off to the cage floor. “Maybe so...” He chews on the inside of his lower lip, his eyes falling to the space between us.

My beast has remained silent since we were captured. We’d been trudging through The Weeping Willows for days, unable to slow or rest, for the forest would sink its creeping tendrils in. We were exhausted, and the moment the trees became just trees—when we entered the Hollows—we chose to sleep. If you can call it that. I don’t think I truly slept a wink.

From the hiding spot deep within the forest, I watched the army head home. The entire parade of creatures padded by without even realizing it. It had been my beast’s idea to let them leave, then try to sneak across the boundary. We just didn’t expect a second party to lead up the rear, toting a cage filled with a prisoner. Nor did we anticipate being chased by some wretched creature.

It was cat-like, towering over my form, horns sprouted from its nose, the ivory texture was stained pink with fresh blood. I tried to sneak away from it, to stay quiet in hopes it wouldn’t notice my presence, but I wasn’t so lucky. A twig cracked beneath my foot, and it sprang. I sprinted through the woods, my body too exhausted to shift fully, and I tried to push down the pain. Raw ache ebbs through my muscles, and the wounds on my feet heal. My flats hadn’t survived long. One night in these woods had them falling apart.

Part of me was relieved when that man snatched me up mid-sprint and shoved that mask on me. Having never been more tired in my life, I don’t even remember if I fought back. All I knew was that I was tired, hungry, thirsty, and I was either going to get eaten by that thing or captured by my father. The man threw something at the ground, and whatever it was

exploded with light. It blinded me and scared off that beast, but by then, I was masked. My arms were wrenched behind my back, and the metal cuffs were placed. As he dragged me toward the smaller army's camp, he wouldn't shut up about how my father would reward him for my safe return. That he'd live like a king because of me, and all he had to do was keep me alive until he could drop me on the stoop of the Solarian castle.

Judging by the way here, I'd say we have another day before we reach Solaria. I was so close to being free, yet too weak to reach it. I've come so far, just to end up back in the same position I was in when I entered that gauntlet. If Lord Peregrine is alive, he'll get what he wants: a key to the fae realm, and I'll be helpless to stop it.

The mask was spelled by him. I just know it. It's the same sweet-scented magic on the ribbon, that he used in the gauntlet, and it's strong enough that I could taste it with every breath I took. How many beast-suppressing trinkets did he make? It's like he handed them out across the kingdom, along with flyers titled "The first to capture the princess wins." Still, Finn took it off. He freed her. Nothing is standing between us now, yet she hasn't said a word to me since.

"You're awfully quiet," I whisper, trying to coax her to the surface. Worry creases my brow. I can't even feel her, but Asmodeus wouldn't lie. He warned Finn that this cage wasn't enchanted to keep him safe from her, only to dampen his magic. So, where the hell is she?

"I could talk more if you'd like," Finn says. His voice has changed since the disguise broke. It's lighter, flirty almost. It's the voice of a man who could have women swooning with a single word, and oddly enough, sends butterflies spinning through my middle.

Still, the beast in me doesn't show her face. With Ash, the moment I felt a

single drop of emotion or connection with him, she'd prick my skin until it felt like it would break. Even something like that would settle my soul. At least I'd know she's still in there.

"I wasn't talking to you..." Closing my eyes, I inhale sharply, knowing that it came out wrong but lacking the words to make it sound right. "I meant—"

"You don't have to explain. I get it. It's a telepathy thing, and that I'm quite familiar with. My friend can speak to her cat, but no one else can. It's a bond they share. It's similar with shifters, I presume?"

Nodding, I twist to face him. "The mask you took off. It drove a wedge between us, not only keeping me from shifting, but also keeping me from talking to her. Since it's been off, she hasn't said anything. It's abnormal."

"Ahh, well. I'm sure she's in there..." His lips twist, his eyes growing vacant. "You guys, like, share a headspace then?"

The corners of my lips turn up. "Something like that."

"Interesting," he says, cupping his jaw with a hand. "Well, please don't stop on my account. Chat away." I open my mouth, ready to speak to her again and hopefully get some sign of life, but Finn beats me to it with another question. "Do you see what she sees? You know, when you're..."

"Yes, most of the time."

His eyes flex wide as he crosses his arms. "I can't imagine what it would be like to have two voices ping-ponging around in there. My mind stays busy enough with one."

The sounds of shuffling feet draw my eye, and I find an orc heading our way. His ivory tusks jut from his mouth, and silver eyes pierce the night. When he reaches the cage, he double takes on Finn before shoving a canteen through the bars.

"You're not the prince," his guttural voice sends goosebumps rising across



my flesh.

“No. I am not. Fantastic observation.” Finn shoots him a fake smile before continuing to pick at his bread.

Only, the orc isn't so satisfied with the realization. He yells at the sleeping army, waking creatures from their sleep. Within minutes, a crowd forms around the cage.

“Where is the prince?” the orc man asks, twisting a handmade dagger in his hand.

“He was never here.” Finn doesn't take his eyes off his boots. His knees pulled lazily to his chest and spread wide. His forearms balance on top of them as he ignores the attention.

“I say we drag him out of there. Force him to tell us where the prince went,” a scrawny creature, only a couple of feet tall, says. A cross of some sort between a troll and a boulder. His skin is hard as stone, crumbling as he moves. There's a patch of moss on his head where hair should be.

The orc tilts his head, staring Finn down as if the answer to what to do next is written on his face. His arms cross over his chest, showing off muscular biceps. “You know what? I think you're right. Get me the keys.”

Without warning, the orc snags the cuffs off the side of the cage, and hands encircle Finn and me, yanking our bodies against the bars. Cuffs are clipped around my wrists, anchoring me to the side of the cage, and Finn thrashes, trying to break free of their hold.

The whine of hinges alerts me to the open gate of the cage, and Finn is forced through it. His body flails and slaps into the leafy ground face first. Before he can get footing, the orc snatches him up, carrying him off toward the middle of the camp.

“Where are you taking him?” I demand, watching the creatures follow

them into the forest. Not a single soul answers my question. Finn's eyes connect with mine as his body is lugged over the orc's shoulder, and panic seeps into my every pore. With a quick yank on my cuffs, I know it's no use. There's nothing I can do to help him, and that look might be the last.

## Finn

I'm yanked from the cage and tumble onto the ground. Twigs and debris nip into my palms, and before I get the chance to catch my breath, the orc jerks me up by my shirt. His large hand twists the fabric, anchoring me to his bulging form.

The dude's bicep is the size of my leg. How am I supposed to compete with that without my magic?

"Hey now, we can talk about this," I laugh, even though the sheer pressure of his grip has my lungs screaming for air. It's not a laughing matter, yet it's the only thing I'm capable of doing at the moment.

Not even bothering to adjust his grip, he flings me over his shoulder like a Neanderthal and starts venturing away from the cage. At this point, I felt safer in my prison cell. My hands scramble for purchase, desperate to get leverage, to gouge out whatever I have to because this can only end one way. Bad.

The shackles around my wrists jingle with his every step as I hear Eva yell, "Where are you taking him?" Her voice carries through the air, but the orc

doesn't falter in step or acknowledge her plea. He's on a mission, and nothing will stop him.

The other creatures leave Eva shackled to the bars and stumble drunkenly after us, much to my relief. I'd rather they follow me than leave them alone with her. That would be a recipe for disaster.

"String him up!" someone screams, and the crowd of creatures cheer. My face pales, my lungs suddenly deprived of air. It doesn't matter how quickly or deeply I inhale; it's not enough.

Panic zips through me as if every nerve in my body has sparked to life in the same instant someone grips the chain to my shackles. My vision blurs and my chest tightens, but I'm minutely aware of the scaly hands gripping my arms and dragging me over the orc's shoulder. I slam to the ground and cry out. There was no chance to brace for the fall, and pain shoots through my teeth, having mashed them together on landing.

The orc takes the chain, bulldozing through the crowd of creatures toward a rope someone threw across a tree limb. I swallow down the knot growing in my throat. Strangulation won't kill an immortal, but fuck... You'll feel it over and over again. Coming to, only to experience blood vessels rupturing, the strain of your lungs as they fight for life.

Reaching the tree, his large hands grip my shoulders and slam my back into the rough bark. It cuts through the thin fabric of my shirt, and I grit my teeth, breathing in and out through my nose.

"Where is the prince?" His deep voice vibrates the air, and the warmth of his breath hits my face.

"I'll answer your question, but only after you eat a fucking breath mint."

The orc's nostrils flare wide, his breathing picking up the pace. I watch in horror as a vein protrudes from the middle of the orc's forehead, and with a

sharp movement, he snatches the rope from a man a foot or two away. The guy topples forward, unprepared for the orc's violent grab.

The rope is looped around the chain connecting my cuffs, and without taking his dark eyes off me, he commands one of his men to pull. The rope snaps tight like a bowstring, and I jolt. Within seconds, I'm hoisted into the air. The metal digs into my wrists, biting into the bone. Pain radiates through my arm, and my fingers flex unnaturally.

"What does it matter to you people!?" I grind out as saliva floods my mouth.

"We don't get paid unless we carry out the king's order, and King Ares was clear. Deliver the prince to Solaria. Now, I'll ask again, and this time you better answer," the orc says, gripping a fallen limb in his thick hand, "because if you don't, bones will break. So, where is the bloody prince, and how did you sneak into the cage?"

"I didn't sneak in." My breath comes out in pants as I occasionally glance at my hands while swaying in the breeze, as if watching the cuffs flay my skin will somehow stop it from happening. My teeth gouge into my lower lip until I can taste the iron of blood, but it's no hope. New pain won't drown this agony out. It won't distract me from it. "I was spelled to appear as him, I swear. The prince was never in the cage."

A hardened fist slams into my stomach, and for a moment, my lungs won't respond to the command to breathe. Pain drips through my middle, stinging across my ribs. "Fucking hell," I groan, tightening my stomach muscles to soothe the ache.

"If he's right, we have to go back," one of the creatures, a thin elf, says to the orc man whose fist just introduced itself to my spleen.

"What is the meaning of this!?" Sweet baby Jesus, I've never been so

happy to hear Asmodeus' voice. "Get him down, now."

I'm dropped from the suspension rope in an instant, and my body crumbles into the ground. Upon impact, my head thrusts forward into the limb the orc man dropped on the ground, and sparks flood my vision.

"This imposter was in the cage. He claims to have disguised himself as the prince—" Asmodeus raises a hand and cuts off the orc.

"I'm aware. I've already informed the king." My eyes shoot wide. No... They need more time. I should've been able to buy them enough to get reinforcements. It's too soon. "Now, put him back in the cage, gently, or so help me, I'll feed every last one of you to the king's pet. Understood?" The orc and most of the men around me swallow and nod their understanding.

Someone pulls me to my feet, my body aching in ways I never thought possible. Their arm is slung beneath mine as they help me to the cage. Asmodeus just watches as we strut by. His one amber eye is narrowed at the orc man, the guy I assume he put in charge before leaving.

Still, we shuffle on, and as we reach the cage, I feel the trickle of something wet down the side of my face. I don't need to see it to know it's blood. Eva lurches forward, pulling on her chains, her face frozen in shock at the sight. I'm all but shoved inside, the gate still open as Eva snarls.

"You rotten—" she starts, but the elven man shoves me farther into the cage, and before I can react, his hand collides with her face, thrusting her head to the side in a splay of white hair. My feet still dangle across the opening of the gate, my arms secured behind my back, and as I lift my gaze to the man, my head slams forward, colliding with his nose and sending him falling onto his ass. Pain rings through my head, pulsing with every pump of my heart, but I don't say a word. I simply pull my feet inside and use my teeth to grip the cage door, pulling it shut with a click.

“Are you alright?” My voice shakes no matter how hard I’m trying to still it. My entire body is trembling at this point from the adrenaline.

Eva opens and closes her jaw, using her shoulder to rub at the reddened mark on her cheek.

“You just wait!” The man I headbutt has finally gotten up from the ground. “The moment no one is looking, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Asmo crosses his arms, leisurely strolling toward the cage.

“Nothing, sir,” the man says, glaring at me through the bars. “Nothing at all.” The man high-tails it back to the crowd of men near the tree they hung me from.

“Here,” Asmo says, holding something through the bars. When I don’t take it, he tips his head, then connects the dots. He summons the key for the cuffs and unlocks mine first, then Eva’s. “Take this,” he says, pushing a spool of surgical thread and a needle into her palm. “You’ll have to sew him up.”

“Or you could just heal me,” I say, pushing my luck. He’s the same as Kai, and within his veins is enough power to lick my wounds inside and out without breaking a sweat.

“I can’t.” He holds up his cuff. “The king dampens our magic unless we’re at war, in the gauntlet, or running some other fool’s errand. Healing you would drain me dry for a while, and I’m afraid that wouldn’t bode well for any of us. You either bleed until you heal on your own, or she sews you up, and you heal faster. That’s your decision.”

“Thank you... For not letting them kill me,” I mumble, keeping my eyes trained on the spool in Eva’s hand.

“You’re welcome, but I meant what I said. The king wants you alive, and he knows you’re not my brother. I might’ve bought you a day or two tops, but...”

“I won’t ask you to go against your king. I understand,” I say, letting my head tip back against the cage. “I knew what I was signing up for.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.”

Rubbing at my wrist, I watch Eva, twisting the black thread between her fingers. “You’ve never stitched anyone, have you?”

“No... I can’t say I have, but I’ve stitched fabric before. It’s not much different, right?”

My lips pull into a toothy grin. “Not much.”

She inhales deeply, her shoulders rising as she nods through the exhale. “Okay... I can do this.” Her lips press into a thin line before she glances back at me. “I got this.”

“I never said you didn’t.”

As if in slow motion, she threads the needle, and I spread my legs wider, allowing her to scoot between them, folding her legs so she’s perched on her heels. She’s careful... Innocent almost in her actions. Most would have slid forward until they couldn’t anymore, making it easier to see and stitch. But she methodically leaves a space between the tops of her knees and my body.

“Okay,” she whispers. “Here goes nothing.” I tip my head back as she hands me the needle, then lifts the canteen the orc gave us to the wound above my eye, letting the water drizzle over it. Blood-tinged streaks run down my face and throat, staining my shirt and causing the fabric to stick to my skin. “Needle me.”

I watch her intently, trying not to crinkle my brow, and something sparks in my middle when the tip of her pink tongue slips between her lips and her eyebrows pinch together in concentration. It has to be one of the most adorable sights I’ve ever seen, and fuck, I can’t look away. Not even when she drives that needle through my skin.



“Don’t look at me like that,” she says, her eyes flicking down to meet mine before she jabs me again.

“Like what?” My lips part, and the tip of my tongue slides along my teeth.

“Like you have stars in your eyes.”

“Those would be tears. You are stabbing me repeatedly, are you not?”

She pauses, resting her hand against my head. “I suppose you’re right, but in all honesty, the gash was barely there before you collided faces with the man. So, in that perspective, you brought this on yourself.”

“You’d think it would earn me some sympathy, but he deserved it. I’d do it again, given the chance.”

“Hmm,” she grumbles, pulling the last stitch through. “Do you have something to cut this with?”

“No, but—” Before I can offer a suggestion, she bends forward and bites the string with her teeth, cutting the plastic-like thread apart.

“All better,” she says, sitting back and twisting as if she’s going to move to the other side of the cage. I catch her face with the palm of my hand, bringing her gaze back to me. Her face falls blank, expressionless, as I look over the red mark the man left, stroking my rough thumb over her smooth skin, and wishing I could take it away. She’s their princess, for heaven’s sake. In our kingdom, the man would be punished until he forgot his name if he touched Alice like this.

“I’m sorry,” I say, pleased that she hasn’t slid away from my touch.

“You didn’t hit me.”

“No, but I should’ve stopped it.”

“You were chained and dying.”

“I wasn’t dying. I’m immortal. I’ll heal within a few hours, and still... I should’ve been able to stop him.”

Her eyes slip down to the small gap between us. “You did enough.” With that, she gently pushes away my forearm and I let it fall as she returns to her side. My stomach drops and my smile disappears the moment she moves away. “We can’t all be heroes, you know.”

“That might be true for most, but not for me.”

“You’re in for a rude awakening, then. Heroes don’t survive here.”

## Eva

“**W***ake up, human!*” My beast stirs, swirling inside me like snakes moving through my middle, binding and twisting together into tangled knots.

“Nice to see you’re on talking terms again,” I mumble, groaning and rubbing my palm into my eye. At some point, I fell asleep again, tucked into the far side of the cage with the blanket wrapped around me. It’s still colder than when the hell flame shines, but not as frigid as it was when darkness first fell.

“*I said, get up!*” My eyebrows furrow as I try to will my eyelids to lift. A bloodcurdling scream rushes the process. I tear my eyes open, pushing up from the cage floor. My head twists, frantically looking around and trying to make sense of what is happening.

Fire rages, burning up one of the tents, and a body flings itself from the opening, screaming in a way that makes my teeth ache and my stomach spin. The creature’s clothes have caught fire, and flames rage behind him as he falls to the ground, becoming still.

“What? What’s happening?” Finn says, rousing and peeking through the bars beside me.

“I... I don’t know.”

As the ground begins to tremble, two figures hurtle towards us. Other creatures scatter in panic as men shout orders, but as the figures draw nearer, I freeze in place. My heart ceases to beat. One is the man who struck me earlier, the other a stranger. Before I can respond, the sharp tip of a blade protrudes through the bars, pushing me backward towards the cage’s far side. The blade’s tip presses against my throat, just above my collarbone. I wince, teeth grinding together as I elongate my neck as far as it can extend. The greater the distance between myself and the blade, the better.

“Hand them over, handsome,” the unfamiliar man, the one Finn had confronted earlier, commands. “You believed you could escape punishment, but my fractured nose will rest easy knowing you’ll be in the belly of a hollow.”

Finn hesitates, his gaze darting between me and the demanding man. Eventually, he extends his hands through the bars. “Just me. Leave her out of this. Please.” The elf raises his eyebrows but does not approach my side of the cage. He clamps a shackle around one of Finn’s wrists, securing the other end to the bars. Once he completes his task, the man wielding the sword withdraws his blade. The two men snigger like thieves before retreating into the forest, leaving us alone in the cage.

The shaking intensifies, and before I can form a coherent sentence, something bursts out from the ground. It’s long and black, extending like a hand to grasp the soil. Additional arms follow, tearing a larger hole in the ground until a body can emerge. Smoke envelopes it, masking its form, but does little to muffle the screams as it ravages the camp, leaving disfigured

corpses in its wake while it creeps and crawls across the forest floor. It's only a few feet tall, but its shape spans more than ten feet wide. Both men and creatures are dragged into the mist by their legs.

"What in the world is that?" Finn inquires, his voice rising in pitch with every word.

*"I don't think he wants to know the answer."* A hollow. Dark creatures, soulless, composed of dark magic and whatever DNA my father could gather.

Suddenly, Asmodeus materializes near the cage, his hands deftly working the locks. "Well, aren't you fortunate? If I were in your shoes, I'd flee to the hills because that thing is deadly." He pauses before opening the gate. "Now, remember who assisted you, Auntie. Next time we cross paths, particularly if it's that thing inside you controlling you, show mercy," he murmurs, the words spilling out so rapidly I struggle to comprehend them.

Without waiting for a reply, he vanishes before my eyes, leaving behind a cracked gate.

"Wait!" Finn cries out, his shoulders drooping the moment he realizes Asmodeus has already departed. "The shackle... That damn trickster. I should've headbutt him harder."

I scan the cage, seeking a key or something to unlock the lock, but find nothing.

"You must leave," he insists, his free hand gripping my arm and drawing my attention back to him. "Go."

"But you—"

"I said go, damn it. There's no need for both of us to perish here. Go."

"We can break the lock, I just—"

His laugh cuts me off, his head shaking slowly from side to side. "No, pretty girl. There's no way you'd break it fast enough. Not without magic—"

something we're both lacking at the moment. Now go. Run before that thing comes over here."

He threads a hand roughly through his hair, pulling at the roots, and leaving it mussed and sticking out in every direction. Quietly, I slip through the gate and tiptoe around the outside of the cage.

*"Run, human. The man is right."*

I inhale, holding my breath as I move further away from the cage. "No. He's trapped in that cage because of me. I'm not leaving him."

*"You're going to get us killed for a stranger. If we weren't so weak right now, I'd force you to leave. Instead, we're going to die here because you want to play the hero."*

"I'm not anyone's hero. I owe him."

*"Why, because he head-butted a man?"*

"Among other things. He removed my mask and demanded my shackles be taken off. He shared his food instead of letting us starve. He doesn't deserve to die like this. I just need..." My voice trails off as I spot an ax on the ground next to a fallen member of the king's guard. "I need that."

Struggling to pry it from his death grip, I pull with all my strength. Inch by inch, I drag it towards the cage.

"What are you doing?" Finn whispers, "Run."

"Not without helping you." Once I reach the cage, I hoist the heavy wooden handle over my shoulder, the double-sided blade barely missing my shoulder blades. "Now sit back. I'm not a great aim." His eyes widen, but he complies, pulling the chain taut across the bottom of the cage.

"Please, don't cut off my hand."

"I'll try," I say, drawing back and slamming the blade down with all my might. The impact echoes out and time seems to freeze as the hollow halts,

slowly turning to face us. I swallow hard and quickly glance at the chain, letting the ax drop. The links are smashed, with only one loop still attached to Finn's cuffed hand. "We need to leave." I grab the mask that they forced onto my face from the cage. It might be useful if he touches me again and my beast emerges. I don't think I'll survive much longer in these woods on my own without him, especially with that creature pursuing us.

"You think?" He springs from the cage as the creature charges towards us. Finn effortlessly lifts the ax from the ground, grabs my hand, and pulls me behind him through the forest. We should have run in the opposite direction, like everyone else. This path, however, only leads to water. When he finally releases me, I do my best to keep pace with him, despite the ground becoming increasingly rocky as we near the water. Each step on the uneven ground sends pain shooting through the arches of my bare feet.

We reach the riverbed, the water rushing past boulders that protrude from the riverbed, creating whitecaps that crash over their tops. The once gentle stream is gone, but it could be worse. Other sections of this river have rapids that churn in every direction.

"Please tell me you know how to swim," Finn demands, spinning around to scrutinize the woods, his gaze hunting for the hollow. My silence earns me a look of wide-eyed alarm.

Of course, I don't. I've never even dipped a toe into water deep enough to necessitate the skill—the most immersive water experience I've had is the bathtub in my bedroom. My upbringing was a crash course in all things royalty, from the proper way to hold a fork to the art of chewing with my mouth closed. My sisters and I were taught how to waltz, how to walk with grace, and be dainty enough to swoon our future husbands. We learned how to run a castle, set a table, and curtsy. Swimming was not on the agenda!

My silent confession must be written all over my face because, in a heartbeat, he abandons the ax and lifts me by the waist. Instinctively, my legs coil around his torso, and I clutch his shirt like a lifeline, still gripping the leather strap of the mask.

His face is so close to mine, I can feel his breath against my skin. Warm and sweet, like honey. The cuff on his hand might still dampen his magic, but he still smells heavily of it. It storms my senses and my nostrils flare, my breath coming out in ragged spurts from the excursion.

“Hold on.” It’s not a question. It’s a command as he rushes into the water, forcing us deeper until the current pulls us. His arms swing and legs kick frantically, trying to keep our heads above the water. The creature, surrounded by its smoky mist, stops at the river’s edge, slipping down the side of the bank for a beat before turning back around with a screeching roar. “Is it following us?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“*If it weren’t for him, we’d be chopped liver,*” my beast says, and I feel her presence wane. My eyes flick over Finn’s face. I’m touching him, and *he’s* touching me, yet she rests. What is it about him that makes her not want to protest? Every other man up until now, she’s taken issue with. She’s made me physically sick if I so much as thought of someone she didn’t believe was worthy of our affections, but Finn’s here. He’s crossing a line that no one else has crossed and lived to tell the tale.

“Princess...” Finn gulps in air as he tries to swim. “As much as I enjoy the way you’re looking at me right now, I need you to help tread water.”

“Tread what?”

“*Water,*” he repeats, rolling his eyes. His hands latch onto my hips, swiveling my body around the side of him. “Lose whatever you’re holding,



you'll have to hang on and you'll need both hands." One glance at the mask has my heart speeding away in my chest.

If I ditch it, and she changes her mind about him, the man who just saved me could die a terrible death. I can't risk that. I need it. I need to know there won't be a repeat of Ash. Making the call, I grip my thighs tightly around Finn, letting go to pull the leather around my neck. I place the mask on, feeling the magic sew into my flesh. I won't be able to take it off, but he will. It's better than losing the one thing that'll enable me to control myself.

"What are you doing?" He grits, his hand reaching up to pull at the leather.

"No. I can't lose it. Not yet, not until I know my beast won't hurt you." Lightening my grip, I let him shove me onto his back.

"Fine... Grab my shirt and kick your legs as fast as you can. We have to get toward the bank. The rapids are growing stronger and I'm not sure what lies ahead." I do as he says and slowly we make it toward the edge, fighting the current. My chest heaves as we crest the riverbank, and my muscles burn. "Let me help," Finn says, reaching for the buckle of the mask as I push up to a sitting position on the rocks.

"No. Leave it."

"Why?" He crouches next to me. "The cage didn't suppress her, and you didn't have that on. I'm alive, so why worry about it now?"

"I just need it." What am I supposed to tell him? I'm worried the moment we no longer require his assistance that my beast will kill him for touching me? I'll pass.

"But it hurts you—" I cut him off with a shake of my head.

"I just need it. Please, let it go," I say, my tone harsher than before.

He holds his hands up in a silent surrender. "Alright. I will. The pup can keep her muzzle."

## Eva

“**H**ow deep into your realm do you think we just went?” Finn clears his throat, extending a hand to help me up. My clothes are soaked, and if it weren’t for the hell flame finally making its appearance, I’d be frozen solid.

“We couldn’t have gone too deep, but we’re not in The Hollows anymore,” I say, scrutinizing the dense woods along the river’s edge. The trees reach right up to the water, their roots emerging from the soil near the shore. Some of the gnarled trunks are fully submerged, indicating a change in the water level, which seems to have claimed more land to expand the river.

Those same twisted trunks and drooping branches are a telltale sign of our location. The Weeping Willows. It’s the very place I was relieved to have escaped from before being captured, and somewhere I never wanted to return to. Despite its beauty, these woods are a true nightmare, and their mere presence suggests we’re closer to Solaria than I’m comfortable with.

It’s the largest grove of The Enchanted Forest and stretches across most of this side of The Enoch River. It certainly appeared smaller and less intimidating on a map. Reaching the boundary will take us days, and at this

point, I'm not sure which route to take. We could either cut through the heart of the forest towards the nearest boundary edge or follow the river, as I did the last time. The latter route is longer but would allow us to avoid most of the creatures lurking deep within The Enchanted Forest.

Taking the longer route might work to Finn's advantage, though. We'd emerge from this realm closer to Hell Hold than if we cut straight through the forest.

Finn unlaces his shirt, then grips the hem and yanks the soaking wet fabric over his head. My mouth goes dry at the sight of bare skin. *Too much* skin. I hastily avert my gaze. He deserves his privacy. He'd do the same for me... I think.

The sound of water hitting the ground resonates as he wrings the fabric out. After a moment, I glance back at him, assuming he'd put his shirt back on, only to find that he hasn't. Instead, he's tucked part of it into the waistband of his pants, leaving quite a view for me to try to ignore. It's easier said than done.

I'm not unfamiliar with the sight of a man without his clothes. It's not a scandalous secret, and considering the castle of horrors I come from, I wish I could say it's an uncommon sight. My father insisted on us remaining 'intact' but wanted his 'prizes' to know how to please a man so we could impress them on our wedding day. He had us watch hired individuals perform acts, explaining what they were doing and how things worked. We attended those 'lessons'—if you could call them that—as frequently as we practiced waltzing. To this day, I'm unsure whether those demonstrations were performed by volunteers or people my father coerced into participating. If they were there against their will, they never showed it.

Then there's Asmodeus. He's older than me, even though he's technically

my nephew. The man refuses to wear shirts unless he's in the presence of the king. It's something I've never given much thought to, but this situation with Finn is different. Being here with him alone feels *intimate*.

Part of me wishes I could do the same. If I had my bag, I could change into something else, but it's long gone. I doubt the man who caged me even bothered to bring it along when he dragged me back to the camp. Now, I'm left in a soaked satin chemise that clings to every curve of my torso and drips in streams from the hem. Fortunately, it should dry quickly.

"If we head south along the river, back toward the Hollows, we should encounter an old temple," I suggest, wringing the water from my hair. "We can pause there for a while, but while we're in this section of the woods, we can't afford to rest. The moment we do, we're as good as dead." Finn steps in front of me, his smooth, tattooed chest directly in my line of sight. I force my breath to come out evenly as I lift my gaze. One of his eyebrows lifts in a silent question that dies on his tongue. "I've seen it. The trees here are sentient, and as long as we don't harm them and keep moving, they'll leave us be."

"Why do I get the hint there's another option?"

"Because there is. Instead of heading toward Hell Hold, we could cut through the heart of the forest, but..."

"But what?" He takes a step closer, and I swallow hard, despising the way the mask tightens when my jaw clenches. For a moment, it presses into the bridge of my nose, causing me to wince. Finn's lips part as he gazes at the mask, as if he's considering trying to persuade me to remove it again, but he thinks better of it.

"I don't know what we'll encounter along the way. Venturing deep into the forest is risky, but I don't think it's riskier than staying along the river. My

father will be moving toward Hell Hold soon, since the prince—you—outsmarted him. If we stay here, they might catch up to us.”

“We risk getting captured again.”

“Yes.” I lower my chin toward my chest, trying to resist the urge to look at him. I shouldn’t... It’s the respectful thing to do. The *lady-like* thing to do. Yet, I can’t help the way my eyes deceive me. He’s *gorgeous*, and all the things statues are made to commemorate. The very sight of him is addicting and sends a surge of dopamine gushing through my veins.

“But if we cut straight across, it’ll take longer for me to get back to Hell Hold. Your father might beat us there,” he muses, chewing the inside of his cheek in thought.

“Yes, but we’d also avoid The Hollows.”

“That’s what you called that creature,” he says, pointing in the direction we came from. I nod once, and he threads a hand through his hair, sweeping it to the side. “Alright... Let’s find this temple first. Then we’ll decide. I think we both could use some rest before we make any further decisions.”

Stepping past him, I head into the woods. Regardless of the forest’s nature, it’s still safer than being out in the open.

“Lead the way, Princess. I’ll be right behind you.”



**W**e journey through the woods for hours, undisturbed. There’s no sign of the hollow we fled from, or any other creatures for that matter, save for the birds chirping in the leaf canopy and the occasional scurrying rodent.

“Up and over,” Finn instructs, lacing his fingers together to form a step. I place my foot in his hands and he boosts me over the rock ledge. I spin around, offering him my assistance, only for him to scale the ledge himself. “How much farther?”

“Not much,” I say, and he falls into step beside me, his curiosity practically tangible.

Taking a deep breath, I try to regain my composure. We’ve been walking for what feels like an eternity. It doesn’t help that I’m claustrophobic and this mask is as constricting as it gets. It’s predominantly leather, curving up over my nose. The strap splits into two around my ears, merging back together to fasten behind my head with a buckle. Wire bars form the front near my mouth like a cage; it doesn’t physically hinder my breathing, but the pressure it applies on my jaw unnerves me.

“Sooo... You’re not going to tell me why you insist on wearing that thing, are you?” Finn spins a finger in the air in front of his mouth. Why is it so important to him? It’s not affixed to *his* face or digging into *his* nose.

“No.”

He tsks his tongue. “Pity... You have such a beautiful voice. It seems almost criminal to stifle it.” I glance at him from the corner of my eye.

Choosing to sidestep his remark, I concentrate on the reality of our predicament. Finn is a hero, a warrior, and his kingdom will always take precedence. The threat of my father advancing on Hell Hold ignited something within him. I saw it in his emerald eyes. This means that once we rest, he’ll opt to take the fastest route home so he can stand by his prince... *his king*.

The question remains: am I willing to risk being captured again, or encounter The Hollows to stay with him? I have no desire to traverse these

woods alone, but as long as I'm in this realm, I'll never be safe. At some point, Peregrine or my father will divert their attention from the war to locate me. I might not be a top priority for my father, being merely a pawn in his game, but Peregrine *needs me* and his search will be relentless.

If I was wise, the choice would be clear-cut. I'd venture off on my own, giving myself the best shot at survival. I could have Finn remove the mask before we part ways, thereby protecting him from the risk of my beast seizing control. It's a win-win situation, but I can't deny that I yearn for the companionship. He might be talkative, but there's a calming presence about him. I don't feel so alone when he's here.

Perhaps it's because we're both in the same predicament, sharing the same fate. I don't know. All I can say with certainty is that the first night in the cage, when we shared that blanket, was the most peaceful sleep I've had since my leap from that tower. And since then? My heart beats a tad slower, my nerves are less frayed, and I'm not as terrified of this forest as I was the last time I traveled through it.

"There she is," I declare, brushing the dirt off my hands from the recent climb. "Just up ahead."

Finn follows my gaze, spotting the crumbled ruins of my mother's temple. Overrun by vegetation, the towering pillars that once supported the roof are now either blanketed with vines or fractured into pieces. Part of the temple has collapsed, but I can sense the magic from here. And if I can, a druid like Finn most certainly can. It's still protected, meaning the woodland creatures won't be able to infiltrate it, but Finn and I can, as long as we harbor no ill intentions toward the temple itself.

"So, I've been thinking..." *Here it comes.* "Regardless of the path we choose, you haven't mentioned your plans post-escape from this realm. You

could accompany me, you know, to Hell Hold.”

My steps are slow and calculated as we draw closer to the temple.

He’s right. I haven’t figured it out yet. I’ve been focused on putting one foot in front of the other, just trying to survive the next minute, hour, or day. As comforting as it would be to have a plan, Hell Hold doesn’t seem to be the answer. I would be stepping into the city full of my family’s enemies, and hoping they don’t assume the worst.

To them, my people, *my kind*, are monsters. We are abominations they deemed too dangerous for their world. They incarcerated us due to this fear, and there’s nothing preventing them from putting my head on a spike to send a message to my father or from throwing me back into this prison realm. They will reinforce the boundary now that they know it’s breached. And when that happens, I don’t want to be trapped on this side. It would be better for me to cross into the neighboring realm as soon as possible, and lie low until this war is over.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I say, ascending the crumbling stairs of the temple.

“Well, you can’t stay here. Your father wants you in chains, and something tells me whoever this betrothed of yours is, they’re not going to give up.” The wind shifts, rustling the leaves and creating miniature whirlwinds of dust on the steps.

“True, but I can’t go to your home either. Your people disapprove of what I am, especially now that our kingdoms are at war again. I’ll be better off on my own.”

“Sure, my people are scared, but they’ll turn a blind eye once I tell them you saved me.” We reach the top, and before I can touch the handle of what



remains of the temple door, Finn beats me to it, wrenching it open and sending dust spiraling through the air.

“You’re right. They might accept me until they learn my last name. And with my luck, I might not even have to voice it. Are there many white-haired women where you’re from? On this side of the boundary, the only ones with such hair are of royal blood. If it’s the same over there, one look and they’ll have me beheaded. My actions won’t matter.”

“No... I’m not sure I’ve seen anyone with hair like yours. Even the elderly ladies have more silver hair than pure white, but the late queen, your sister, had hair so blonde, some considered it white. The kingdom knew exactly who she was, and everyone adored her.”

He refers to my father’s first-born, Persephone. Her existence led to his curse, and it’s why she’s the only one of his daughters he didn’t experiment on. She was the product of the king’s affair with a goddess named Demeter. When his wife discovered it, she cursed him to only father daughters. The king killed my mother for it, assuming her death would end his curse, but it didn’t.

“Half-sister,” I correct, “and Persephone married your king centuries ago. Things were different then, and she didn’t just waltz into the Devil’s home. He abducted her.”

Finn snorts, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “He didn’t abduct her. They were madly in love and your father sought to sell off your sister, just as he did you. My king saved her from the very fate you’re attempting to escape. They’ll understand.”

“No...” I trail off, shaking my head. “I’m sorry, but the moment I get mad, and my beast rears its head, they’ll seal me back in this realm along with

everyone else and then my father or Lord Peregrine will catch me. I'm better off on my own."

"Well, I can't just leave you out here by yourself."

"You can and you will. All it takes is for you to move your feet one way, while I go the other."

Finn doesn't respond as we head inside, but I feel his aura shift. He wants to protest. Why, I don't know. He doesn't know me. He has no reason to look out for my well-being, but I suppose it comes down to who he is. A hero, and heroes will risk everything for those they deem helpless. I just hope he realizes that the person he's trying to save is no different from the creatures he killed during the battle at the boundary.

## Finn

The temple is breathtaking... The vibrant blooms swirl round the wreckage. A fountain still runs by magic in the middle of the open stone room. The goddess Aphrodite herself is captured in a statue, her feet beneath the trickling water that flows into the fountain from a nearby stream.

Otherwise, it's empty. There's no furniture, no tapestries. It's been abandoned and left for nature to reclaim, but I can feel the power laced within these walls. It radiates from the fountain and dances in waves across my exposed skin. The sigils of my tattoos sense it, too.

"What this place must've been like hundreds of years ago..." My voice is barely above a whisper, but the stone walls seem to grab hold of my words and amplify it. Eva hasn't even turned her gaze away from the statue. All she's managed to do is step closer to it, bit by bit, her attention glued to the goddess. "Beautiful, isn't she?" I ask, crossing the room to stand next to her.

"Yeah, I suppose she was." Eva presses her full lips together, and I pause, awestruck to see this obnoxiously brave woman show the first real sign of raw emotion. I've only known her for a short period of time, but after everything we've been through, she's stayed stoic... until now.

It's not much, but I can see the gloss of her eyes, the way the blue rings of them turn brighter. This place means something to her. I wish I knew what, but asking doesn't seem like the right thing to do. Instead, I do the only thing I know how, and that's making light of a shitty situation.

"What kind of name is Peregrine?" I recall the way she effortlessly slipped her betrothed name into her excuse to not come with me to Hell Hold. For the first time since we've entered, she looks away from the goddess, snapping her gaze toward me. Slowly, I catch her lips tilting into a smirk through the grate of the mask.

"An awful one," she answers, making a noiseless laugh roll through me.

"It's a mouthful... and I can assure you no self-dignified woman is going to moan that out loud. At least not without shortening it to Perry, and I don't think that's much better." Her laugh is just as angelic as her voice... If not more so. "So, tell me, if you entered the gauntlet, how are you still breathing and betrothed? I thought only one could win your father's trial?"

"Normally, yes. Only one *man*. Peregrine and I had an agreement to help each other until it was just us left, but before we could face off, my father announced him as the winner."

"Well, I'm sorry he's a prick... but Asmodeus was right. It took a lot of guts to enter a fight to the death." I sit on the edge of the fountain, facing her.

"Not guts. I was terrified, but it was either enter and hope for the best or accept my fate. If I hadn't been there, an orc would've likely won, and I'd surely be dead right now. It wasn't bravery or guts or some noble purpose that made me join. It was a need to survive."

Her arms fold across her chest, and I have to force my eyes away to keep from staring. Especially since those perfect tits push together and peek at me

from beneath what's left of her chemise. I want them... *in my mouth*, and that's a problem.

The woman is by far the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Even with her hair a mess, and what's left of her satin slip, the woman could be a goddess herself. Her skin practically glows, her eyes are unlike anything I've ever witnessed, and every piece of her is perfect.

As if sculpted by an artist, she has hourglass curves, and where most of the women in The Seven Realms feel the need to alter themselves. She embraces her natural shape instead of binding her ribs with corsets and starving herself frail. Whether that's by choice or because this is all she had to wear, I'm not sure, but I'm here for it.

Eva's shorter than me, and when standing she has to crane her neck to look me in the eye, but what she lacks in height, she makes up for with death glares... Small, but mighty.

"Who was she to you?" I ask. From where I sit on the fountain, it puts her face level with mine and while I wait for her to respond, I trace the shape of her lips with my eyes.

"My mother." Somehow, that doesn't surprise me. Eva is far from normal. Her voice is *divine*, and I could listen to her speak all day and never grow tired of it. It makes sense that she's the daughter of a goddess, and Aphrodite was known for her gifts of love and beauty.

"Would you like to make an offering to her spirit while we're here?" I'm not sure what we'd require to do such a thing, but if it puts her heart at ease, I'm willing to figure it out.

"No. I didn't know her. My father had me through a surrogate. Biologically, I'm her daughter, but she didn't raise me. My older sisters did... and the sisters I was close to have already joined her."

Good gods... Shatter my heart, why don't you?

The worst part of being a druid is feeling everything, even if you don't want to. Magic comes from emotions. My strength is a result of what I've lived through. And I've seen the look on her face in the mirror more times than I can count.

I'm not sure why I do it, but I reach for her hand, and I'm delighted when she doesn't pull away. Not immediately. "I'm sorry... I know what it feels like to believe you're alone." Her gaze turns to me as she gently removes her hand from mine. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that sometimes having your world turned upside down isn't a bad thing, because when you finally figure out where you belong, you'll be glad you never settled for less. Your father... *Perry*... This bloody kingdom... All it did was smother you and keep you from becoming the person you're meant to be."

"Have you figured out where you belong?" she asks, her voice so quiet that my heart squeezes into a vice grip.

"I did... Up until I took the prince's place."

"We should rest while we can." Eva takes a seat on the ground near the fountain.

"I suppose you're right... The protection spells your mother cast should keep out anything seeking to do us harm. I don't think we'll need to take shifts." Eva curls up onto her side, propping her head against her arm as she stares at the door to the temple. I don't lay down, but rather slump against the fountain and close my eyes. The hell flame shines through the crumbled ceiling, but even the broad daylight doesn't stop sleep from pulling me under within seconds.



**W**e step out of the temple, and the moment I've been dreading descends upon us. I need to return to Hell Hold, to warn my people of the impending attack. I made a vow to protect the prince with my life, and up to this point, I've honored it.

Eva will want to cut through the forest. I can sense it in my soul, and I'll be compelled to leave her alone and do as I've always done. I'll put my kingdom before everything else, even though I owe this woman my life... Regardless of my decision, I'll place people in danger. If I stay with her, Hell Hold will be taken by surprise. If I leave, she might not survive the woods on her own.

"Well, what will it be?" she asks. I don't need her to elaborate. When I remain silent, she nods her head, conveying that she has my answer without me having to voice it. "Then this is where we part... I'm going to cut through The Enchanted Forest. I have to. I can't risk being captured again."

"I understand," I say, bowing my head and wringing my fingers together. Up until now, I'd been so sure of my choice. Yet, it still feels wrong when it shouldn't. Taking the fastest way to Hell Hold is the right choice, but I can't bring myself to move. My gaze travels to the trees, listening to the gentle tumble of the river, as if it can solve my problems.

"I'll be fine. Your kingdom needs their hero." Eva turns her back to me, allowing me to loosen the mask on her face. When she removes it, she takes three steps away before looking back at me. "I never got your full name."

There's a red ring where the edges of the mask rested on her face. It'll fade, but the raw indent it's made into her nose will take time to heal. I'm not convinced she heals quickly either, considering the scratches are still scabbed over on her arms from running through the woods.

“Finnick,” I answer, hoping she won’t press further. That’s all she needs to know, but it’s also all I can provide.

Eva grins, nearly stopping my heart with a single look. She gazes at me for a long moment before turning back towards the woods and continuing on her way. I watch her leave, and with every step she takes, worry seeps deeper into my bones.

I can’t do it. I can’t bring myself to turn around, to head back to the river... I’m incapable of willing myself to go home, not if it leaves her out here alone. Taking a deep breath, I do the only thing that feels right. I take a step... It’s a slow progression, but it puts my heart at ease.

Eva must sense me, or perhaps her beast does. Her feet halt their progression, and she looks at me over her shoulder. “You’re going the wrong way, Finnick of Hell Hold.”

“I suppose I am.”

“The river is behind you,” her voice carries through the air and my stomach flutters. It’s so fucking mesmerizing... The thought of never hearing it again twists me in a way I can’t explain, but I need to hear it. I want to hear it.

The loyal warrior in me knows I should be marching down that riverside. I should be returning home to my friends, but then there’s her... Eva needs me. Even without my magic I can help. And there’s the fact I’m drawn to her in all of her masked bandit glory...

“I know,” I breathe.

“Yet you’re not changing direction.”

“No, I suppose I’m not.” I stop next to her, and she narrows her gaze into lethal slits.

“What are you doing? They *need* you. I’m more than capable of handling



myself.”

“Says the girl who wound up sharing my cage.” I hold up my hands in a silent surrender. “You won’t even know I’m here.”

“I highly doubt that... and I don’t need you to protect me. I’ll have my beast. She won’t have to be muzzled if you’re not around.”

So... The truth comes out. The mask truly was because she was scared of her alter ego hurting me.

“Oh no, don’t get it twisted, babe. I’m doing this for me.”

It’s a white lie... but a necessary one. I don’t want her to believe I think she’s incapable of handling herself, but I also don’t think she needs to make this journey alone when there’s another way. Kai and the kingdom will be fine... *Hopefully*. After all, they believe I’m dead.

“Look,” I continue. “I’m no stranger to strong women wanting to take care of themselves. One is very near and dear to me, and I’ll support her until the end. I’m not saying you can’t do this on your own. I’m saying I don’t want you to... and if it means not having to be alone myself, then it’s a win-win.”

“Your king—”

“I am not their king. I’m a man who has served my time. They’ll survive without me.”

“Fine.” She walks deeper into the woods. Lifting the mask back up to her face, she cringes as the leather fits against the marks where her skin has rubbed raw.

“What are you doing?” I try to stop her hand, but she swats my fingers away before I can.

“Trust me. It’s for the best.”

“I don’t think it is...” I plead, my eyebrows tipping and worry creasing my brow.

“It’s not your choice to make.”

I fill my lungs, letting the exhale fill the silence between us as we walk side by side through the woods.

“We’re friends. There’s no reason for you to hurt yourself... If your beast wanted to hurt me, she would’ve in that cage.”

“It’s different now,” she grits.

“How? What’s changed?”

She spins, and I stop within an inch of my body barreling into hers. “Because you touched me.”

My brows squish together. My head tilts. “What are you talking about? Trust me, if I’d *touched* you, you’d know.”

“It didn’t have to be sexual to upset my beast... And if she’s given the chance, I can’t guarantee she won’t hurt you for it. The last person she didn’t approve of ended up in a pile of bones. I blacked out, and she *ate* him. *Please*... I’m trying to keep the same from happening to you.”

My feet slam to a halt, my lungs in my throat as I process what she’s admitted.

“She doesn’t approve of me?”

“I haven’t given her the chance to voice her opinion. But she’s never approved of any man before.”

My teeth grind together as I fish through the words to say, but come up short. “I see.”

“You should go to the river, Finn. Go home.” Eva wraps her arms around her middle, her hands sliding up her arms as she continues into the woods without me. That same feeling from earlier settles in, the panic growing the farther she gets.

“No. I’m staying... Just... Please don’t eat me. I’m gamey. Pass that

along, yeah?"

## Eva

**W**e've gone deep enough into the forest that the hell flame is mostly blocked out by the twisted canopy of leaves overhead. The birds are silent, and the mushrooms bloom, casting a glow across the moss-covered ground.

Finn knows what I've done, what my beast is capable of, yet he stayed. I thought for sure he'd run for the hills, but for some reason he's set his hero sights on saving me. In a realm where monsters lurk around every corner, it's not exactly a simple task. Especially when I'm his biggest threat.

Something crunches to my right, and I dart my hand out to stop Finn dead in his tracks. Listening, I wait for another footfall, but this time it comes with a resonating boom, like the creature pounced. A squeal of its prey follows, ringing out into the dark forest and sending small animals rushing away from the racket. The noise cuts off and the blood drains from my face.

Whatever that was, it wasn't small. It moved with lethal grace and I didn't have to physically see it to know that. It was calculated, waiting for the perfect moment to spring, and that's a move only apex predators make.

Everything else in these woods is just trying to see tomorrow. They're not out playing cat and mouse games.

"We need to go," I whisper, looking for somewhere to hide. The boom happens again, but this time it's closer and a low guttural growl reverberates in the air, sparking through me like a live wire. My beast might be suppressed, but I can feel her hackles raise. "Now." I grip Finn's hand and take off into a dead sprint. Once he catches on, he lets go and keeps pace.

"I didn't hear anything," he pants, neither of us careful about staying quiet any longer.

"Trust me. I could and whatever it is, we don't want to run into it."

We burst through the trees, the darkness concealing the low hanging wisps of branches until it's too late to avoid them. Once I'm close enough to make out the twigs in my way, they're already slapping against my skin. My lungs burn as I push harder, desperate to put as much distance between us and that thing as possible.

Suddenly, the ground ends and I skid to a stop. My momentum has me flailing as I teeter on the edge of a steep ravine, desperate to catch my balance before I fall. A strong arm slips around my middle and I'm dragged backward.

"Careful," Finn breathes. His breath is warm against my skin, causing goosebumps to slip down my throat. His magic hits me all at once and my senses explode in the most glorious way possible. It would seem the cuff around his wrist is still dampening his ability to cast, but the magic itself is building within his veins, making him smell sweet... *Addicting* even, like candied apples and whiskey. It's such an odd combination, yet one I'll never be able to forget.

Gathering my wits, I peel his arm away and start to climb down the sloped

edge of the ravine. A small stream lines the bottom, having carved this very trench into the soft dirt. “I bet there’s somewhere to hide down here.”

“If you say so,” he says, following me down and beating me to the bottom. Bracing for the pain to come, I latch onto the final handhold, ready to drop the rest of the way. My feet are going to hate this. Closing my eyes, I let go, and as I start to fall, hands grip my waist, and I’m gently placed on the ground.

“Thank you,” I mumble, his nearness clouding my head. I need to focus. We don’t have much time. Searching our surroundings, I find what I’m looking for. “There.” I point toward a cove in the ravine wall, mostly obscured by overgrown vines. We slip inside the small cave, just big enough for me and him to hide in face to face.

Our breath mingles in the sliver of air between us, our backs pressed against the cove walls. Nothing but a couple inches between our faces remain. My eyes flutter as I try to soothe my racing heart. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, flooding them until I can feel my heartbeat rattle against my eardrums.

“Finn...”

“Yes, Princess?” he whispers.

“Take my mask off...”

He’s quiet for a moment, the only sound comes from our ragged breaths. “But you said—”

“I know what I said, but you can’t cast magic and we don’t have anything to fight back with... I’ll try not to, but just in case, if I shift, you need to run.” His throat bobs, his emerald eyes boring into mine.

“O... Okay,” he says, lifting his hand to pull at the buckle. The mask falls free, and I catch it before it can drop to the ground. Gripping his hand, I

shove the leather strap into it, forcing his fingers to curl. For a moment, we just stand here in complete silence.

I don't even know if I can shift. The last time I took off this mask, my beast didn't resurface right away, but I don't know if that was from the physical exhaustion we endured before my capture, or the mask. At the present, I feel stronger than I did then... I just hope she recognizes that we do need Finn to get through these woods. I'm not sure I'll stay sane without him.

"Don't lose this," I whisper, finally forcing myself to let go.

His emerald eyes haven't moved away from mine. Not once. "I won't."

Something snarls, and the water in the stream stirs. Finn's body straightens as he tries to quiet his shaky exhale. A purr-like growl sounds from outside the little cave and whatever is creeping toward us knows we're here. *It's waiting.*

"Please tell me you can hear me," I whisper to my beast, squeezing my eyes closed. "Wake up."

The sound of sharp nails scrape over the stone jutting up from the stream, and twigs and roots snap as my nerves spark like rapid fire beneath my skin. Every instinct tells me to run, to hide, to fight. "Wake up," I grit. Opening my eyes, I find the worry in Finn's. He knows...

She's not coming.

A large paw scratches at the stone slab on the ground near the cove entrance. I search for my beast, looking for something that will tell me she's still here, and finding a single thread resembling her existence in my mind. I pull, unraveling it until her presence grows... and grows... "Wake up," I move the words, not wanting to make a drop of noise with that thing so close.

The creature recedes. This is part of its fun, and just like its last prey, it's going to hunker down and wait to pounce. I have to shift. If we leave this

cove, it'll kill us. Sucking in a shaky breath, I take a risk I swore I'd never do again. Lifting the hem of my satin dress, I pull it up and over my head, ignoring the way Finn's eyes grow wide. This isn't about him. It's not about me, either. It's about survival.

He doesn't fight me when I reach for his waistband, tucking a piece of my dress into it, just like he did his own shirt.

"What—" He swallows. "What are you doing?"

I lift my finger to my mouth, shushing him. "I don't want to lose my clothes when I shift," I whisper, and he presses his lips into a line. His eyes drop for a split second before he tips his head back to look at the ceiling of the cove.

My beast needs to get angry. I need her to react the same way she did to Ash, but I have to control it this time. If I let her take the reins, she might kill Finn for what I'm about to do, and I can't let that happen. Not after everything we've been through.

"I need you to touch me," I say, grabbing the leather mask from his hand, slipping the buckle through his belt, and hanging it off his side.

"You said the last person to do that died."

"I know what I said. Desperate times call for desperate measures." Gripping his hands—and still vaguely unsure how this works—I put them to my naked chest, hoping he'll get the hint. Finn audibly groans, his eyes closing as he breathes in a shaky breath. "Surely, you're more experienced at this than I am."

"Experienced? Yes. Very. Utterly terrified of dying in the next two seconds? Also yes. I don't wish to be eaten alive."

I'm not sure who I'm convincing more, him or myself, but I cup his jaw and his eyes open once more, staring down at me. He's so genuine... so *real*



that it's almost helpless but to get lost in them. "I'm not going to let that happen, but I need you to help me wake my beast up. If we have to go toe-to-toe with that creature out there," I point to the opening of the cove, "then she's our only hope of getting through this alive."

He nods his understanding. "Okay... Touching you will do that?"

"Yes," I say, dropping my hand and urging his to move. "It has before. She always gets pissy when men make advances."

He's silent, slowly letting his eyes drop to my naked form. I swear his pupils grow until their emerald color is nearly nonexistent. His warm hands glide from where I've placed them, just below my collarbones to drift up and over my shoulders and down my arms. He's so gentle... so *innocent* about it.

"If you don't want to—" He cuts me off with a shake of his head just as his feather-light touch sends a shiver down my spine.

"Let's not get hasty. I said you scare me, not that I didn't want to... or that I wouldn't do it anyway."

Reaching my hands, he weaves his fingers between mine and presses me back against the cove wall, then pins my hands near my head.

"What now?" he breathes, and I swallow down the lump forming in my throat.

"Keep going."

"As you wish." His mouth is so close to my ear, I feel his lips brush against the curve of it as he speaks. He releases one of my hands, and I don't know why, but I have an overwhelming need to bring him closer. I thread my now freed fingers into the hair at the base of his neck as he cups my breast, kneading me into a puddle of want... of adrenaline. His touch glides lower, slipping down my side, making goosebumps rise across my bare skin.

"More," I choke out, not sure how to voice the way I feel. It's... *electric*,

as if some dormant part of me has finally awoken, as if the pieces have clicked together. My entire life, I've dreaded my wedding night. I knew whoever I married wouldn't be gentle or kind, or care about how or what they did to me. Somehow, intimacy as a whole was swooped into the same mindset.

Not to mention how my beast made me feel when Ash made his advances, but now... Without her drowning me in horror, it feels like heaven. My body chases the connection, my spine arching off the cove wall as his fingers dance up the length of my thigh. Finn smiles against my shoulder, clearly enjoying the way I respond to him. The very thought has my heart racing, as if his silent approval is enough to ebb me on.

Finn's thumb rolls over the curve of my hips, his grip tightening as he kisses down the column of my throat. I didn't know it was possible to feel like this... to need someone so badly... nor did I know I'd be this consumed with it.

His hand caresses up the inside of my thigh, and my body trembles with anticipation. I want to know... I want to know what it feels like to have someone touch me there. Someone other than myself to make stars burst behind my eyelids, but he doesn't climb as high as I want him to. If simply running his hands along my body feels this good, I can only imagine what that would be like for him to do more.

Finn rests his forehead against mine, his emerald eyes darker than before. Something swirls deep within them, telling me he's just as mesmerized as I am. "Can you feel your beast yet?"

I shake my head no, trying to stay as still and as silent as possible. That thing might be waiting for its perfect opportunity to attack, but taunting it isn't going to bode well in our interest. Catching the tip of Finn's tongue

swipe between his lips, the way his chest rises and falls... I'm not the only one coming undone and part of me yearns to see him lose control.

He lets go of the hand he's continued to pin to the cove wall, and blood surges through my fingers once more. I hadn't noticed his grip deprived me of it. Finn grips my hips with both hands and spins my body until I'm facing the cove wall. His arm anchors me to him, looping beneath mine so his can cover my mouth. My back is plastered to the hardened muscle of his torso, and he uses his foot to spread my feet apart. The warmth of his hand slips down my stomach, cupping between my legs, and I shudder.

"Has anyone else had the pleasure of touching you here?" he asks, and I shake my head no, breathing in deeply through my nose. He's silent for a beat before pressing his lips to my throbbing pulse. "Do you want to be?"

Again, I nod. Only this time it's a yes. His breath comes out in a groan as he gives me what I want. His movements are slow and gentle, giving me exactly what I need, and at this moment I could practically beg for more.

Something primal comes alive within me, and everything pulls tight like a bow string as my beast surges up, but doesn't shift. My arousal wars with my worry of her hurting him, but I can't will myself to tell him to stop. I want this.

*"It's about fucking time you let me out."* My hold on her loosens the moment red scales pass by the vines. The light catches off their slick surface and scatters through the cave. *"Move out of the way,"* she commands.

As if breaking the spell, I push off Finn, putting as much space as the cove will allow between us, just as talons push through my fingertips. I don't shift all the way, forcing her to wait until we're far enough away from Finn. My teeth elongate, forming into sharp points and my vision casts everything in a sea of blue.

“Remember what I said. Run the moment you can,” I tell Finn, placing myself between him and the cave opening as the creature moves away. This is its game. It’s letting us know it’s still here, but waiting for us to make the first move.

“It took *you* long enough to show up,” I mouth off to my beast, and a sensation I’ve never felt before rolls through me, like a series of tingles as my beast laughs inside my head. I work up the nerve to push through the vines, knowing it’s lurking just outside our safe haven. “If we live through this, we’re having a serious talk.”

*“If we live through this, you better not suppress me again. It’s a bit hard to keep you alive if you have Elven magic spiraling through your veins, isn’t it?”*

## Finn

**S**wallowing hard, I step behind Eva, plastering my body to the back of the cove. My powers are shot, due to this godforsaken handcuff, leveling me to a helpless immortal monster snack. I did not wake up to die today, and though she's small, she is mighty, and far more equipped to face that thing than me.

"You got this, Princess. I have faith in you," I whisper, nudging her forward. Her head swivels, but the blue eyes I'm used to have been replaced with slitted pupils and a fluorescent glow.

"What are you doing?" she hisses, craning her gaze over her shoulder.

"What does it look like? Pep talking... *Hiding*... All the above."

She snorts, returning her stare to the cave opening. "My hero."

The creature has been circling outside. She must be waiting for it to step away long enough for her to step out of the cove and shift. If she does that here, well... I might get caught up in it. I'm no stranger to the creepy things in this world, but whatever's out there... That's far beyond my scope of monster hunting. If I had my magic or even a blade, it'd be different, but in my current state, running is the best option.

“Um, I’m sorry. What would you like me to do? Throw spare body parts at it and hope it gets full?”

Her fingers darken, turning into talons at the tips, razor sharp like daggers. Clearing my throat, I take a step back, putting my spine against the cool cove wall. “Do me a favor, when you kill that thing, save Daddy a leg, please. I’m starving.”

“You’re not my father.” She doesn’t move as she answers, watching through the vines for the creature stalking us.

“It’s a *phrase*.” *By the gods...*

“It’s a weird phrase then. You’re nothing like the king. He’s a psychopath who only cares about himself. You, on the other hand, care too much. He would’ve killed that creature with his bare hands if he had to and you cower in the dark without your magic and swords.”

*Ouch...* She’s not wrong, and I’m not sure if I should take it as an insult or a compliment that I’m nothing like the mad king. Before I can formulate a response, she’s pushed through the vines and the sound of bones snapping cuts the air, followed by a creepy as fuck clicking noise. It continues as she moves away and then I hear it, the boom of the predator outside landing in the stream and splashing up water.

Stilling my uneven breath, I peer through the vines, feeling the slams of Eva and the creature battling vibrate the ground. Growls, snarls, yelps, have my stomach whirling. It should be me out there. I should’ve had a fucking sword... I should’ve been the one to protect her from it. Worry places a crease between my brows as I catch a glimpse of ivory teeth, red scales, black fur, claws, and crimson spray as beasts rip into each other. I can only hope it’s not Eva’s blood that splatters across the rocks near the cave opening,

visible just until the blanket of vines. Nor that it's her yelp that cries out, sharp enough to send pain through my teeth.

Eva is so dainty... I should've kept her from having to endure this. What kind of hero would let her face that creature, beast or not?

Kicking myself, I remember that she told me to run... She demanded it, actually, but I can't leave her here. What if it's gotten the upper hand? What if she needs me? As the commotion falls silent, I suck in a breath and rip back the curtain of vines. Only what I see makes the blood in my veins run ice cold.

A naked humanoid body lies on the rocks. Gashes are ripped into its skin and a limb removed. The severed arm floats lifelessly with the current down the stream, staining the water and making crimson caps against the rocks.

Bile climbs my throat as my mouth waters in a sickening way. Swallowing hard, I close my eyes for a second. I will not throw up in front of this girl, but fuck... Every single time... Why is it I can be fine in the heat of the moment, but as soon as things calm, gore gets me? It sends my stomach spiraling out of control.

Getting myself together, I look at Eva's expressionless stare... I thought she was emotionless before, but this... I can't even wrap my head around it. Slowly, her gaze meets mine from where she's kneeling beside the body. Red rings surround her eyes as the color returns to their normal blue. Her lower lip trembles while I scan over every inch of her exposed skin, looking for wounds or any injury she might've acquired but finding nothing... Her beast fought whatever that was and barely obtained a scratch. The only sign of battle is a reddened mark across one of her thighs, as if dull claws caught it but weren't strong enough or sharp enough to break skin.

Her lip trembles harder as tears well in her eyes. "He was a shifter. Likely

a bounty hunter hired by my father or Peregrine.” She lifts a scrap of fabric for me to see. “He had this on him. It’s part of my comforter from my bedroom in Solaria.”

“Hey...” I brush her bloodied white hair from her face, checking again to make sure none of the splotches on her body are from her. “You did what you had to. He was going to kill us. Right? Or worse, lug us in chains back to your father. You saved us. Your beast is why we’re still alive right now.” A tear slips down her cheek and I brush it away with my thumb. “Come on, pretty girl.” I scoop her up, tucking her body against my chest. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“Did you still want a leg?” She mumbles against my chest, pulling a laugh from me at the most inappropriate time.

“No... I think I’ll pass this time.”

I carry her farther up the stream until the man is out of sight and out of mind, setting her down on a larger boulder just near the water. Pulling my shirt from my waist band, I bunch it up and soak it in the water. The stream isn’t deep enough for her to just get in and rinse the carnage away, but this will help.

“Close your eyes,” I tell her, wiping the wet fabric over her face, then rinsing it in the water only to do it again. Red streaks run from her mouth, down her throat, dripping down between the valley of her breasts. I’ll let her do the rest on her own, but I can at least help her with the places she can’t see, like her face and hair. When her ghost-white locks are thoroughly rinsed and her beautiful face is blood free, I hand my shirt to her, letting her finish the job.

“Did you know him?” I ask, taking a seat along the bank.

“No... but it reminded me of someone.” Little by little, she wrings out the



shirt and cleans herself up.

“Your friend, I’m assuming? The one you ate?”

She doesn’t reply for a long moment, rinsing the shirt and wringing it out one last time. “Yes. I cared for him a lot, but my beast didn’t share the same affections. Every time he’d do so much as hold my hand or hug me, she’d threaten to end him. Regardless of the risk, he chose to enter the gauntlet, and my father has a way of binding his daughter’s magic and abilities before the event with this enchanted ribbon. It’s the same magic that binds her when I wear the mask. Long story short, we tried to force her to accept him by mating while she couldn’t do anything about it, and the ribbon broke...”

“So, she killed him.” I finish for her.

“Yes.”

Pulling her dress from my side, I bunch it up, coming to stand behind her and slipping the fabric over her head. She weaves her arms through the proper channels until the fabric drapes across her body. It’s loose, and baggie, swishing around her knees, but it does little to hide what’s underneath... And now that I’ve seen her—all of her—I’m never going to be able to erase the mental image of her mouthwatering curves from my mind.

“That’s why you’ve wanted to wear this?” I finger the mask on my belt, unclipping the leather strap and handing it to her. Eva doesn’t waste a second putting it on.

“I don’t want the same thing to happen to you. I thought she was letting you live because we needed help, and I didn’t want her to change her mind the minute we didn’t. That stands now more than ever.”

“Well, I’d hardly say you’re helpless. You did just save us both, and she could’ve killed me in that cove, but didn’t. Hell, she could now, and hasn’t, but I understand.”

Looping the t-shirt fabric between my belt and waistband, I stand and offer her my hand. “We should get going.”

Eva doesn’t hesitate before taking my hand and rising to her feet. We travel through the ravine, looking for an easier way up than a straight climb, but we travel for a solid hour off course from our ‘straight through’ path until the ravine begins to level out and we can risk the climb to the other side. Reaching the top, I pause.

“Look,” I say, pointing toward a post that’s clearly been dug into the dirt. It’s man made, meaning we must be close to some civilization. Maybe we can find some food and whiskey—because if I have to drink water for one more day, I’m going to cry—and a bed... My mouth salivates just thinking of the comforts society brings.

It looks like the post used to hold up some sort of bridge that’s since been taken apart or crumbled. The pieces were likely carried away by the stream below. At the bottom of the post sits a skeleton. A faded sign is clasped in his bony grip. ‘City of the Damned’ with an arrow.

“That doesn’t sound promising.” I keep my voice low as Eva moves to stand next to me.

“It’s an abandoned city. Ash was on the guard and they used to put up warning signs all over the place during their travels. They aren’t to deter travelers from danger so much as to keep them from stumbling upon my father’s secrets.”

“Huh.” I pick up the sign, turning the weathered wood in my hands.

The skeleton shifts and his skull dangles forward. Clothes are still draped over the petrified shoulders and are slipped through the pants around his nonexistent waist. It’s as if everything alive about the man disintegrated, leaving behind the bones and possessions.

“I promise, we’re not in any more danger than what we’ve already been in,” Eva says, gently taking the sign from my hands and placing it back on the skeleton’s lap.

Crouching down next to the body, I look for anything that might be of use, since he clearly won’t be needing it. “Alright then, I believe you, but it’s not going to stop me from stealing the dead man’s sword.”

Her hand juts out, stopping me from wrapping my fingers around the hilt. “That, on the other hand, is dangerous. If you take the dead’s things, you’ll be cursed to join them in the afterlife. That’s why no one has touched them.”

“Well,” I raise my brows. “I don’t feel any magic, and without magic, there isn’t a curse.” And if I want to ensure Eva doesn’t have to risk her life the next time one of those creatures come around, I’ll need a sword. Wrapping my hands around the hilt. I pull it from the sheath, checking over the blade. It’s not too shabby for being left out in the elements for only god knows how long. Unclasping the sheath, I attach it to my belt, then shuffle through the man’s clothes, finding a small dagger hidden in his coat. I grab the blade and hold the handle out to her. “Here, take this.”

“There’s not enough magic in the world to convince me to take that.”

Cocking my head, I eye her. “You’d rather be defenseless in a realm full of beasts and monsters that can swallow you whole than take this dagger?”

“A dead man’s dagger,” she corrects, “and yes. I have my beast. We’ll be fine.” She starts to walk away, journeying into the woods the sign warned us of.

“Assuming I’m there to take off that mask.” I shout, then mumble under my breath. I just want her to be safe. What’s wrong with that? I slip it into the waistband of my pants before jogging after her.

## Eva

**T**his is all wrong... If we're near the City of the Damned, we've strayed too far north. Though, running from creatures and navigating the natural land was bound to put us slightly off track. I just didn't anticipate this.

Angry footsteps sound behind me while I rack my brain for where to go. This is the absolute last place we want to travel through, but I'm not sure what out of the stories I've read is the truth and what's fiction, contorted to scare kids from wandering into the forest.

If we circle north, we'll end up in The Poison Grove and it will only make Finn's journey home longer. On the flip side, if we go south, we might end up in the shifter dens. With one of them already having been hired to find me, it wouldn't be a good idea to risk that. Our best option is to continue as we have been, and hope we stay topside. No caves. No problem.

"Slow down for a minute," Finn says, jogging up to me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leave you. I'm just trying to figure out where we are."

"And did you?"

“ Yeah... You should know, I’ve never been here. From what I’ve heard, it’s a ghost town in the cave systems below us, but...” I trail off and Finn stops, grabbing my wrist and pulling me to a halt.

“What? I don’t know much about this realm. Everything I knew from before the boundary has changed. If you know something, you need to tell me.”

“The city belonged to the dark elves and was cursed by the fae. Anyone within the caves at the time of the curse was turned into these abhorrent, bloodthirsty creatures and they literally ripped each other apart. The entire realm went to war with the fae over it until my father trapped them within The Shadow Realm and sealed the gate shut. The city should be empty. The dark elves who survived wouldn’t return following the war. As long as we stay up here, we’re okay.”

Finn crosses his arms, his eyes squinting as he focuses on the ground. “I suppose we’ll find out then. For now, let’s just worry about staying out of caves, yeah?”

The breeze whips through the trees, and the birds have returned, chirping and singing away. For a place so ‘doomed’ it’s full of life and that gives me hope that things will—

The ground beneath me gives way with a sickening lurch. My heart races as I plummet down, down, down into darkness. I reach out frantically, grasping for anything to break my fall, but my fingers only meet empty air.

My body seizes, refusing any of my brain’s signals. I don’t scream. I just watch the hole in the ground grow smaller as I fall. My back collides with shallow water and sponge moss, and the breath is knocked from my lungs with the bone-jarring smack. For a moment, I stay still, feet beneath the ground, happy to at least have landed in the water instead of the spattering

across the rocky ledge. My bones and muscles still ache from the impact, but it's not as bad as it could've been.

More of the earth gives, crumbling inward and I lift my arm over my face, to keep the dirt and debris from hitting my eyes. Cringing, I roll up to a sitting position and wait for things to stabilize.

“Eva!”

“Down here!” I call back. It's hard to make out much of anything from inside the cavern, but the subtle glow of crystals along the walls is enough for me to get my bearings. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the gloom, but when they do, my stomach sinks. This isn't some random cavern. This used to be the entrance to Malodor...The City of the Damned.

The once-grand archway that marks the entrance to the city stands tall. My father, or perhaps the dark elves that remain in our realm, must've sealed this place away, encasing the history and the chaos like a tomb. For all I know, it might've been to contain the curse and keep it from spreading to other places like a virus.

According to the stories, the gate only opens at nightfall, which in The Seven Realms only happens once every three days, except for the black out. The crystals set in the stone will glow brightly, but until then, a barrier will separate Malodor from the rest of the world. I suppose the dark elves need to have some sort of regulation on what comes in and out of the underground city, since they lived in the heart of The Enchanted Forest.

Staggering, I climb to my feet. I was lucky to have landed on the edge of their once sacred pool, because any farther from this rocky shore, I would've drowned or would be in a broken heap on the rock ledge. The light from the hole is shaded, and I look up to find Finn peering inside.

“Fucking hell...Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I pause, looking back at the gate, “for now.”

“Wha—” he stutters, adjusting his stance. “What does that mean?”

“That city I was telling you about... Well, I’m looking at the front gate of it.” I glance over my shoulder at the archway, eyeing the elvish language that spells out Malodor inscribed in the stone surface, surrounded by orange-hued crystals.

“You’re kidding,” he says, standing up straight for a moment to thrust his fingers roughly through his blond hair. “Please tell me that’s a sick joke.”

“I wish I could.”

His head droops forward. “Alright... Okay... *Don’t panic*. We can figure this out. We’ll get you out of there... I just need a minute.”

“You’re panicking,” I say, squinting up at the light. “That’s the very definition of panicking.”

“You know what---You shush. I’m going to find something to pull you up.” He disappears from the hole, having wandered off.

Even if I could shift, I doubt my beast would be able to climb these stone walls. They’re smooth, unlike the towers of Solaria. Not that I could even try.

Finn doesn’t return for hours, and part of me wonders if he’s left... He should. There’s nothing up there that he can use to pull me out. The only way I’m getting out of this mess is if I go through the city. There’s a second entrance near the boundary, assuming I make it through there. It’s either that or wait here for my father’s lackeys to find us eventually, but that would be trading one death for another.

Heavy breathing sounds from above and I look up to find Finn peeking back through the hole. His skin shines in the light, and his hair is soaked with sweat. “I can’t find anything. I tried to chop down a tree limb and the bloody

thing tried to eat me. I barely escaped with my life.” He’s easily three stories up and his voice echoes off the cavern walls.

“It’s okay, Finn... There’s no way out of this. You should go. It’ll be dark soon and the forest is creepy enough during the day. If you push it, I bet you can cross the boundary into your realm by nightfall.”

He shakes his head before I’ve even stopped talking, his hands propped against his knees. “No... I’m not leaving you down there. You don’t know what’s beyond that gate.”

“Maybe not, but it’s my only way out. I can’t shift, even then I doubt we’d be able to climb out. There’s nothing to grip onto. I’m fine, don’t worry about me.” Before the words roll off my tongue, I know it’s a lie. I’m nowhere close to fine. Hell, I’m barely keeping myself together.

“The fuck you are! I told you that mask was a bad idea. You can’t shift to protect yourself and you want me to just be okay with letting you go through some haunted, cursed city? Hell no.”

“Well, if you hadn’t stolen a dead man’s weapons, we might not be in this predicament. It’s rather ironic that a hole opened up in the ground right after you plucked it from his person. Let alone that it happened directly over the front door to a sealed, forgotten city. It’s quite the coincidence if you ask me.”

“This has nothing to do with the dagger or the sword.”

“Really?” I hold my hands out, spinning around. “This looks like a curse to me.”

Finn stares for a moment, his head slowly tilting to the side as his gaze zones out. “That gives me an idea,” he says, shaking a finger before taking off. When he returns, he has old clothes gathered in his arms.

“Oh great. You stole more from him. You’re really trying to step both feet



into the crypt, aren't you? This is just fantastic." I sit on the stone floor.

"Will you hush? I'm making a rope, and if that doesn't work, I'll come down."

My eyes widen. "No... If the rope doesn't work, you'll leave me here. Do you understand?"

Finn sets down the clothes he's been knotting together. His eyes meet mine through the distance. "What aren't you telling me?"

"It's my beast... She's fae. It's why Peregrine wanted me, because my blood will open the gate to the shadow realm. He needed my father's blood and fae blood, and mine just so happens to be both. If anything is in there, it'll recognize what I am, and it will take its grudge out on me for it."

Finn continues to tie knots, shaking his head. "Your father likely told him. There's no way he just knew. That's like someone dropping one tear into a pool and asking someone to detect it. It's not possible."

"It is. My father never announces what his children can do. We're not even allowed to show our gifts to the staff in the castle. Peregrine said he can smell it on me. He's a dark elf, the same species as those who used to live in this city. If he could sense it, whatever is in there will, too."

"All the more reason for me to come. I can take your mask off, and we can get through it together." He drops his makeshift rope down, but it doesn't come close to being long enough. Finn curses under his breath. He'd need three more outfits to make it work.

"Don't be a hero." I swallow down the tears, the realization of what I'm asking him to do finally settling in. "You have to go. Jumping down here to take my mask off won't change anything. These caves are full of Elven magic. It's what the mask is made from. The moment the hell flame dims and that gate opens, I likely wouldn't be able to shift anyway, mask or not."

“No. There’s got to be another way.”

Tears stream down my cheeks as he presses his lips together, his eyebrows tipping in empathy. “No, there isn’t. You’re too good for this realm, Finnick of Hell Hold.” I do my best to force a smile to pull at my lips. “You have people who love and miss you. Don’t waste your chance to see them again on me. No one will mourn the Princess of Solaria. Everyone who would miss me is either dead or believes I’m some monstrosity. If anyone was going to get trapped down here... I’m glad it’s me.”

He drags a hand down his face, his teeth biting into his lower lip. Then, without a word, he stands and disappears from the hole, leaving me here. It’s what I asked him to do, and what I believe is best, but the way my heart seizes in my chest screams the opposite. With a glance over my shoulder, I spot the gate, knowing in just a few hours, I’ll be journeying through it and hoping I come out the other side.

Something swooshes down into the hole, the clank of metal ringing out around me as the bundle lands on the rock ledge. The sword and dagger are bundled into the clothes he stole. My lips part, ready to speak, right as a skin-colored blob falls from the sky and cannonballs into the deepest section of the sacred pool. Finn emerges from the surface, whipping his head to toss a stream of water from his hair. With effortless strokes, he swims to the edge and lifts from the water. His back is to me, but I can’t look away as my eyes travel down the arch of his spine to find him naked. Water beads against his smooth skin, rolling onto the stone.

“What have you done?” I seethe. “You just signed your death warrant.”

“If you think I’m going to leave you to die down here alone, you’re just as mad as your father.”

“No, you’re right. Instead, we’re both going to die. You had a chance to

escape this realm, to see your family and friends again.”

He turns, holding a hand up with a nonchalant scrunch of his face. “Not so fast, pretty girl. I don’t give up so easily.”

“Well then, tell me this, oh *mighty warrior*. What happens when something creeps out of that gate? Hmm? Where are you going to hide? You don’t have magic.”

“I’m not defenseless, Eva. I don’t need my magic. I have a sword and a reason to make it out of here. That’s enough motivation for me.” He pushes up from the ledge and I dart my gaze away out of respect, letting him gather his clothes.

I turn my back to him as I speak, “Whatever your reason is to make it out of here should’ve had you heading toward the boundary, not jumping into the unknown.”

His wet feet pad across the stone toward me. “No... It didn’t because my reason is trapped down here.” The meaning of his words strikes me right to the heart. “Eva... You’re wrong, you know.” The way he says my name has butterflies storming through my middle. I glance over my shoulder, finding his leather pants have been shoved on. Slowly, I travel my gaze up the length of his body.

“What are you talking about?” I ask as Finn bends, hooking a finger below my chin and forcing me to meet his emerald eyes.

“I’m not dead, nor do I believe you’re a monstrosity, but *I would miss you*. We either find a way out together, or we share the same fate. You didn’t abandon me in the cage, so why the hell would I leave you here in this fucking hole?” He stands, dropping my face. I hadn’t noticed I’d been leaning into his touch until it left and I nearly toppled over. “Now, you get some rest. If that gate opens at nightfall. We only have a few hours.”

I watch as he crosses to the far side of the ledge, putting the gate in his line of sight. He sits, propping his back up against the wall, and lays the sword across his lap. His shirt is now loose over his shoulders. He put it on but didn't bother to lace up the strings that close the neck line, allowing the deep V to plunge until the point of the opening hits his abs.

When he finds me staring, he arches a brow. "What?" he asks, clearly still aggravated.

"You should rest. You need it more than me. I'll watch the gate," I offer, biting my teeth into my lip. He's been the one running around the forest for most of the day, trying to find a way to get me out of this hole. I've just been sitting here.

"Let me decide what I need."

"It'll be more beneficial for you. I've tried to get sleep since I ran away and I can't. I'm pretty sure I'm broken, because when I wake up, it's as though I never closed my eyes."

"You seemed to sleep just fine in the cage," he grits, lifting his hands as he rests his forearms on his knees.

"It was... different. That's the only time I have since I left home. I'm not sure if it was the fact that I knew they wouldn't kill me until we made it back to Solaria, or the fact that you would've woken me up if something happened, or just listening to the sound of your heartbeat... I didn't feel alone anymore. Since we've escaped, I haven't felt safe enough to truly get sleep."

Finn scrubs a hand over his jaw, resting the sword beside him. For a moment, he just looks at me, his eyes wandering in rapid movements. Then his arm lifts and his fingers wave me over. "There's only one way to find out."

My heart kicks up the pace, and for the life of me, I don't know why. It's

not like this would be the first time I slept in his arms, or even the first time he's held or touched me, but it feels like it is. My body trembles as I make my way toward him, as if I've been dipping in icy water. Slowly lowering beside him, he wraps his arm around me and pulls my body close to his. His hand smooths my hair away from my face as he rests his head on mine.

“I promise I'll wake you up if anything changes.” His lips press gently to my forehead and my eyes flutter shut. “You're safe, Eva. As long as I'm here, I'll do everything I can to keep it that way.”

## Eva

I lean against the rock wall, the rough stone a stark contrast against the smooth satin of my dress. The last of the hell flame dims and the orange crystals slowly flame to life. The magic causes the air to move like heat against the stone in the middle of the day, wiggling in waves. Slowly, the air comes to a stop and crystals lining the tunnel blaze to life.

It's beautiful and terrifying all the same time. A rainbow of colors dance around the cave floor as Finn and I gear up to enter. Something hard nudges me in my side and I look down to find the dagger hilt pointing toward me. The sword weighs heavily in his other hand.

"Here. Since we both know you're not going to let me remove that damn mask, I'll feel better if you have this." I hesitate and Finn drops his sword to thrust the dagger into my palm. "Jesus, Eva. If the curse exists, we're already in the thick of it."

He's not wrong.

Finn bends to retrieve his discarded sword and together we venture inside Malodor, the remnants of a once-beautiful Elven city. The air grows colder,

and the darkness becomes suffocating, but I'm not afraid. I'm with Finn, and that's all that matters.

The tunnel winds until it opens into a colossal cavern full of light from the crystals lining the ceiling. The beautiful structures of homes and shops within what used to be a bustling dreamscape lie in ruins and decay. The buildings are crumbling, the streets are cracked and overgrown with vines and weeds, and the air is thick with dust and musky, as if it hasn't circulated in years. Perhaps it hasn't, with the entrance being sealed off.

Despite the desolation, there's a sense of eerie beauty to the abandoned city. The intricate architecture of the buildings, with their delicate arches and artistic carvings, hints of a time when the dark elves were a thriving and sophisticated society.

We carry on, strolling leisurely through the city. Nothing moves or creaks as we shuffle through. So far, we're alone. Skeletons litter the path, shells of who they used to be left behind by the curse. Glass windows are shattered, the wreckage still splayed through the cobblestone road like glitter. Doors are left ajar as if it was just yesterday that someone ran through them, desperate to escape. Signs of violence lie around every turn.

Coming to the city center, we find that the cobblestone road opens to a wide circle that bends around a grove of trees. They take on a weird red hue, as if the trunks are infused with gems and blood stones. The leaves are nearly translucent, and the webbing within them takes on a monochrome color and texture. Milky crystal pillars rise stories high, surrounded by flat panes of mirror-like sheets. I've never witnessed anything like it.

"What is this..." I trail off, spinning around to see it all.

"It's a stone henge. The elves believe making circular formations like this could enhance the properties of the crystals," Finn says, staying close behind

me.

“It’s beautiful...” I breathe, gawking at the shimmering stones and feeling the pulse of a strange energy. It draws me in, beckons me to touch it. The hum is enchanting, entrancing, and before I can stop myself, my hand reaches out on its own accord.

Energy shoots through me the moment my skin makes contact, and I suck in a breath. The world tilts and spins until I’m no longer within the cavern but standing in my bedroom. Jerking my head left, then right, my heart pounds. It’s exactly how I left it... How... I can’t be in Solaria. Rushing toward the window, I peer out, but instead of seeing the sea and the black stands of the shore surrounding the castle... Instead of Skull Bridge standing in all its glory, as a constant reminder to not cross the king like the dragons whose corpses complete it... It’s blank. The window is nothing but shimmering stone.

It’s an illusion. This is magic... It’s not real.

“Smart girl, Eva darling.” That voice. That voice could make my blood both boil and freeze over within a matter of seconds.

“Father,” I mutter, spinning to face the yellow-eyed king. His cat-like prowess is uncanny. A trait he acquired not long before the gauntlet. He’s a mimic, meaning he can absorb gifts and powers of others. It’s what makes him so deadly.

“No... Not your father, just taking his form.”

I step back, putting more space between me and whoever I’m speaking with. “Who are you?”

“Why, I’m your memories. I’m you...”

“You can’t be me. I’m standing right here.”

His grin is a perfect replica of my father’s. It even holds the same sinister



vibe. “I am the thing you fear most, the thing you hide in the darkest depths of your soul. I’m your secrets laid bare. I’m your truth.”

“I don’t—” He lifts a hand, silencing me.

“I’ll show you.”

The same pulse rushes through me and the room shifts, becoming others. I stand in the great hall, the room empty as a younger version of me trots through the echoing stone room. My father opens his arms, letting me jump into them.

“You...” he taps my nose with his finger. “You are my greatest creation, Eva darling. I can’t wait to see what you become.” He kisses my head, putting me down so I can skip from the room in my pink poofy ball gown and tiara.

Tears sting my eyes... How could I have been such a fool? My father’s head snaps toward me, making me stumble back.

“He never loved you, despite how convincing his displays of affection were,” the thing pretending to be him says. He’s replaying these memories, but why?

As if reading my thoughts, he strolls toward me. Pointing over my shoulder. My heart freezes, as if already anticipating what might be there. I don’t remember this particular moment, but I remember that dress. I only got to wear it once before my father refused to let me wear it again, claiming I deserved something better... More fit for a princess. Holding my breath, I spin, following his finger to what lies behind me. What I see has everything rush back.

“I show you this, Eva Darling, because it’s what you *are*, what you *hide*, and what you’ll *never escape from*.”

Limbs scatter the floor, bitten and chewed, and flayed apart. Crimson

paints most of the throne room floor. I remember it now... I killed them. Well, my beast did. The maids were supposed to be watching me and my friends, but someone refused to play with me. I got upset and my beast surged, making my eyes glow. One of the other kids called me a freak and, just like that, I snapped. This was the day my beast first took control.

“No... This was the day you truly became a monster. And it didn’t end here.”

Shaking my head, I back away from the sight, frantically looking for the exit. “No... *Enough*. I’ve had enough.”

The person posing as my father chuckles. “Haven’t we all? You were made to bring destruction. Yet, you pretend to be otherwise.” The room changes again, and I’m back inside my bedroom, but where it was empty before, now Ash lies in pieces. “Tell me.” A whisper floats across my ear, “Will Finn be the next victim, or will you accept yourself for what you are? *A monster.*”

My chest flutters and suddenly I can’t breathe in enough air to sustain myself. My chest is too tight, the air too thick. My fingers form into talons and my teeth elongate into sharpened points. I swing and my talons slice through the enchantment. The caverns return and before I can stop it, my hand slams into Finn’s chest.

My nerves spark, my body jolting as I frantically repeat that I’m sorry, looking for blood or any sign my talons might’ve hurt him... but it’s as if I imagined them. There’s nothing in front of me but solid tattooed muscle. Strong hands grip my wrists, holding my hands up so I can’t flail anymore.

“Eva,” Finn’s voice rolls over me and suddenly I can breathe.

*The mask.* My gaze shoots to my nose, my body trembling in his hold as the realization that it all was just an illusion sinks in. My mask is still on. My beast can’t hurt him, and I’ll do everything I can to keep it that way. Finn lets

go of my hands and I fly forward, wrapping my arms around his torso. He freezes, going statue still, then slowly hugs me back.

The cool blade of the dagger rests gently against my shoulder. I must've dropped it at some point.

“You're alright. I've got you, pretty girl,” he whispers softly, one arm wrapped around me and the other hand threading into my hair, holding me to his chest. “What happened?”

“It showed me things... Things from my past.”

Finn stills, his thumb stops stroking across my side. “It showed me things too, but that's all it was... Memories. And memories can't hurt you. Not anymore.”



## Finn

I shouldn't have touched the stone, but I couldn't resist its pull. The moment I did, a flood of memories zoomed through me so fast that my stomach flipped. The crystals showed me things I wished I could erase, that I've pushed away and forgotten, and I know it can't be any different for Eva.

Before the boundary around the Realm of Monsters was erected, I was asked to do things I'm not proud of. They were orders I had to fulfill or risk being thrown into the prison world with the mad king, but I wasn't alone. Most of the creatures who lived here before the great fall have similar stories, and I still believe I made the right decision.

King Ares was mad long before the Devil came knocking, and he needed to be stopped. My parents were both magic users and refused to be a part of his guard, but his temper is what made me an orphan. Or so I've been told. I was too young at the time to have much memory of them, but it didn't change the fact that he took them from me. I was grown by the time the angels fell with promises of dethroning him, and that's all it took for me to jump onboard.

Growing up without parents wasn't easy, but I made it. A farmer and his wife had taken me in when the mad king destroyed our home and village, except it wasn't out of the kindness of their hearts. They took me in because they saw free help, and as I grew up, I did nothing but repay that debt by working in the stables and training phantom horses.

It wasn't until I joined the Devil's ranks that I knew what the true meaning of family was, but it came at a cost. Just like everything else good in my life, I was at the mercy of what I could offer, so I became the best. I did my job

and carried out my new king's orders and I remained blind to the harsh morality of what was asked of me, assuming he had his reasons. We were told that turning The Seven Realms into a world of peace would first require death.

Now, I'm not sure what to believe. I've worked my way up through the ranks until I became the prince's hand, the commander of his army, *a hero*.

We've been told for centuries that everything that breathes on this side of the boundary is an enemy. That they're creatures as ruthless as they come, including the Devil's first son. Yet, Asmodeus helped me escape. Yet the king's daughter has empathy... and she's wormed her way into my heart. I don't believe her to be any more evil than the king I serve. Nor is she more of a monster than Kai or Alice... or me.

All of us would kill to protect those we love and would commit atrocities if it meant saving the many. What if I'm not the hero I thought I was, but a villain to those on the other side of the story?

I breathe in deep, consumed by the way her hair smells. It's sweet despite being dipped in the river, and now I know why. Fae magic courses through her veins, and magic always smells sweet... It smells like home. As someone who's struggled to find their place in this world, that's a new feeling. I haven't even felt that in Hell Hold and I've done nothing but strive to carve out my place there.

Though, I'm starting to realize that home isn't a place.

I don't think I can leave her... In fact, I know I can't. I abandoned my king when she chose to cut through the forest. A sworn warrior doesn't do that, even if my kingdom does believe me dead. I *chose* to save one over the many. I followed her into this forgotten city, and if we go to Hell Hold, and they can't accept her, I can't say I wouldn't walk away from it all.

What's scarier is what the stones showed me... *My greatest fear*, and what I've been trying to ignore since we entered Aphrodite's temple. If the Devil tries to hurt Eva to get back at the mad king, like she suggests he will, I won't hesitate to pick up a sword against my own... Against *my prince* if it comes to it.

How can my loyalties change so quickly? I just offered up my life in the prince's stead, yet here I am ready to take up arms with him if I must... A hero doesn't change sides for a woman. They always do the right thing for the greater good.

But if I'm not a hero, then what am I?

Eva, now calm, pulls away. "We should keep moving," she says, rubbing at her tear-stained cheeks.

"Not until you tell me what made you so upset." I grip her hand, keeping her close.

"It's not important," she mumbles, trying to pull away, but I don't let go.

"It is to me." I cup her jaw, bringing her bright blue eyes back to mine. "Please."

She exaggerates a blink and huffs out a deep breath, realizing I'm just as stubborn as her. "My father has always called me his darling monster, and I thought it was because of our kingdom. I was wrong. I've hated what I am, that I'm the only one out of my sisters who has this other half. I'll forever have to worry about hurting those I love." She sniffles, trying to catch her breath as unshed tears shine in her eyes. "No one else has ever made me feel safe or wanted, except for you, but I can't enjoy it, not without putting your life at risk. The moment you upset me, and I don't have this mask on, I can't promise she won't retaliate. It's terrifying. You deserve so much more, but I

can feel it in everything you do. You're falling for me, and I can't let you end up like them, another victim of my monster."

Eva bites her teeth into her full bottom lip, her eyes dropping away from mine as she continues, "Promise me when we reach that boundary that you will leave." She presses her lips into a fine line, looking up to blink away the unshed tears. "You don't need to fall in love with a monster."

I can't breathe... I can't stop looking at her, and fuck, I can't even process what I'm hearing. All I know is the rage that's boiled up inside the pit of my stomach is all-consuming, and for her to feel this way... I'm torn between the warmth in my chest that revels in the fact she cares, and the need to drive my sword through her father's heart for making her feel like she is anything less than everything I want and need.

Eva starts to turn away, to head farther into the city as if this conversation hasn't just ripped my heart out and made it beat within the same minute. Without pause, I reach for the mask on her face, my fingers gripping the bars in the front as I spin her back around to face me. Her eyes stretch wide before narrowing into lethal slits.

"Did you just grab my muzzle?"

"I did," I answer, still holding it as I step closer. In hindsight, it probably wasn't the best course of action, but all I know is she can't walk away, not without knowing what I have to say.

"The whole point of it is to make sure I can't eat you. You sticking your fingers through the bars defeats the purpose. Did you not hear a word I said?" My lips tip into a smirk as she talks with her hands. Her feistiness is cute for someone so small, but I don't want to be on the wrong side of her temper, either.

"Oh, I heard every bit of it... And from where I stand, the worst you can

do is suck my fingers. Even if you miraculously managed to bite one off, it'd grow back." Her brow furrows as her gaze flicks between my fingers and my face. "Now that I have your undivided attention, listen closely. You, my maniacal, heart stopping princess, are wrong. You're worth so much fucking more than you give yourself credit for. I'm honored you care enough to worry about my well-being, but you are worth the risk to me. If you can see that, then I won't stop trying to prove it to you until my body rests six feet deep. Do you understand?"

She doesn't move. Hell, I don't even think she blinks.

"And as for this," I continue, moving my hand from the front of her mask to pull the strap away from her head. My other hand grips the dagger she hates so much. "If your beast truly wanted to kill me, this piece of scrap metal wouldn't stop her." With a swift pull, the blade slices through the thin leather, and the magic it held dissipates into the air around us. I let go and it tumbles down her body, and she catches it before it can drop to the ground.

"What have you done..." she whispers, her eyes widening.

She tries to take a step back but stops the moment the hilt of my dagger lifts her chin. "You don't need it."

"There are easily dozens of dead souls that would disagree with you. I'm a monster, and now I have no cage—"

"No... pretty girl. Monsters don't mourn. The fact your mistakes haunt you proves you're not one." Closing the space between us, I drop the dagger and cup her face with my hand. "You won't kill me. I'm sure of it."

Her body stays rigid as she stares up at me. "And if you're wrong?"

"Then it was my decision to take the risk." Her eyes dart to my lips as I drag the pad of my thumb over hers. "I've wanted nothing more than to kiss you... and now there's nothing standing in my way."



She doesn't pull back as I lean in, her eyes jostling between mine. Her lashes flutter closed as our lips met. Gentle at first, then Eva stands on her tiptoes. She kisses me back, and I can't help but get lost. The way she feels against me, the way the world seems to stand still... This was our first *real* kiss. The first kiss in both of our lives that matters. The first to end all.

My hands thread into her long white hair, pulling her closer and needing more still. I don't think I'll ever get enough of this woman to feel satiated. Her hands travel over my chest, and I groan when she nips at my bottom lip. She deserves slow. She deserves my everything and I'll give it to her, even if it means giving up my kingdom in the process. For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm where I belong.

## Eva

I'm weightless, and completely and utterly at his mercy. This man has my soul in knots, and I'm not sure how he did it. When did he sink his claws in? When did the wounds heal and why haven't they left behind scars?

It takes everything I have not to dive deeper into his kiss, to explore every undiscovered part of him that's unfamiliar to me. I want to know his secrets, to drown in his sorrows, to sap away his rage and carry it as my own, just so he can be a little lighter.

He kisses me like a man going to war, as if this might be the first and last time, challenging me to savor it. And when he breaks away, every cell of my being yearns for him to be closer.

"Don't ever threaten to leave me. Not unless you truly no longer want me here with you. I'm a grown man, who is more than capable of weighing the benefits and the risks... And you, pretty girl, will always be worth it."

He smiles down at me, and that sly grin has my heart hammering into my ribs.

"We should go if we want to get out of here before sunrise," he says, stroking his thumb over the blush of my cheek. My face is so warm, and

muscles I hardly ever use are strained from the giddiness I can't shake. I don't have the words. Finn has officially taken away my ability to speak and not an ounce of me is mad about it.

"You're smiling..." he trails off, bending to kiss me again and again, "I'll take that as a good sign." I bend away from the onslaught of affection, but Finn scoops me up. My legs wrap around his waist as he presses me to one of the mirrored walls separating the crystal pillars from each other. My back meets the rough texture, and I'm not sure how my arms know what to do, but I link them behind his head. And I swoon, unable to look away from those emerald eyes. It's as if I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

"What am I going to do with you, Finnick of Hell Hold?" I twirl a chunk of his hair between my fingers.

His grin turns wicked, and the tip of his tongue slides across the edges of his top teeth. "Anything you want, love." He bends forward to plant a chaste kiss in the valley between my breasts, keeping his eyes on me. The sight alone has my breath shaking, and butterflies erupt through my middle. "As much as I want to show you exactly how I can be of use, we don't want to risk getting trapped in here for three days. We've gotta get through that gate before it shuts at daybreak." Gripping my hips, he places my feet back against the ground.



**I**t doesn't take us long to get back on track, and we continue through the labyrinth of tunnels surrounding the city center. There's a strange beauty to it all, as if this place was painted by an artist, instead of being real. Jagged rock formations have burst through the cement floors. The walls drip with

moisture that piles into stalagmites and allows the moss and algae to grow. It covers most of the cobblestone path from view. There's the faint glow of crystals overhead and from the luminescent mushrooms peeking through the cracks in the ground. It's breathtaking, and sad, that such a glorious place has been sealed away and forgotten.

My fingers skim over the tunnel walls that we've been weaving through for hours now. It's like this place was built to be a maze, or maybe to keep out intruders. I suppose the people who lived here likely knew these tunnels by heart.

As we round a bend, Finn slams to a stop, backing up into me, and I lose the air in my lungs as we collide. He twists, eyes wide and pinning me with a look that has my heart skipping a beat. A single finger presses to his lips. Slowly, he moves so I can peer around the bend, spotting blue figures huddled into a pile.

Unlike Peregrine, they're far from resembling perfect beauty. Their pointy ears are crumpled like a leaf someone's squeezed in their fist. Their blue complexion isn't smooth, raised into dark patches of stone and moss. Even as they sleep, their fingers resemble talons, and the points of long sharp teeth peek from their purple lips. The silver hair most of the dark elves have is patchy, having fallen out in random spots. Bones are disfigured, poking in disjointed fashions, and limbs bulge with abnormal formations. The poor things have been through the worst of the curse and somehow survived down here all this time.

"We have to go across," Finn whispers, pointing to the other side of the tunnel. He wants us to continue down the tunnel, to cross over the entrance to the one they rest in. "Quietly," he urges, and I can feel his hand at my back,

tight around his sword. The dagger's handle is pressed into the palm of my hand, and I squeeze the golden hilt until my knuckles scream and flash white.

Holding my breath, I step forward, tiptoeing across the opening, and just as I make it across, Finn's boot squeaks. I glance over my shoulder, meeting his stretched eyes as movement sounds from the tunnel I just crossed.

"Run," he breathes, and I take off, him right behind me. Seconds later, something slams into stone, and I glance back to see the creatures rushing behind us. Coming to another juncture, I guess, going with my gut feeling and choosing the far right one. The sickening sound of teeth snapping and visceral growls flood the tunnel behind me and as I round a corner, the gate comes into view.

My legs burn and my lungs stretch as I push as hard as my bare feet will allow me. Ignoring the ache, the sting of every footfall that sends fire gushing along my legs, I force my body to its limits, moving faster even as I will it to step lighter. *How much further can it be?* Something stabs hard into my foot, and I fall forward. My body collides with the ground and pain sears through my knees as they connect with the cobblestone. My palms sting as rubble is crushed into them and I yelp. Finn skids to a stop in front of me, flipping his sword and adjusting his grip, ready to take on the creatures the moment they catch up.

One comes around the tunnel first, foam dripping from its mouth as it slows to a crawl, down on all fours. Finn steps closer, taking his stance as it plunges toward him. The elf towers over Finn in height. He's easily three times his size, though if Finn's aware of his disadvantage, he hasn't let on.

With a flick of the sword, it slices across the creature's side. Finn spins, slamming the blade across its neck and severing the head in a swift motion. There's no recovery time as three more skid into the wall, racing toward us. I

barely get to my feet before one hits me with everything it has. I feel one of the talons rip into my side as I collide with the ground, though I manage to roll swiftly, evading another strike. Flat on my back, I've got no escape. My only hope is to keep the snapping jaws at arm's length long enough to come up with a plan.

Beside me, Finn takes down one and is rushed by the other. It's too fast. There are too many. A third sprints toward us from the cave, having lagged behind the rest. Panic burrows into my bones as I glance from where Finn is struggling with the creature in the tunnel, and at the one I'm barely keeping away.

We're going to die here. I finally found someone who cares about me *for me*, and I don't even know his last name. I can't die. Not when I finally found something that makes me want to live.

Then I feel it... The pricking of my skin, the rattling in my teeth. My vision turns blue, claws shooting from my fingertips as a growl echoes around us. The sheer tone of it is so menacing I can hardly believe it came from my throat.

Giving in to my animal's nature, I let go, driving my talons through the creature's middle and yanking apart until it's in pieces. The newcomer throws itself at me before I can even get up from the floor, and my talons skewer into its middle as my teeth latch onto its throat, ripping flesh from bone. Blood sprays as strength floods through me. Somehow, even though I can't fully shift, my beast has been able to give me what I need. She's pushed against the magic in this place hard enough to partially break through it.

I stride forward to where Finn holds off the last of them, his sword sideways, and pressed against the creature's throat. Blood slips down Finn's wrist and arm as the blade slices into his palm. His teeth grit as his muscles

flex. Crossing the space between us, I lurch onto the creature's back. My hands wrap around its neck, and I rip with everything I have, tearing its head from its shoulders. Its body, along with mine, falls to the ground in a heap, knocking the wind out of my lungs. I gulp in the air and push what's left of the elf away so I can sit up. Finn is still against the wall, mouth dropped open as he stares at the carnage.

"Okay... Remind me not to piss you off," he says, nodding far too fast as he takes in the mess I've made. "I don't ever want to be on your bad side."

I give him a wry grin. "You won't have to worry about that as long as you're on my good side." Standing up, I cringe as I set weight on my right foot. Something cut it deep, and now that the adrenaline has calmed, I feel every radiating wave of pain it causes.

Finn reaches over and takes my hand, a silent gesture of comfort and support. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," I answer, leaning on him. "I hurt my foot."

He starts to move, only to pause and glance back at my face. "Is she going to eat me if I touch you?"

"I don't think so." It's an honest answer. I can't say for certain what she thinks of him, but I don't think eating him is on the agenda. At least it better not be. I'm not sure I'd survive being out here alone.

"Grab my neck," he commands, bending at the waist for me to jump on his back. "Let's at least get through the gate, and then I'll take a look at it. I'd prefer not to find out if there are any more of those things."

He lugs me through the arched stone gate and the moment the magic has cleared, my beast slips a little too close to the surface for comfort.

*"Well, isn't he resourceful?"*

We barely make it through before Finn quickly sets me down, then runs

around the side of the cliff, putting distance between us.



## Finn

**W**e barely make it through the gate before I set Eva down and take off toward the side of the cliff to empty my stomach. There's not much in there to give at this point.

Throwing up was not on the agenda, but she ripped someone *in half*. Like a fucking pretzel, I heard the creature's spine snap. Oddly enough, it's not the fact she grew talons that made me panic, but the unholy number of severed limbs and gore.

"You're a warrior," I tell myself, wiping my mouth as I stand back up. "You should be used to this by now... but *noooo*. Hundreds of years into my lifetime and here I am, puking like a teenager who got a hold of the good whiskey."

Cursing at myself, I head back to Eva. Without a word, I snatch her up and toss her over my shoulder, despite her bickering, and set her down on one of the stone ledges outside of the gate.

"Are you alright?" she asks, in the angelic voice that melts through me like butter. Whose idea was it to make her so bloody perfect? I need names. It's like she was placed in The Seven Realms to be my freaking kryptonite.

“Fine... Just not a fan of dismemberment.”

She cocks her head as I crouch down to get a look at her foot.

“Well, excuse me for saving you,” there’s an airy humor to her voice, something I’ve yet to encounter, “I’ll be cleaner about it next time.”

I pause, one hand holding her ankle and the other prodding the gash to see how deep it is. “Thank you... See, you get me. It’s nice to know someone is taking my stomach problems into consideration. The gods know the prince never did. In fact, I think he purposely tried to be extra gory at times just to see if he can get me to break the record of how many times I’ve gotten sick during battle. It’s seven, by the way, in case you were wondering, but I don’t think anyone can top that, so it’s completely pointless to try.” With a final look, I set her foot down. “You shouldn’t need stitches.”

“Lucky me.”

Slapping my hands against my thighs, I straighten, peering at the triplet moons. I spot the thin ring of light from the hell flame shining around them. It won’t be long before that gate seals and with her foot this way, there’s no way we’re walking anywhere. At least not at this moment.

Carrying her isn’t a problem, but it would be if we got attacked by something else. The smart thing to do is to give her some time to heal, and if she won’t heal on her own, maybe I can speed it up.

I glance over the wounds she’s already acquired. The lines from the branches in the woods beating against her skin are still visible, but just barely. There’s a raw patch on the bridge of her nose from the mask, which still looks fresh, and of course, the gash in her foot. Eva’s been beaten to hell and she’s healing like a...

“You’re mortal, aren’t you?” I ask before finishing the thought.

Her blue eyes flick up to me before dropping back to the ground near my

feet. “Why?”

“Because if you weren’t, the marks on your skin would be gone by now. I thought maybe you just healed slower than most, but some of the cuts and scrapes you obtained before the cage are still scabbed.”

She grinds her teeth while her fingers pick at the stone wall she’s sitting on. “I don’t know.”

“You mean you haven’t died to find out...” Dropping my head back, I scrub my hands over my face.

“No... I don’t exactly want to test the theory, either. I can count on one hand how many of my sisters are alive and well. Most have died from a fate so brutal that it would even kill an immortal. Only two have bodies in our family crypt, the rest of those who died... Let’s just say there wasn’t enough left to warrant a casket. The only one we know of for sure is your queen.”

I grimace, unable to look at Eva as I speak. “*Late* queen...”

She tosses her hands up, letting them freefall down to her sides. “Well, in that case, the odds are even worse.”

“Well, seeing as you can’t walk, we’ll stay here for a bit. The gate is closing and there’s enough power radiating off it to keep predators away. As for this, I nudge her foot.” I might have a solution.”

“I’m not chopping it off,” she says, and I snap my mouth shut, the words I planned to say becoming a distant memory.

“Why in the hell would I ask you to do that?”

She shrugs, folding her arms over her chest. “It was a statement I felt needed to be made.”

Gathering my composure, I point to the shadowed corner where the cliff meets the archway of the gate. “Hobble, and I’ll be over in a moment.”

I yank my shirt over my head and hold it, judging how long it is. Satisfied,

I grab my sword from where I've leaned it against the wall, then follow after her. Eva plops onto the ground, then stabs the dagger into the dirt beside her.

“Arms up, Princess.”

Her eyes narrow before she does as I ask, and I slip her dress over her head. The moment it's off, her arms wrap around her body, as if it's something I haven't seen before.

“What are you doing?” she asks, watching me bunch up the fabric of my shirt.

“Your dress is in shreds. My shirt is going to do more for you than what's left of that scrap of fabric.” I hold it up and she slips her arms through and drapes the dark fabric over her form.

Grabbing the dagger, I rip her satin chemise into a long strip of fabric, then sit on the ground near her feet.

“Why are you—” I end her protest with an arch of my eyebrow.

“I'm saving your feet, since for some unholy reason, *someone* decided to venture into the woods without shoes. At this rate, you'll die of tetanus before we get out of this bloody forest.”

I grab her foot, the one without the gash, and look for wounds. There's not much to note, so I start wrapping the satin around it, making a sort of mummified sock. At least it puts something between her and the ground.

“I didn't just decide to ditch my shoes. All that I had were ballroom flats, and I had five minutes to gather what I could and freefall from a tower. The flats didn't last long in the woods and they were doing more harm than good. Had you seen my feet days before I got shoved in that cage, you'd know those shoes were giving me blisters.”

Satisfied with my makeshift shoe, I grab the other half of the strip I made and lift her other foot. I snag the dagger and cut deep into the meaty part of

my palm.

“Finn!” she snaps, taking the dagger from me. “Why would you do that?”

“Relax, love. I’ll heal.” I clench and release my hand, and blood flows from the wound. Dipping my fingers into the crimson liquid spilling down my forearm, I cover the wound on her foot with my blood. “I might not be able to cast my magic, but it’s still in my blood. You can wash it off once you’ve healed.”

“It’ll heal me?” she looks at me quizzically, glancing from her foot to my face.

“Yes. To an extent. It’ll at least close the wound and make it so you can walk.” Slowly, I run my bloodied fingers over the scrapes on her arms. “But these should go away completely.” Next, I stroke my thumb over the raw patch on her nose. “And this.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, letting me draw the runes on her and in the space where the laces used to close the neckline of my shirt. Once I’m finished, they let off a faint glow before simmering out.

“Don’t mention it.” Wiping off the blood onto my pants, I peer at the slice I made. It’s already almost sealed shut. “See? I told you it would heal.” Eva peers at my palm, then furrows her brow.

“I wasn’t aware druids used blood magic,” she says, leaning back against the rocky cliffside.

“Normally, we don’t, but I happen to have become an expert at it recently. My friend is a witch—among other things—and needed to learn how to use her gifts. In the process of teaching her, I discovered I could use it too.”

“She’s the prince’s betrothed.” She doesn’t say it like a question, but it comes off as such.

“Yes. I think you’d like her,” I say, wrapping her other foot now that it can

start healing. “She’s just as stubborn as you.” There’s enough of the satin dress left that I can slice a small strip off. “Here, turn around.”

This time, she does so without question, nor does she shoot me death glares. Grabbing her hips, I drag her between my legs so I can gently run my fingers through her hair. I smooth the tangles and tie it back with the fabric into a low ponytail.

“Maybe now it won’t get so snarled. If I knew how to braid, I’d do it for you, but sadly, that is not an area I have expertise in.”

Eva glances at me over her shoulder. “Why is that? No ladies in your life.”

“Just two, I’m afraid. Alice and now you. And I’m pretty sure if I were to sit like this and braid Alice’s hair, the prince would string me up for the birds.”

For some morbid reason, that brings a smile to Eva’s face.

“Maybe I’ll have to teach you sometime.”

Incapable of keeping myself from touching her, I let my fingers wrap around the exposed skin of her thigh. “Maybe you will... but that would imply you’d have to stick around once we cross that boundary.”

She places her hand over mine, threading her fingers so she can hold it. “I suppose it would.”

My heart flutters at that. Maybe this will work out. Maybe Hell Hold will be open to her being there and if so, all will be right in the world as long as we can make it across that boundary. And if they can’t, then we’ll go somewhere that will.

Bending my body closer to hers, I kiss the crook of her neck. “I’d like that a lot.”

## Eva

I stare at the gentle trickle of water running down the cliffside. It's just enough to coat the rocks, disappearing into the cracks at the base of the stone wall. It tastes so clean... *so pure*. It makes me wonder what could be up above the plateau, but I'll have to live with that curiosity, and settle for the fact we have clean drinking water for the time being. That and it allowed me to wash the blood from my body. Almost all the cuts and scrapes Finn painted with his own have healed, with the exception of my foot. More than that, I appreciated being able to rid myself of what remained of the cursed creatures I killed earlier.

While I cleaned up, Finn managed to collect wood from the forest around the cliffside and started a fire, roasting the small creatures he hunted while scouring for fallen limbs. It's been so long since we've eaten... My stomach growls at the scent of food and my mouth salivates.

We haven't had the time to do much of anything other than push through The Enchanted Forest, but my damaged foot has forced us to take a minute, and thanks to his magic, I can already sense the wounds closing. The dull

throb in the arch no longer exists and as long as I don't flex it, I hardly remember it's there.

*"He provides well for us... He could've brought more food back, but he's learning,"* my beast says, her presence there but not smothering me. *"I like him. He's much better than the fool you made me kill."*

"I didn't make you do anything," I snap, and Finn eyes me from across the fire. With a raise of his eyebrows, he catches on to the fact I wasn't talking to him and continues to take bites off his squirrel. I've already downed my portion and I'm not about to make him feel guilty for eating his, especially since he caught and killed it in the first place.

*"Excuse me... We'll agree to disagree."*

"You just like him because he destroyed the mask." That gets his attention again. He doesn't speak or even move much, but he's listening in. I know by the way his eyes open wider at the mention of 'him.'

*"Yes... Remind me how you so blatantly smothered your other half. I deserved better. He got that, so he is mine now and you can go suck a toe."*

I cock my head, my brows creasing. "You do realize that we're in the same body, right? Whatever you tell me to do, *you* have to do as well. So, maybe consider that before you demand I do atrocious things."

*"I'm fully aware, human. I didn't tell you to jump off a cliff, I said to go suck a toe. Calm down. We've been through enough in the last couple of weeks. We don't need you having a coronary."*

"And how is doing obscene things with an appendage any better? Hmm? I think I'd rather jump than do what you're suggesting."

*"Because I could bite it off... Maybe then, we wouldn't be so hungry. Now, ask the kind man for his meat stick."*

I glare at the fire, just as Finn stands and hands what's left of his food to



me. “Here, the rest is yours. You need it more than I do.”

“*Seeee... He provides. Are we sure he can't read minds?*” Ignoring her, I take it.

“I don't understand. You should be starving.”

“I'm fine, and shifters require more food than druids. I'd much rather go hungry and your beast be full. I don't want her looking at my *appendages* like her next meal.”

He wipes his hands against his pants as he chews, then lays down next to the fire. Patiently, I tear off bite by bite, even though every primal cell in my being wants to consume it and go out searching for more. It's daylight now, but in this little shaded cove in the cliffside, the flames cast an orange glow on his face. We're serenaded by a crackle of embers and bright sparks float up and fizzle out in the air. The silence hangs heavy in the space between us, beckoning me to break it.

“What's the first thing you're going to do when you get back?” I ask, making my voice a bit louder so Finn knows I'm talking to him and not my alter ego.

He links his arms beneath his head, staring up at the sky. “I'm not sure... Depends on the company, I guess.”

Finished, I set the makeshift skewer down, trying to hide the way my heart accelerates. “You mean it depends on whether I'm there or not.”

He twists his neck, letting his emerald eyes take their fill of me. “Yes.”

“And if I am? Assuming your people allow me to stay and don't try to take my head.”

Finn shifts his gaze back to the sky. “I'd take a week-long hiatus and never leave my room. I'd gather up all the fairy rum I can drink, and the fucking delicious cookies Clamara—one of the castle maids—makes, and somehow I'd

convince you to forget clothes exist,” his eyes flutter close as the tip of his tongue wets his lips, “because *fuck*.. that’s a sight.” He turns his head back toward me, and I suck in a shaky breath. “That’s what I’d do, or would want to at least.”

“What if I’m not welcome in Hell Hold? What would you do?”

“Then *we’ll* be wandering about, looking for a place to live.”

The air stills in my lungs, and my mouth goes dry. “You’d leave your people for me?”

Finn’s lips twist into a sly smirk. “Sweetheart, I’d *kill* my people for you.”

My chest grows tight as I let his words sink in. Suddenly, he’s too far away. I crawl forward. Finn’s gaze follows my every movement as I straddle his body, placing my legs on either side of his hips.

“What would you do, Princess... if you could stay in Hell Hold with me?” He doesn’t move. Instead, he lets me feel the smooth skin of his chest and trace my fingertips over the circular symbols of his tattoos.

“Well, that’s easy. I’d like to discover all of your *talents* you speak so fondly of.”

He stills, and for a moment he doesn’t even breathe beneath me, as if someone’s cast a spell, trapping him in a statue-like state.

“Is that so?” He finally allows himself air and his lungs expand until they can’t hold anymore. As he lets it out, his hips rise and he shifts his weight. The rigid length of him presses against my center, and it takes everything I have to bite back a moan.

“Yes,” I say, wetting my lips and continuing to trace the inky lines on his skin.

“Has anyone ever—”

I cut him off, shaking my head no. “I’m no stranger to how things work.”

Leaning forward, I brace my hand beside his head and grind my hips against his. It earns me a low, throaty growl. He grips his hair, not moving an inch from where his hands are laced behind his head, as if it's all he can do to keep them there and off me. Ever the gentleman... and ever the hero.

He raises his hips again, his eyes dropping to where our bodies meet as he hisses out a breath. "You're playing with fire, pretty girl... You shouldn't be teasing me like this." We connect so perfectly, even with all the fabric between us. I bite my lower lip, silencing the moan that comes when he hits the right spot, sending a rush of desire racing through me. "You deserve for your first time to be everything you dreamed of, not me losing control, and definitely not on the edge of some creepy old forest, but that's what it will be if you keep going."

"Believe me, here with you is an upgrade from what I imagined my first time would be. I've always dreaded it, knowing whoever won the gauntlet wouldn't care about my pleasure, and would only take what they want. I knew I'd be left to pick up the pieces... This is much different from that."

Finn peers up at me, the emerald shade of his eyes becoming darker. "I'd never hurt you," he whispers.

"I know that." I cup his cheek and place a gentle kiss on his lips, enjoying the way he seems to chase the connection when I lift away. "You've done nothing but protect me and make me feel safe. Even while we were locked in that cage or traveling through the pits of Malodor. Not once did I believe you'd let something happen to me... You'd give your life if it meant extending mine by a single second." I bend to kiss him again, deeper this time, pouring my very heart and soul into it. I want him to feel how I do, to know without uncertainty that I mean it. "If there's anyone in these seven realms that I trust, *it's you.*"

“Then I take it back...” he says, swallowing hard. “All of it. I don’t care about spiced rum or snickerdoodle cookies. The first thing I want to do when we get to Hell Hold is show you just how amazing it can be... I want you to know what it feels like to be with someone who’ll always put you first.”

Large, warm hands circle my thighs and slip beneath the shirt I wear. Finn grips his fingers into my hips and the sheer pressure of him between my legs has me needing more. “What if I don’t want to wait?”

He inhales until his lungs can’t hold anymore, and as he lets the breath go, his hips raise, and he shifts in place. I can feel his own desire pressing against my center. “Then *fuck*... I’ll do anything you want. You just say the word.”

I crush my lips to his, the sweet scent of his magic fills my nose, and I shudder. His hands hold me tight against him as he rocks his hips, and the delicious friction is mind-numbing. In one fluid motion, we roll away from the fire, and my back collides with the ground. Finn doesn’t break the kiss as he adjusts himself between my legs, spreading them wider, and my fingers thread into his hair, needing him closer, needing him *now*.

Lust burns inside me, drowning out every worry, every thought, every fear—*gone*...As if they never existed. His lips travel down my jaw, and goosebumps flood across my skin, basking in the heat of his body as I melt beneath him. My pulse quickens with every thrumming beat of my heart, and liquid fire flows through my veins.

My body takes on a mind of its own, and gods on high... If he asks, I’ll beg for him to keep going. Chasing the delicious friction he offers, I feel his teeth nip into my pulse and I moan, not caring who or what hears it. I angle my head to give him better access, demanding he do it again. The creature within me craves it... She wants him to mark us, to claim us as his own, as his mate, but Finn draws back.

“She wants this, doesn’t she?” he asks, referring to my creature.

“Yes,” I breathe.

“But do you?” He cradles my face and I lean into his touch.

“I do. I want it—*I want you.*”

There’s no hiding it. I’m consumed, and utterly entranced by him. I couldn’t stop myself if I wanted to. He feels like falling, like all the things I’ve been missing in my life... This one man fills every void in my hole-ridden heart, healing all the pieces of me that my family and this godawful world broke.

“If we do this, your beast will imprint on me for life. We’ll be mated, and not even magic can undo that. You’ll be *mine...*” he trails off, placing sweet kisses down my jaw. His hand runs up the inside of my thigh, coming so close to the place I need him, but not giving me what I want. My body shudders with anticipation.

“I want to be yours... I want to be yours *so bad—*” My words cut off on sharp inhale the moment his fingers land where I want them, sparking every nerve in my body to life all at once. I’m boneless as pleasure dips through me, my muscles tightening in ways I’ve never felt. Not like this... This is something far greater than anything I’ve been able to do myself.

I meet his dangerously dark emerald eyes, those of a man whose control is balancing on the edge of a sharpened blade... All it takes is one small push for it to shatter. He watches me, drinking in every sound I make, every arch of my spine. My eyelids feel heavy as my head falls back against the ground, and suddenly, the muscles in my body pull tight like the string on a bow, and *snap*.

His lips meet mine as wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me. Sensations so familiar, yet so foreign... My legs tremble as Finn growls. It’s

now that I notice my hands are buried in his blond hair, holding him close. When did I grab him? When did I demand he not pull away? But I'm too lost in the euphoria to care. If this is what he can do with his fingers... I can only imagine what the rest will be like.

I finally let go, the waves of my climax fading. Finn sits back and I watch him unbuckle his belt, inadvertently licking my lips as curiosity rushes through me all at once. I want to know what he looks like... what he *feels* like. I want him buried within the deepest parts of me, and to hear my name fall from his lips as he experiences the very sensations I just did. I want to know the noises he makes. I want *it all*.

"Fuck, pretty girl," he mumbles, trailing kisses down my throat. "That look is going to be my undoing."

My lips tip up as his fingers work at the buttons and laces of his leather pants, and as the last of the fabric opens, his cock springs free. It's hard enough to stand on its own, and moisture beads at the tip. It's odd to think of it as being sort of beautiful... *glorious*, really.

All of him is magnificent. From the way his tattoos swirl across his arms and chest, over his shoulders and up his throat, to the way his body has been honed into delicious planes of solid muscle. His blond hair is mused from the rough abuse of my fingers, falling gently over his forehead. All the way down to those striking emerald eyes. I could get drunk off the image of him... It makes my knees weak, but him in this way... *disheveled*. It's a sight I can never unsee.

He looks carnal, like he could devour me whole, and I'd let him. My gaze tracks the way his hand grips his length, stroking gently... It's just like the rest of him, soft yet strong, big and unyielding... I'm entranced and the need

for my hand to be wrapped around it rises inside of me. A need to taste him, to put him at the same mercy he did me.

Placing my hand over his, he stills.

“We can stop,” Finn whispers, concern creasing his brow. I’ve never shaken my head so fast.

“No,” I breathe, “I want to do it.” It takes him a moment to process before he stands, offering a hand to help me sit up. His cock bobs in front of me and as I wrap my fingers around it, just like he did, I’m surprised by how soft and velvet-like it is. Finn guides my hand, showing me what he likes, and I absorb his every reaction.

I’ve never wanted to please someone so badly before.

Our eyes meet as I draw closer, close enough for my tongue to lash out in a slow, languid stroke over the tip and he lets out a serrated exhale. His head falls back for an instant before he brushes the pieces of hair that have escaped from my ponytail away from my face. I do it again, savoring the way he tastes, both salty and sweet.

“Open your mouth,” he says, and I heed the command without hesitation. Finn brings the tip to my lips. “Wider, love.” I stretch the hinge of my jaw, and slowly he presses inside. His hand wraps into my hair, gripping just at the base of my neck.

I’ve only seen this done once, but I know what he wants, and I’ll give it to him without question. I take him deeper into my throat, hollowing my cheeks and swirling my tongue, repeating the process until he moans and starts to thrust along with my rhythm. My eyes water, but not once do I wish him to stop. I want to see him come... I want to see him raw and exposed. I want to bring him the same pleasure he did me, and for that, I’ll do anything.

He’s never too rough, though, being mindful of his motions, even with his

control hanging so delicately in the balance. He clings to it, making sure to not hurt me, even if the primal side of the man wants to take hold and bury himself as deep as he can go.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Eva... Every single piece of you.”

Heat blooms within me, my heart swelling in my chest. Without warning, he pulls away, keeping his hold on my hair. I’m lowered to the ground as he sits between my legs and begins to kiss a trail over the fabric of my shirt from the valley between my breasts to the juncture of my thighs. His hands pin them down, baring me to him. My stomach pinwheels, transfixed by the sight of him as desire pools within my core. His gaze meets mine, his lips curling into a perfect smirk.

Finn bows his head, and his tongue connects with the most sensitive part of me. My hips lurch the moment he makes contact, but he keeps them still, drawing lazy circles with the tip of his tongue. Hard and soft. Demanding and teasing. My eyes roll back as my hands run up my body.

Gentle fingers press against my entrance, and one slips inside me, curling and twisting. Just when I think it can’t feel any better, he sucks my swollen clit into his mouth and sparks explode behind my eyelids. Finn stretches me wider still, adding another digit as his tongue works wonders. I clench around him, my body meeting his pace. I want more. I *need* more.

I’m so wet that I can feel it... I can hear it as his fingers bring me to new heights. Then I’m climbing, that same tightening feeling settling deep inside of me, winding tighter and tighter until everything goes rigid. Finn doesn’t stop. He sends me crashing over the edge of oblivion. My legs convulse, my body trapping him against me as I ride out the waves of ecstasy.

When it finally ebbs, I relax and he sits back, panting, as he licks his lips clean. “The gods as my witness...” he pauses, trying to catch his breath, “I’m



never going to get enough of watching you come.”

His hand slides up my side as he falls forward, bracing himself against the ground to keep from pinning me beneath his weight. His fingers grip the hem of the shirt I’m wearing, gathering the fabric and pulling it up until I can slip the rest of the way off. My body is bared to him, and his eyes drop to my chest. Within seconds, his mouth surrounds one of the hardened peeks, his tongue flicking in languid strokes until I’m trembling.

It’s euphoric... I hum beneath his touch. The candied scent of his magic swarms me, so strong I can taste it. I feel ravished, worshiped, and wanted. Three things I never thought would exist in my world, yet all three sensations belong to him. Then there’s the hunger, the *craving* for more.

His fingers sliding through my wetness and his head falls against my shoulder as he lines himself up. Pressure... that’s all I feel as his emerald eyes meet mine.

“We can stop at any time,” he says, reminding me that I’m in control.

“I want *all* of you.” My arms wrap around his neck as he kisses me.

I can taste myself combined with the sweet magic and something else that’s all him. It’s intoxicating... *Sorcery*. It should be illegal to fall this hard for someone. To want to be impossibly close.

He thrusts forward and the pressure grows until I feel so full that the air leaves me. My lips part, my body clenching and releasing, desperately trying to accommodate him. Then he moves, pistoning back and a feeling too goddamn good to describe takes its place.

“Are you alright?” he whispers, kissing my pulse.

“Yes,” my word comes out a moan. “*Gods* yes.”

I feel his lips tip into a smirk as he fills me up again. He kisses my throat, nipping his teeth there. A spark of pain gushes through me that’s quickly

turned into something different. Something pleasurable. He doesn't let go, and my creature revels in it, submitting to him wholeheartedly, the ecstasy of the bond snapping tight between us, making me dizzy.

His hips thrust again and again, each time picking up pace and going a bit deeper than before. My breath hitches in my throat as Finn lets go. His pupils blow as he stares down at the mark he's left. He knew... He knew what my creature needed to feel satiated, and he didn't protest even when it's not a part of his customs. His mark will heal since he's incapable of placing a true shifter mark, and she'll want it placed again and again, but he knew. He's not just doing this to give me pleasure, to make me feel loved, he's doing it for her too.

My spine bows, arching off the ground violently as he seats himself as deep as he can go. What subtle tinge of pain there was is gone, as lust burrows into my bones, taking hold and leaving me breathless. He was connected with me on a level I've never felt before, so intimate, yet so consuming.

Finn's hand runs up my stomach and circles my breast, squeezing as he thrusts into me, gliding deep in one fluid motion. My hips rise up to meet his, moaning as a new form of climax builds... It's stronger, my sore muscles bind until I fear they might snap. Finn's teeth grind as he growls, and he drives deeper and deeper, as if he's scribing his name into my very soul.

I come harder than I ever have before, screaming his name. It's devastating, earth shattering, and glorious. He curses under his breath, his hips slamming into mine as his control snaps, driving my climax higher yet as he chases his own. My fingernails drive into his back, my head spinning as I shatter. Finn claims my lips, kissing me wildly. He rolls his hips, his abs flexing, and tingles erupt, saturating every inch of me.

He's so close... I can feel it in the way his muscles tense, to the way his thrusts become unhinged. His hands roam, scouring every inch of me they can reach, until there isn't a single part of me left untouched. Our kisses turn into a battle of tongues and teeth as his body coils. His cock swells inside of me, stretching me still as he comes hard, growling his release against my lips. I can feel him twitch as warmth blooms in my middle.

He collapses on top of me, his arms catching his weight to avoid crushing my form beneath his. Finn pants, his chest expanding and contracting in rapid fire.

"Fuck, Eva..." he breathes, slowly dropping to my side and curling my body against his chest. "Are you alright?" He sucks in a deep breath, letting out a shaky exhale. "I tried to be gentle. I'm so sorry."

I cup his cheek in the palm of my hand, crushing my lips to his in a final kiss. "I've never been better," I whisper, curling against him and letting myself get lost in the way he holds me.

## Finn

When I wake up, cool air slips across my chest and I immediately notice the absence. My eyes snap open as I jerk upright, looking around for Eva, and finding nothing but a dying fire beside me. She was just here...

Pushing to my feet, I step out of the inlet we've been in, where the gate recesses into the cliff. I search left and right, but find no sign of her. I knew I should've stayed awake... but *fuck*, the girl wore me out. I've never experienced anything like that before and it wasn't just because it was her first time, or even our first time. It was the emotion behind it.

Every other woman I've been with has been transactional. Pleasure for pleasure, then going our separate ways. This though.. This has my heart in knots, so wrapped up with this girl that I'll never untangle the web, and I don't want to.

Grabbing my sword, and noticing that the dagger isn't in our makeshift camp, I head into the woods in search of a white-haired princess. It sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale, when in reality, we have no idea what is within these woods and anything could've happened if she went in them

alone. When I did, I stayed along the edge, making sure I could see the cliff no matter where I ventured, and I was lucky enough to only find smaller rodent creatures that littered the forest floor. But where there are animals, there are monsters who eat them...

The woods are silent. No birds are chirping, no leaves rustling, just my footsteps against the ground. It's eerie, and I can't shake off the feeling of unease that's slowly creeping up my spine.

A visceral growl sounds behind me and a cold trickle washes over my body. The color drains from my face as I grip the sword handle a bit tighter. Slowly, I turn my head, peering over my shoulder to find a display of sharp teeth. The creature's lips are rolled back and I'm not sure how the hell I missed it.

The thing is massive, and for me to walk past it, it has to creep from the bloody shadows. It's unlike anything I've ever seen before—large, with black fur that catches a shine from the hell flame peeking through the treetops, blood coats some of the strands, making patches mat together. Its eyes are glowing red, and its sharp blade-like teeth gleam.

I freeze, not knowing what to do. My mind races as I try to force an idea to come to my head. It's too close to swing my sword at it, and without my magic, there's no way I can outrun it. As if it's determined I'm no longer a threat. Its lips close around its teeth, and the creature dips its head. Blood-red eyes staring into mine.

The creature shifts its weight, carving long black talons into the ground. I'm rooted to the spot, terror taking over my body. Then it hits me. I've never seen Eva's beast. When she shifted at the ravine, I stayed within the cove until it was over, and in Malodor, she only partially did. Could this be her? Is that why the creature has relaxed? I do remember seeing jet black fur through

the vines in the ravine... It has to be her. It makes sense with my sweet princess missing.

“Your Eva’s other half, aren’t you?” The creature tilts its head, then snarls, revealing its serrated teeth once more.

I narrow my eyes, trying to resist the urge to step back. Eva’s beast is a predator, and any sign of weakness will entice her to kill... but she should be happy with me. Eva was. She said her beast wanted it, and I believed it. Hell, I felt her purr when I bit her throat. Marking is part of a dominance game with shifters, and she submitted. She didn’t fight back or even try to take over control from Eva as it happened. We’re supposed to be bonded, so why would she be aggressive with me?

Unless maybe we aren’t as *mated* as I thought and this is the true test for dominance... It’s hard to know, seeing as I lack an alter ego and because I’m a druid and she’s a shifter, I’ll never truly feel the bond. Not the way she will, though I’ll still care about her just as strongly.

If this is truly her beast testing me, I can’t back down.

“Well go on then,” I yell, throwing up my hands and causing the creature to flinch. “Fucking eat me already! What are you waiting for? Huh?” Thrusting my hand into my pocket, I grip a handful of berries I found while gathering wood and smash them against my chest, smearing them around. “Have a fucking lick.” The creature takes a timid step forward, its head bowing. It lowers its snout to my chest and its nostrils flare rapidly as it sniffs the berries. The creature’s lips part and its tongue lashes out against my chest. “That’s right. You know just as much as I do that your human likes me, and I think it would make her mighty sad to shift back, only to find my bone splinters between her teeth. So, either eat me or give her back!”

“What are you doing?” The angelic voice I’ve come to love so much

sounds from somewhere to my right. My eyes stretch wide as I stare at the creature in front of me. I trap my breath in my lungs as my gaze, and only my gaze, shifts to where Eva stands, alive and well in the forest.

“If you’re there...” I trail off, returning my gaze to the creature. “Fuck...” This isn’t Eva. “May I interest you in some more berries, I say, pulling another handful from my pocket and holding them out. It must catch the sight of Eva’s white hair because it completely ignores me and twists toward her. Panic shoots down my spine and I do the only thing I can. I poke it on the top of its nose and it flies backward. When it regains its balance, it growls and snaps its teeth.

It charges toward me recklessly, and Eva steps in front of me. I watch in awe and horror as she partially transforms into her beast, her hands now talons as sharp as blades, her teeth longer and pointy, and the sounds that she makes are completely inhuman. It’s something along the lines of a growl mixed with a sinister clicking and the creature slams to a stop, its legs thrust hard against the ground as it scurries away.

Eva slowly turns to face me, not quite back to herself. Her eyes still glow that shimmering blue. There’s a twinkle in them I’ve never seen before, as her lips curl into a smirk.

“You’re not Eva, are you?” I ask, standing as still as a board.

“You would be correct.” Her hands are bloodied and her mouth is too, as if she’s just killed something. I can feel the adrenaline drip through my veins as she comes closer and I swallow down the lump forming in my throat. “My human found dinner,” she says, pointing off to the severed leg of a deer or something similar on the ground a few feet away.

“That’s... *Great news.*” My stomach lurches, and I hiccup, doing my best to keep from throwing up right here and now.

Eva's talons shrink away, along with the pointy teeth and every other sign of her beast until it's just her. "I'm sorry," she says, glancing at the limb. "I meant to try to cook it before you woke up. We were just so hungry..."

"It's okay," I say, keeping my eyes far away from it.

"Also, I'm not just starting to like you," she cups my cheek, the dark crimson flakes of blood a stark contrast against her alabaster skin. "I like you a lot... I think I have since you head-butted that man in the nose."

My eyes drop to the bruise on her throat, warring with myself over feeling the guilt of hurting her to please her beast and enjoying the fact that it claims her as mine.

"I really, really like you too, but I could do without the gore sometimes. Though, I'll learn to live with it... Eventually."

She bites her lip, moving closer and dragging her finger over my chest. "But the gore is the best part."

"Must you write your name in blood?" I ask, watching her scrawl 'Eva' across my chest.

"It's not in blood."

"Oh, well, that's reassuring."

"It's blood-tinged berries." She stares into my eyes as she bends to lick her name away, making a noise that goes straight to my dick.

"You're going to fucking ruin me."

She grins, her cheeks flushing red as she stands up straight. "Perhaps, but you'll enjoy it while I do."



## Finn

**H**aving eaten and rested, we start trekking through the last section of the woods. According to Eva, the boundary isn't far now that we're through the City of the Damned. The trees have all started to blend together; the willows becoming more sparse and normal oaks taking their places. We're so close to being out of here, I can almost taste it.

"Look," Eva says, grinning from ear to ear. I search out the trees ahead, not finding anything concerning or different from the same scene we've been traveling through for the better part of three hours.

I squint, following her finger. Not a damn thing in sight, except for moss covered bark and a shit ton of leaves.

"You can't see that? The magic?" she asks. In that case, I should be able to. If it's magic, I should *feel* it, but maybe this cuff is finally taking its toll. Shaking my head, she drops her hand. "We made it. That's the edge of the Realm of Monsters. My father took down the boundary that the Devil erected, but the mirage he put in its place is still up.

We come to the edge of the forest, not far from where the boundary should be and as we creep closer, I still feel nothing. It's bad enough that this cuff

has kept me from using my magic, but to deprive me of this? It's part of who I am. It's part of my soul. Eva runs her hand through the air, as if there's a brick wall in front of us, and only now do I notice the slight ripple in the air.

"We did it," I breathe, my heart racing off in my chest. "We made it."

Eva squeals, and I can't help but watch in awe as she spins. I didn't know this side of her existed... but now that I know, I'm never going to stop trying to bring it out more often. The glow she wears, the smile pulling at her lips... It's *contagious*.

Her gaze meets mine, her crystal blue eyes shining with unshed tears. "We did."

I grip her hand and bring her knuckles to my lips, placing a kiss there, but I don't let her go. "Ready to leave your realm, Princess?"

"I was born ready," she says, staring at the wards and threads of magic. I wish I could see it, because something like this would be one hell of a sight. Normally, with spells this complex, thin translucent threads will streak along the boundary, weaving together like a spiderweb. The wards shimmer, and it's breathtaking to behold.

Pulling her behind me, I step through, feeling the boundary flex around me like a film until it slicks off and we're on the other side. I pull her closer, placing a kiss on her forehead. "We're here because of you. Had you not helped me escape that cage, I wouldn't be breathing, and regardless of whatever happens in Hell Hold, I won't forget that. We'll figure it out. For now, we keep walking until we hit the River of Styx, then we'll catch a boat home."

She stands up on her tippy toes, kissing my jaw. "Lead the way, hero... I like the sound of snickerdoodles and spiced rum."

My cheeks pull tight, warming at the thought of locking ourselves away for

a bit. It sounds like Heaven. I bite my lips and smile down at her. “Trust me, Princess. I’ll convince Clamara to make all the things... Your mind will be blown.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will,” she says, walking forward and dragging me along.



The bells toll as we reach the nearest village. Mythar, a place full of shifter-like creatures. None are even remotely similar to Eva, but there are dire wolves, lizards, and sometimes dragons.

The bustling city is made up of open cobblestone roads and quirky huts made from stone bricks, the roofs slope in a whimsical fashion. Shops line either side of the road as we weave through people and creatures alike until we reach the village center. It’s shaped in a ring with a stone fountain in the center. Twisted wrought iron lamps line the street, magic glowing from within the glass panes.

We beeline for the largest building along the circle, the Lord’s home. Stepping up onto the creaking wooden front porch, I push open the large, arched doors and step into the foyer. The sound of steps echoes off the walls until heels kick against the stone floor and a lady comes into view from the hallway, heading straight toward us.

Her blue dress is embroidered with beautiful flower designs in a lighter shade, from her hands down to her feet. Her blonde curls are coiled tight and left down. If I didn’t know any better, I’d believe she was going to a ball.

“Can I help you?” she asks, adjusting her corset as she walks.

“I’m looking for Lord Zule. I’m the hand to the prince and I need to book passage on the river back to Hell Hold.”

She stops a few feet away from us, her curls bouncing as she looks between Eva and I. Maybe I should've secured proper clothes for her first... I scratch the back of my head, letting my eyes linger on the antler chandelier hanging above us.

"I'm afraid you missed him. He was called to Hell Hold a few days ago for a council meeting, but we've received word that he'll be extending his stay." My brows knit together. Council meetings are typically concluded in a day. They hardly ever last longer than that, and certainly not *days*.

"Did he say why?" I ask, regretting my prying the moment her lips form a firm line. I'm at the end of her wick. Clearly, we stopped by at a bad time.

"I'm not at liberty to say, other than it has to do with the princess."

"Alice..." I whisper her name, my head spiraling. Could she be in danger? "Did something happen to her?"

The woman snorts. "You could say that. If not, I'm sure something will happen when she returns. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have places to be and obligations to fill. You'll have to secure passage another time." She ushers us out and shuts the door. The bolt locks, but I'm too busy running every word she said through my mind.

"Alice came after me..." I breathe. "That has to be it. The only question is, how much trouble did she cause to do so? The prince wouldn't just let her leave, not without accompanying her." I scrub a hand down my beard, trying to make sense of this, but also trying to figure out how the hell we're going to get a boat.

"Well, they did say the lord extended his stay. Maybe she found a way to make sure she wasn't followed. She is a witch, yes?" Eva says, placing her hand on my arm to comfort me.

"Maybe... Either way, she's likely heading to Solaria to save me and I'm

not there. Your father is, though, and he'll want to use her for her power."

"One thing at a time," Eva says, her thumb making soft circles on my bicep as we step back into the city center. "There's nothing we can do until we find a boat, yes?" I nod. "Then that settles it. How do you feel about thievery?"

I freeze, my head snapping toward her. "I'm a hero."

Eva pats my chest. "No. Today you're not. Today, you're a man who needs to get home and considering we have no money or anything to trade for passage, we're going to have to steal a boat.



## Eva

I creep along the edge of the shore, my heart pounding as I scan the docks for any sign of an unguarded boat. Finn crouches behind me, muttering under his breath.

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” Finn whispers.

“Relax, we’ll give it back.”

He grumbles as I catch sight of a lizard man near a canoe. It’s not the best vessel, but it will do what we need it to. He drifts up the shoreline of the River of Styx, heading toward the taverns. I get into position, ready to take off the moment he disappears from view.

“It should be a crime to rob a boat without a pirate hat.”

I squint, turning toward Finn. “Can you focus?”

“Sure... It’s not like everything I’ve worked for is on the line here.” He slides closer.

“What is the worst that can happen? You’re the hand of the prince.”

“Jail. *Jail*, Eva. Have you ever been to jail? I’ll tell ya, it makes the cage we were in look like a fucking spa.”

“Let’s go,” I say, seizing our window and yanking on Finn’s hand. He jerks into motion, following behind me. As soon as I reach the canoe, I quickly flip my legs into the boat and he pushes us off the black sand shore, only to climb in once the water starts to take us.

“You think a canoe is a good idea? I seem to remember you can’t swim. This river is much deeper, and *much* more deadly.”

“Do you have a better idea?” I snap, holding up the ores. “What do I do with these?”

“Dear gods... Give those to me before you hurt yourself.” He takes them both, dipping them in the water on either side of the canoe. Finn rows, his arms following a circle-like motion, propelling us farther from the village and getting us one step closer to Hell Hold.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” Finn asks.

“It was a good idea.”

“It was *criminal*.”

“Why yes, it was,” a deep voice sounds behind me and every cell of my body freezes. Finn stops rowing, his eyes widening the moment he catches the familiar face sitting on the seat behind me. “I don’t think this is anywhere close to what I expected when I helped you escape the cage. You’re bickering like an old married couple.”

“What do you want, Asmodeus?” I snap, packing every ounce of power into my words. My beast rises to the surface, ready to be in my grasp if I need her to take over.

“I figured that would be obvious... I tried to help you escape. I tried to stay out of this, but it would appear Lord Peregrine has finally paid King Ares the right price. Whatever it was, it was enough for him to sick me on the case and... Well, you know what happens if I disappoint him.”

“He’ll kill you,” I say, daring a glance behind me.

“Ding, ding, ding,” he says, pretending to ring an imaginary bell. My heart sinks into the pit of my stomach.

“We have a winner. So, I’m sorry, but it would appear your time is up.” I spin around just in time to see Asmodeus grip the sides of the canoe. Light floods in around us, and the boat slams into solid ground.

As the world comes into view, I peer up at the castle I escaped from. I

can't help the tears threatening to fall. Everything we just went through was for nothing. Jumping from that window, the cage, hiking through the forest, traveling through the City of the Damned... None of it matters, because standing before me is the place nightmares are made of.



## Eva

“**N**o... No, *no!*” *This cannot be happening!*  
We were so close to Hell Hold. We were *free*. I feel around the boat, wondering how it can be real. How can we be back here? It has to be magic—an illusion like the crystals showed. Please tell me we did not just survive all of that for nothing.

Asmodeus grips my shoulders, lifting me up and out of the boat.

“I’m sorry, Auntie... The king wasn’t concerned about where you were, not until Lord Peregrine paid him enough to care. You know as much as I do, if I don’t take you in, he’ll just send someone else. Someone who might not be so nice.”

Tears sting my eyes, blurring my vision, and robbing me of my words. He’s right... My father doesn’t send Asmodeus after just anyone. He’s the biggest and baddest beast in the king’s arsenal. Not by choice, the man would rather leave this land than serve him, but the piece of scrap metal around his wrist forbids him from doing so. The king can turn off his magic, just as he can siphon him like a battery, like he can all of his collared creatures.

Asmodeus can't take it off, and the king could easily kill him with it and all it'd take is a push of a button...

My father only sticks him on the most important tasks since he can teleport. All he needs is to picture a face and he'll be transported to them, as if appearing out of thin air, just like he did on that boat. I know better than anyone the consequences of going against my father and if Asmodeus doesn't hand me over, the king will murder him, too. Grandson or not.

It's why he's so obsessed with marrying his daughters off, and trying to manipulate their genes to force nature and evade his curse. Having nearly given up on baring a true-born son, he's switched roles to creating beasts strong enough to survive being married to his monsters... strong enough to survive long enough to give him a grandson. So far, he's mostly failed at that, too.

Running now wouldn't just risk my life... It would risk my nephews, too, and he's just as much a victim of circumstance as I am. Not to mention if I cooperate, I might be able to convince him to spare Finn.

Glancing up at him, I find Finn's vacant eyes zoned out on the handle of the ores still in his hands. He's in shock, and I don't blame him. We'd gone so far to get our happy ever after, only to have it ripped away from us at the last second. My only wish is that Asmodeus didn't drag him into this mess... Why not just take me? Finn could've made it home by dusk and I would've been at peace with that. Now, his life hangs by a thread... just like mine. I can only hope if I can't convince my father to show mercy that Finn won't share my fate. That he won't suffer.

"As for you," Asmodeus says, talking to Finn. "The king has been looking. He's not happy about your trickery and I lied to him. I said I didn't get a good look at your face and wasn't sure if you survived the hollow attack.

However, seeing as your scent is all over her, including this lovely parting gift,” he points to the bruise on my neck from where he bit me. “Congratulations, love. Nice to see you got to experience something good before you die.” He shakes his head, circling back to Finn. “Anyway, the king would know I lied had I brought her back without you.”

“I understand...” Finn’s voice is so shallow, so *quiet*. I barely recognize the man.

“However, I might have something that’ll help.” He pulls the crumpled up mustache from his pocket and hands it out to Finn. “He’ll be curious about how you did it. The king is obsessed with learning about magic, and if you show him how you spelled that, it might buy you some time.”

Finn takes it from him, rolling the furry sticker in his hands. “Thanks.”

With a head nod, Asmodeus turns just as Peregrine steps out the front door of the castle. His arms fan out to his sides as he descends the handful of stairs. “Well, would you look at that...” His blue skin seems to gleam in the hell flame light, and he’s just as perfect as I remember. Every feature without flaw, as if carved from stone by an artist. It makes me sick.

The silver locks of his hair are pulled into a knot on top of his head, and a tunic embroidered with the finest linens hugs his body. His hands slap to his sides as he continues toward us. “My long-lost wife has finally returned,” he says, swirling his hand in the air. Magic swarms me, but my beast was trapped the moment Asmodeus popped into that boat.

Peregrine must’ve gotten creative with his spells... He must’ve found a way—likely with the help of my father—to detain my other half without needing to place anything against my skin... Making it possible for him to send someone else in his stead to collect me. I can’t feel her anymore. Not a

lick of her presence remains as whatever pulses from him now smothers out what pieces of her are left.

“I should’ve let that orc eat you,” I suck in air the moment his hand grips my jaw and forces my neck to bend. His eyes roam over me, then flick to Finn for the flash of a second. He’s put the pieces together.

His face falls, the smile that hinted on his lips vanishing before my eyes. “It was an ogre, and is that any way to treat your husband?” With a rough shove, he removes his hand from my person and I stumble back, almost falling into the wooden canoe.

Righting myself and sucking in a breath, I straighten my shoulders. My eyes narrow into slits as I step toward Peregrine, shoving a finger at his chest. “You might’ve smothered her, but it doesn’t mean I’m any less scary. I’m going to make one thing excruciatingly clear. I am *nothing* to you. We might’ve said vows, but we didn’t complete the wedding ritual by the next moon. I jumped from a fucking tower to make sure of it.”

He smirks, stepping closer until I’m forced to step back. It’s a power grab, his way of showing me he’s still in control. “How sweet. It would seem *my lawfully wedded wife* has discovered how to be brave. You’ve grown, little monster. You’re not the same woman I found hiding while men gave their lives for her. Regardless, you’re wrong. Your father signed a contract.”

Peregrine materializes a scroll in his hand, letting it drop open. The paper drips with magic, so sweet it turns my stomach upside down. Along the bottom line is Lord Peregrine’s name and my father’s. It’s a declaration of rights. It’s his proof of his claim on my father’s throne, but also to the offered daughter. At the very bottom is an amendment. My father has overridden the requirement for our union to be consummated...

Why? He wants a grandson. It’s the whole reason he goes through all of

this. He wants a rightful heir. The gauntlets rally his people and require those who enter to swear loyalty. My father already had the dark elves in his army the moment Peregrine won. What could he have offered him that would make him forgo his chance of me giving him a grandson?

“Now, Eva darling,” he says, adopting my father’s pet name. “Do you still wish to stand on your soapbox and point fingers?”

Blue fingers slip my hair off my shoulder as my brain is consumed by the puzzle he’s presented. What could he have given the king in return? Asmodeus said he paid a hefty price and I believe him. My father wouldn’t have sent him for me if Peregrine didn’t.

“Listen closely,” he whispers. “That man might be your beast’s mate, but I own you. You can either accept that and come with me, or join him in the dungeon.” He stands up straight, adjusting his tunic, flashing me those perfect teeth.

“No,” Finn grits, “She’ll take the deal.”

Peregrine’s grin stretches wider. “At least he’s smart.” He tsks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “You’d be mindful to listen.”

Flaming rage boils up inside me until I fear I might burst with it. My pulse echoes in my ears and my teeth gnash and grind, threatening to crack bone. “Wait until my father hears about your plan.”

He chuckles, crossing his arms. “Go ahead. He won’t believe you. If I was worried about you keeping your mouth shut, I’d have never told you about it. So, what will it be, Princess? My bed or a cage?”

Without flinching my gaze away from his silver eyes, I hold my wrists out to Asmodeus. “I’d like to be taken to my cell, please.”

Fire burns in the lord’s eyes as he lets out a serrated breath. “So be it.”

If there’s something I’ve learned about Peregrine, it’s that he’s calculative.

He is always one step ahead. More importantly, he needs more from me than my dying blood. If he didn't, he wouldn't have placed a reward on me being returned alive.



The hinges whine as Asmodeus closes the gate to our cell, trapping us within the deepest part of the dungeon. The cell is damp and dreary, a stark contrast to the salty freshness of the ocean air that drifts in through the barred window. The breeze sends my hair whirling around me, and the soft crashing of waves against the shore outside is a constant, haunting reminder of the freedom that lies just beyond the walls of our prison.

“Why would you not take his deal?” Finn asks, scrubbing his hands over his face. They’ve replaced his shackles, removing the broken one to cuff both wrists and string a chain between them. Until me, the links connecting his hands together have also been secured to the floor with enough slack for him to move around the cell.

“I’m not leaving you to rot down here. Not alone.”

“So you’d prefer to rot with me?” He peeks at me from between his fingers.

“No... but it will be easier to find a way out *with you* than to escape myself and break you out. Not to mention I don’t want to be anywhere near Peregrine.”

Finn takes a deep breath, pinching his fingers into the bridge of his nose. “Fine... It’s done now. There’s no point in arguing about it.” He shrugs, pressing his lips together. “Any ideas in that beautiful noggin of yours or...”

I barely shake my head no, taking in the cell and looking for anything to jog an idea. The walls are rough-hewn stone, cold and unforgiving to the touch. A single torch flickers on the wall outside the bars, casting eerie shadows along the damp, mossy stone floor. It smells of must and mold, and the only window in our cell is barred. Everything else is sealed by brick and mortar... There's only one feasible way out. The way we came in.

A weight hangs heavy within my chest. I have no idea how much time we have, nor where to start to form an escape plan. I just knew I couldn't be away from Finn... I had to know he'd be okay and the only possible way that would happen was if I came down here with him. It was a risk, but one I'm willing to take for the right person.

"I told you we'd get thrown in jail," Finn says, trying to lighten the mood with his usual humor, but even he seems subdued by the gravity of our situation. The thought of being trapped here indefinitely is suffocating, and I won't be able to breathe fully until I figure out what to do.

Sighing, I can taste the salt in the air on my tongue, a bitter reminder of the world beyond these walls. It only makes our imprisonment feel all the more cruel and unjust. But in spite of it all, I refuse to give up hope. We will find a way out of this, no matter how impossible it may seem.

We will.

## Finn

“Up.” The guard rattles the bars, rousing me from sleep. Eva shifts, curled against my chest and I gently slide her to the side, stand up and hold my hands out to the guard.

“Talk dirty to me, why don’t you?” He doesn’t seem to find my comment funny. Not at all. I pop my lips.

He slips the key through the lock, releasing the chains that secure the cell door, then slips inside to disconnect my shackles from the floor.

“Come,” he demands, grabbing the link between my hands.

“Man of few words, I see.” Again, the guard doesn’t respond as he locks Eva inside and escorts me down the hall. “Maybe this could be the start of a new friendship. You let me and my girl out, and then I secure you a place in Hell Hold... It’s a win-win, really. From what I hear, no one likes the mad king—”

“Shut. Up,” he growls, the sheer vibrato of it creeps down my spine and I straighten, darting my gaze away.

“Yes, sir.”



We climb the flights of stairs we came down, until we reach the top, leading to the outside, where we spiral up the thick column of rock holding up the Solarian castle. Since it's suspended in the bay around the mainland, a bridge made of skeletons connects it, and the waves below crash against the castle's pedestal.

Cresting the landing, we stand at the foot of the castle, just in front of the front door. Seconds later, it creeps open, and the guard's hand tightens around my chain, as if he's testing me to try something stupid.

Asmodeus pushes through the front door and strides toward us. He takes my chain from the guard as he comes in arm's reach. "You're dismissed, thank you," he mumbles, jerking me forward. The moment we're alone, he pulls me close. "Do you have it?"

"Of course, I have it. What? You think I'm going to drop the only thing that could push off the inevitable?" Contorting awkwardly, I fish around in my pocket for the mustache. "See?"

"Good, because I promised someone you'd live for at least a few more days."

I freeze, my head twisting to stare at Asmodeus' scarred face, his amber eyes watching me while the pure white one rolls like it still can see. "Alice... You mean you promised *Alice*?"

Why would she associate with him, of all people? I can still feel his hands around my throat, his magic stabbing through my body as he drained the life out of me. If it weren't for her, he'd have killed me that day. How did they go from her driving a sword through his chest and adding to the collection of scars on his body to being on the same side? Or on talking terms, for that matter.

He doesn't answer me, nor confirm what I already assume. Though we

went through every floor of the dungeon on the way down and back up. She's not in there, and that gives me a sliver of hope.

"Whose side are you on?" I demand an answer, putting my face directly in his.

"No ones. I look out for myself, and if your presence suits me, then I'm willing to help you. That's all. The only exception to that rule is when the king manipulates me with the wristband I'm wearing, got it?" He pulls me along with him, and we round the side of the castle.

"What did Peregrine offer the king?" My steps are uneven and I do my best to keep up with him, even though we're on uneven ground.

"It doesn't matter to you."

"Okay, fine. What did he threaten you with to come after us?"

Asmodeus halts on a drop of a dime, spinning and nearly knocking me on my ass to keep from colliding with him. His mismatched eyes narrow as he pins me with a lethal glare. "You're on death row, yet you want to play twenty questions?"

"You know as much as I do, if I plan to save me and your aunt, then information is our ticket out." I clear my throat, having regained my footing.

"You want information? Fine. Here you go. The king didn't offer me anything. He took my magic and won't turn this bloody cuff off unless I do his bidding. We had a deal. If I fought for him, he'd let me go on my merry way. Clearly, he didn't keep his end of the bargain, and now I'm running his errands. I'm surviving off a battery that is running down with every use of what little of my magic he's allotted me. Yet, I completed my job and now that's extended into bringing Eva here, and by default you, because I tried to do the right thing."

"Then what does Alice have to do with this?"

“That’s what he has had me doing. He’s had me keeping an eye on Hell Hold. We can’t get in the city due to her protection, but he wanted to know the minute she or my brother left. He wants Kai dead, and Alice as a house pet. Since she’s not from the seven realms, he believes her magic is capable of lifting his curse.”

“Did she leave?”

“Yes,” he answers, not even blinking as he stares me down.

“Is she alive?”

“Yes. Now, no more questions. The king is waiting.”



“Ah, yes... The man who took my grandson’s place.” The king gestures to us as we enter his garden. “What’s your name, son?” If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was having tea with my grandfather and not the man who was planning to kill me.

“Finn,” I answer honestly.

“Your *full* name.” He says, pinching the tea cup in his hands a bit too tightly. His cat-like eyes scan over me, and he snorts, as if he’s not surprised by what he sees.

“That is my full name.”

Asmodeus pulls me closer and secures the chain to one attached to the ground near the king’s table. Apparently, brunch is something he likes to do with all of his prisoners.

“Surely you have a last name,” he chuckles, waving for me to sit. My teeth grind, hard enough to crack enamel, but I do as he asks, taking a seat in the plush patio chair.

“No. Just Finn.”

Realization washes over his face and his brows tip apart while he nods his understanding. “I see... A bastard then.”

*No... Not a fucking bastard, you dick. Just wasn't old enough to know who my parents were when you killed them.*

“Something like that,” I say, not giving him the respect of looking at him while I speak. He doesn't deserve it. Instead, I stare into the sea of blooms.

“Asmodeus tells me you're a magic user. I'm always looking for druids and mages to add to my guard, but...” he trails off, lifting a gauntlet out of the seat beside him and setting the medieval metal contraption on the glass table top. “You'd have to be willing to show me I can trust you, and that involves wearing this.”

“Why? So you can turn my magic off or threaten to take it away altogether. You do that to your grandson. Why would I expect any better treatment from you when you're not even my blood?”

He flashes silver blades for teeth, the crow's feet around his eyes deepening. “Because of what I can offer. I can kill you and make an example out of you to those of Hell Hold by scattering your pieces around the edge of our realm, or you can join my guard. You can live.”

There's no way in hell that I'm joining his guard... It would be a complete slap in the face to my parents, who gave their lives when faced with this exact same circumstance. I won't undo their noble sacrifice by accepting his deal. Not unless it will help Eva, too.

“I'm mated with your daughter.” His eyes widen as he sits back.

“So I've heard, but *her husband* doesn't seem to mind. Of course, you'd have to forgo any connection you have with her, but I can add that into the

spell work of the cuff. You won't even remember her." His arms cross, stretching the seams of his velvet tunic.

"What if I showed you how I made this?" I say, placing the mustache on the table. "This is how I tricked you. If you understand how it works, no one would be able to do so again.

A thick hand grips the furry patch, lifting it up and flipping it around in his fingers to get a better look. "Interesting," he says, returning his slitted pupils to me. The very sight of them has me on edge.

"If I show you how to make those and join your guard, then you have to do me a favor. I've accepted my fate, and I'll happily lay my head on the stone, but if you offer a chance to save someone I love, then... Well, we might just have a deal."

I can't believe I'm considering this, but people do crazy things for love, and *fuck*... If I die, then she has no one to help her. And if she gets left in her betrothed hands, he'll use her to do what he needs to, then kill her because her beast is mated to me. I can't let her die... Even if it means breaking every solemn vow I've made in my life. I just can't. There's something inside me that won't allow it to happen.

The king sets the mustache down, his hand holding it. "I appreciate you bringing this, but your help isn't required to learn, nor to understand it. Only this," he holds up the mustache. "This is all I need. My daughter will fulfill her duty. I've already accepted Lord Peregrine Grey's offer and contracts with elves are unbreakable. They stand until death."

I push up from the table, the chain attaches to my shackles growing tight. "Then I can't accept your deal. I won't become everything I despise to save myself. The only reason I'd consider it is to save your daughter."

"Very well then." The king waves someone over and a guard comes to

release the chain from the ground and escort me back to my cell. Asmodeus follows, having been waiting near the edge of the garden. As he approaches, the king stands. “Schedule his public execution for a week from now. We’ll give him some time to change his mind and think about my deal, but if he hasn’t accepted by then, he’ll be put to death. *Finn* can either join me against his people, or be scattered across the edge of our realm as a warning for them. It’s his choice. Hell Hold can’t hide within their city forever. At some point, they’ll have to leave and we’ll be ready.”

Asmodeus bows his head, turning on a heel and heading back toward the castle while the guard starts to drag me toward the dungeon entrance.

“Oh, and let’s not let him forget about his choice, yes?” the king calls behind us, and the guard chuckles before dragging me farther away.

Whatever that means can’t be good.

## Eva

I scramble to the bars the moment I hear footsteps. Somehow, I slept through them taking Finn away, waking in this desolate space by myself. The only good part of this cage is the fact I can speak to my creature again. Peregrine's magic only affects me so long as he's around or I'm near something he's enchanted. Neither of which are down here. Too bad accessing her won't help me since they placed us in the old-time dragon cells. The gleam in his eyes sends a wave of ease crashing through me. He's wavering... That glimpse is all I need to know I'm on the right path. Something takes hold of my heart, and pumps new life through my veins, and that something is hope.

Centuries ago, before my father obliterated the entire species of shifters from our realm, this is where we imprisoned such creatures. Clearly, my father wasn't taking any risks. I'm here because they know I won't be able to get out if I wanted to. Not without help from the outside.

Metal clinks and something shuffles down the stairs, but I can't see who the sound belongs to. Just that someone is coming.

"Finn!" I yell, my voice echoing off the walls. Please tell me that's him...

The guard comes into view first, followed by Finn. The treatment is brutal. The guard yanks him down off the last step, dragging him before he can get his feet beneath his body. I growl in protest as they near, but Finn holds his hands up.

“I’m alright,” he says and instantly my heart slows to a steady thump.

*“Thank the gods.”*

The guard’s purple eyes peek through the holes in his helmet. One of his hands rests on the hilt of a sword slung at his side, the other grips Finn’s chain. He’s a warlock. I should’ve known my father would use someone with magic to guard our cell. Even though it wouldn’t be as simple as overpowering the man opening the gate to get out of here.

Each floor has a guard. We could fight our way past them to the top floor of the dungeon to get out, but it wouldn’t keep Asmodeus from popping in wherever we are, and so long as he remains at my father’s beck and call, there is no escape... Only running and hoping to not get caught. I can’t overpower Asmodeus... He’s one of the strongest assholes in all the realms combined. If he wanted it, he could snap my beast’s neck in an instant and eviscerate me with a snap of his fingers.

The guard opens the gate and pushes Finn inside, not bothering to reattach his shackles to the floor. “Food will be brought down eventually,” the man says before his heavy boots slowly pad back to the stairwell.

“On the bright side, it can’t be any worse than what we’ve been scavenging for.” Finn steps toward me, a soft smile on his face.

“Where did they take you?” My words come out a bit harsher than I anticipated.

“To see your father.”

White hot rage melts through my veins as I take in the two black eyes he’s



now sporting. My beast flares to the surface, just close enough to make me feel her, but not enough for me to start the change. She's pissed, and so am I. I want to find whoever did this and let them know what my beast does to those she doesn't like. I'll make what happened to Ash look like fucking child's play.

"He did this to you?" I ask, knowing if it's true, then there's nothing I can do about it, even if we do get out of here. My father ensured that none of his children could hurt him. If I so much as try, my heart will stop.

"No... The guard did. He slammed my face into the side of the castle. It'll heal. I'll be fine, Eva." His hand settles against the side of my face, the chains and shackles cool against my skin. "I promise." I can't help but lean into his touch. It's everything I need and *so much more*. Even in captivity, even with the walls closing in around us, it's comforting. It forces me to breathe and my heart to quiet. The tempo drops to a steady beat and the ringing in my ears quiets.

"Maybe for now," I say, forcing myself to meet his gaze. I've been so quick to give up, or just to keep running instead of facing my demons, but that naive girl is gone. We will figure it out, but I need the stubborn man back. We need him and his persistence if we have any hope of getting out of here. "What happens when he comes back? We need a plan and I have nothing. No matter who we fight to get out of here, it doesn't keep Asmodeus from finding us. We need to get to Hell Hold."

He doesn't speak as he strokes his thumb against my cheek. It's such a simple gesture, yet when he's soft like this, it makes my knees weak. Closing the distance between us, he rests his forehead against mine. "I don't know. I wish I had the answer, but I don't."

Something about him is different...Where is the man who jumped into a

hole just so I didn't have to go through The City of the Damned alone?

"Why does it seem like you're giving up?" I whisper, tipping my face up to nuzzle my nose against his.

"I just don't see a way out of this. Not this time..."

"No," I shake my head, my hands colliding with his chest, but his arms loop around me, holding me in place. The warmth he offers melts through me, but I don't slip into it. I won't. The stubborn man who believes there is always another way is in there somewhere. I just need to fix the cracks my father made. "No," I repeat. "It's not good enough."

My beast surges a bit close to the surface, and the growl that leaves my throat has him stepping back and putting as much space as he can between us.

"Eva... I can't save us from this. I tried the only feasible way. Even if I accept your father's deal and join his guard, he won't break his oath to Peregrine."

Hesitating, I zone out, looking past him at the mossy stone walls. "But he offered you a chance to live..."

"Yes," he says, "for *me* to live, but you're the only person I'd sacrifice my honor for. He wouldn't make a deal for you."

"So what? You're just going to give in? You realize you might be eaten alive, right? If the king doesn't want to get his hands dirty, he feeds his prisoners to his pet. What about me? Peregrine is going to murder me and unleash the fae on all the seven realms. Not just this one. If your kingdom wasn't prepared for my father's army, well... Let's just say the fae are as ruthless as they come. They will slaughter their way through every piece of The Seven Realms and they won't stop until the royal families are displayed on spikes. My father, my innocent sisters, your king and prince, Alice... All

of them will be murdered in the most brutal way imaginable if Peregrine gets what he wants,” I say.

Tears well up in my eyes. My chest feels so tight... as if my heart is holding on as hard as it can, knowing what comes next is going to break it. If Finn dies, it will shatter into a million pieces and it will never be whole again.

When he doesn't answer, I continue. “My father couldn't stop them. They were killing their way through our realm like wildfire, and if it weren't for him taking a page out of the Devil's playbook...” I trail off, shaking my head. “My father is a monster. He's the very definition of a mad king, but I can promise you the fae are much worse.”

His chains rattle as he drags his hands down his face. “I understand, but *I can't stop it*. I can't pick a magical lock, and,” he spins, holding his hands out to our cell, “do you see any exits? Unless you can shrink into a fucking mouse, there's no way we'll get through the window or the bars.” Finn stalks forward as he speaks, his voice raising. Flames burn within his gaze, his pupils blown. His jaw twitches as he glares down at me. Something about my face triggers him to change his tone, and when he speaks again, it holds the same cadence it always has. Except it's void of his airy humor, his compassion... his empathy. “What would you have me do?”

“You're a hero to this world, Finn. Do what heroes do and don't give up hope.”

“No, pretty girl. I'm no one's hero. There's nothing I can do to save you. I wish there was, but we're in over our heads this time. It doesn't matter how skilled I am with a blade if I can't use one against my enemy. And magic,” he holds up his hands, “clearly that's out of the question.” He chuckles through an exhale, gripping a hand around his jaw. “I don't even know if I was anyone's hero to begin with.”

I tilt my head, placing a hand against his chest and feeling the steady thump of his heart. “What are you talking about?”

“The stones in the abandoned city... It showed me my truth and made me realize just how long I’ve been lying to myself.” He sits against the far wall, letting his head thump against it.

“The stones showed me my past, but it was wrong about my truth. You said that. They claimed I was a monster—*an abomination*—and that I’d kill you the first time I let me guard down. Yet, here you are, all in one piece. They were wrong about me and if they convinced you that you were anything less, then they were wrong about you, too.”

He side-eyes me, but doesn’t move an inch. “It didn’t lie to me. All it did was show me things from my past. Things I remember doing, but from a different perspective. That perspective painted me in the same light I’ve associated your father with.”

I shake my head, crouching in front of him. “You are *nothing* like my father, Finn. I said it before and I’ll say it again. He’s committed atrocities the history books can’t even comprehend. You’ve devoted your life to protecting your kingdom. There are no parallels.”

He scoffs, rolling his neck. When he brings his gaze back to me, every shred of the man I knew is gone. All that’s left is an empty shell, vacant eyes and an expressionless face. It’s haunting and sort of beautiful all at the same time.

“If you know me so well, then what’s my last name?”

My lips part, but right as the answer starts to form in my head it goes blank. I snap my mouth shut, sitting back on my heels. After everything we’ve been through, I’ve never asked. I didn’t feel necessary to. He was Finn, the man I’ve been falling for, and that was all that mattered to me.

“That’s what I thought,” he huffs. “Would you like to know what it is?”

My eyebrows flatten as I try to figure out where he’s going with this, but I can’t. Slowly, I nod, curious as to how something as mundane as a last name matters or pertains to our situation.

“I don’t have one. Why? Well, that would be because your father murdered my parents because they were magic users and refused to join his army. He thought them better dead than possibly siding against him. He massacred the village I was born in, but I lived. My mother hid me and when the Devil’s men discovered the wreckage, they followed the sound of me crying. I was just a baby. So, I don’t know my last name. I wasn’t old enough when I was orphaned to remember it.”

My eyes round, listening to every word. Finn never deserved that... Those people didn’t, and I knew my father was awful, but hearing something like this... It makes me feel vile to even be of his blood. “I’m so sorry, Finn. I didn’t know.”

“I don’t blame you, love. You weren’t even born. How could you have had any part of that?”

I shake my head gently, placing a hand on my face as if the motion alone will help me understand. “But how does that make you like him? If anything, it proves the opposite,” I ask.

“I swore on my parent’s lives—the lives they sacrificed along with the rest of the magic users in my village—that I’d make sure King Ares would pay for what he did. I vowed to make sure he’d never be able to do it again. The moment I came of age, I joined the Devil’s army and the things we did... Well, from where I stood, we were ridding the world of dangerous creatures. Those who would commit heinous acts against innocent lives. We shoved people into this realm—*families*. We condemned children to live here, to grow

up serving the very man I despised, because of things their parents did. Do you know how many collared creatures I've killed? Come to find out, the king is controlling them through it? Those are innocent lives, victims, yet I do so without mercy. So sure, to the people in Hell Hold, those who were glad to see the mad king gone, I might look like a hero, but I'm starting to think heroes don't exist."

He props his elbow on his knee, cupping his mouth with his hand as if he's worried about what might come out of it next. I'm not even sure how to respond. Time seems to stand still, until finally I lean forward, remove his hand, and kiss him. He doesn't even offer to kiss me back, but it doesn't matter. He needs to know that I don't think of him the same way he sees himself. The kiss is soft, and it doesn't last long, just enough to get his attention.

Breaking away, I look him in the eye and try not to get pulled into the sea of emeralds that's somehow brighter, even though it's clouded with unshed tears.

"Do you know what separates us monsters from the heroes in your stories? Perspective. In your kingdom, you were doing what society deemed as morally right. You were ridding the world of a murderous king. It's impossible to know if things were done differently what would've happened. But Finn... If anyone deserves to be labeled a hero, it's you. You can be a hero and still be wrong. All that matters is what you do to make it right."

## Finn

“**L**ook at me,” she says, and it’s now that I realize that I’ve stopped, my gaze zoning out past her. I didn’t expect her words to hit me so hard. They tore open old wounds while simultaneously healing them from the inside out. The only problem is working through my bullshit past isn’t going to get us out of here. “Finn.” Her stern tone draws my attention back to her.

“What?” I push the words out through clenched teeth. It’s not her fault that we’re here. I know that, but taking a trip down memory lane isn’t going to help, nor do I want those memories to be fresh on my mind in my last days and moments.

I looked on the way out of the dungeon when I went to meet with the mad king. There are guards on every level. There are no exits, only barred windows until you reach the top floor. Nearly every guard we passed was a magic user. I could feel it like oil slicking against skin. Tendrils of power encompassed me as we climbed to the top floor. We wouldn’t stand a chance.

Not to mention, unless she can fly too, we’ll have to cross the bridge and that’s a long stretch. At any moment, someone could see us and we’d be sitting ducks. I’d rather enjoy a week with her in a dungeon, to get just a bit

more time, than die ahead of schedule trying to break out of an inescapable fortress. Is that so much to ask?

Eva snarls, her eyes flashing bright as her beast pushes its limits.

“Not you too,” I say, rolling my eyes, but the action only makes the tears building up spill. I quickly wipe it away, but Eva catches my wrist. She weaves her fingers with mine and brings our joined hands to her lips to kiss across my knuckles.

“So what... Things aren’t as black and white as you once thought they were. The truth is, we live in a world full of shades of gray. Your mistakes don’t make you weak... Giving up does. I’ve made countless mistakes... I’ve taken innocent lives. I’ve killed someone I thought I loved, and it gutted me. You pieced me back together and you didn’t even know it. Everyone is going to do things they regret, and you might not be a hero to all, but you are to me.” She moves closer, putting herself between my bent knees, and lifts my chin with her free hand. “Do you hear me? You’re *my* hero, and I love you just the way you are.”

Heat blooms within my chest, and everything seems to deflate. “I love you too... I’m so wrapped up in it that the thought of losing you is debilitating. I can’t think of anything else. You’re everything I ever wanted and if I could have one wish, it would be more time... We should’ve had more time.”

Tears stream down her cheeks and I reach up to wipe them away, but the moment I do, more replace them. The sight of her like this cuts me down to the very center of what I am. It flays me open and strips me raw. I hate it, but at the same time, I love it, because she wouldn’t be this way if she didn’t mean every word she said... if she didn’t love me.

“Then try... Do it for me, because I don’t want this to be the end. I feel like I just started to live, to be happy, and even if by some chance Lord



Peregrine doesn't kill me, if you're not here, I'll never get to experience what this—being so utterly in love with someone that it hurts—is like. So do it for me... Do it for us. Help me look for a way out, because I'd rather try, knowing we might get to be together forever, than give up and spend the rest of our days counting down the clock.”

I grip her to my chest, inhaling deep to steady my heart. The sweet scent of her hair engulfs me. I know it's the fae magic within her, but it's intoxicating and now my favorite smell in the entire world. “I'll do it. We'll find a way or die trying.”

She lurches back, her eyes toggling between mine before she crushes our lips together in a searing kiss. It's soft yet urgent, and absolutely everything I need. In the time we've known each other, she's become my glimmer of hope in the darkness, my fantasy for the future, and so much more.

My hands hold her face as I part my lips, deepening it. I'm desperate to capture every second of time we have left, yet lost in this moment. The way she smells, the way her full lips taste... To the noises that have become ingrained in my memory. I want it all. I want to kiss her tears away and make her forget that she ever shed them.

I've never felt this way about anyone, nor have I ever wanted to be near someone so badly before. I want to touch her every minute of every day, kiss her until my lips go numb or raw. Before I met her, I had no issues being alone, but now I'm afraid I won't be able to breathe without her. She's terrifying, and her beast could end me in a flash, yet I trust her fully with my life.

Maybe it's because of everything we've been through, having to rely on each other to get free and survive, but there is no me without her... Not anymore.

I grip her hips, lifting her up and placing her in my lap, her legs straddling me. Eva's fingers curl into my hair, wrenching my head to the side. I've seen what she can do with those teeth, but when she kisses down the length of my throat, my dick twitches in anticipation. I want to feel her, all of her around me. I want to suffocate on her moans, and drown between her legs.

"Here?" I ask, the moment her hands pull at my belt.

"Here." Her warm breath makes me shiver. "In this world, there might not be another moment."

A truer statement has never been spoken. I help her, pulling my belt through the loops of my pants and working the buttons and laces until my straining dick is free, standing up against her smooth stomach. My shirt still hangs loose around her body, and the moisture at the tip swells at the thought of her being bare beneath it. That the only thing wrapping around her is mine.

I swear she licks her lips, staring down at me, her gaze possessive, and filled with carnal urges. She wants this as bad as I do. Her hand wraps around my thickness, pulling a groan from deep within my chest. I'm helpless but to watch as her dainty hand moves, working me from base to dripping tip.

Eva slides back, and the moment her warm mouth wraps around me, my eyes roll back in my skull. My chest tightens, every muscle flexing as tingles spread through my middle and go straight to my balls.

"Fuck baby... How are you so damn good at this?" Her tongue swirls around me as she sucks me down deep into her throat.

Her mouth travels up my body, placing kisses on each bump of my abs, then continuing up my chest. "Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to."

Before I can stop myself, I bunch my hands into her hair, keeping her face near mine. It's not hard enough to hurt her, but it does keep her from receding

back down my body to ravish me more.

“He didn’t... *Please* tell me he didn’t. I don’t think I’d be able to keep myself from doing something stupid if your father or Peregrine hurt you in that way.”

She blinks. Her blue eyes are calm, yet glazed over. Her eyelids are heavy with lust as she stares at my mouth. “No. No one forced me to do anything. My beast wouldn’t allow for a man to touch me, let alone that. However, me and my sisters were forced to watch others do it. We learned. It was my father’s way of ensuring we could please our future husbands... And I’d say it worked.” Her hand grips me again and it takes everything I have to stifle a moan.

“It’s still not okay,” I grind out, trying to force my voice to stay even.

“It is to me. It wasn’t at the time, but I’m glad for it now.” She pumps her hand and I have to suck in a breath to keep from moaning. “Seeing you like this, and knowing I can make you feel so good that you moan my name... It almost feels better than what you do to me.”

“Almost,” I repeat, raising my brows as I lay back. My arm falls over my eyes as if it will hide the way I come undone for her.

Her mouth surrounds me again, and my hips lift, daring her to take me deeper, to suck me harder, and I feel her smile around me. My dick twitches, knowing those full lips will be red and thoroughly fucked by the time I’m done.

My free hand is clenched into a fist at my side. I don’t need to see it to know the knuckles have turned white. I can feel it in the way my hand tingles from lack of circulation and my nails bite into my skin. They’re kept short, but the choke hold I have on my sanity is enough to make them slice into my palm, anyway.

My breaths come in pants as my hips move on their own accord, keeping time with her. “Unless you want me to come down that pretty throat, I suggest you lay back.” I don’t look at her as I speak. I don’t even move my arm away from my face, out of fear that the view of those blue eyes and her flushed cheeks will be enough to push me over the edge.

With a final pop of the suction breaking from around me, she lets go, and just as I’m about to sit up, I feel her on top of me. Removing my arm, I watch in awe, entranced in the way she lines herself up. She’s so fucking wet... So ready for me, for the things I’m dying to do to her.

We both moan out a breath the moment she lowers an inch. Her body squeezes and clenches around me, so tight I can feel her heartbeat. Every rhythmic pulse echoing through her body wraps around me, teasing me. All I want to do is drive my hips up, to slam so deep inside her that she’ll feel me for days. Instead, I sit deathly still, letting my breath shake as I struggle to keep control. She’s still new to things. Even if she has knowledge of it, her body doesn’t, and I won’t hurt her for my own pleasure.

Little by little, she sinks lower and lower, leaving teeth marks in those perfect lips. Needing to take my mind off it, I work at the laces of the shirt she’s wearing—my shirt, pulling them through the eyelets until the V shaped collar opens up all the way to just above her navel.

“Don’t rush yourself,” I whisper as my hand swims beneath the fabric and wraps around her breast. They’re perfect, just like every other inch of her. Not too full, not too small, just enough to squeeze in my hand. She moans at my touch, lowering more, and I keep my eyes on her lust-maddened face as I bend forward and draw one of her hardened nipples into my mouth. Her back arches the moment my tongue begins to toy with it, and her head drops back. Her lips parting.

Fuck... She's such a sight to behold. Once I'm seated all the way inside, she swivels her hips, and the friction drags a growl out of me. There's no option not to, no chance to smother it. Before I even know it's happening that noise is hanging in the air between us. Her hips pick up the pace as I switch to her other breast. Her hands bury in my hair, pulling hard at the root while keeping me trapped to her.

I'm not sure why I do it, but I snake my free hand up her chest, wrapping my fingers around her throat and I feel her body spaz around me, the muscles contracting as she finds her release. It squeezes so tight around me that I fear it might cut off the blood flow, yet it feels so fucking good. I don't want it to stop. I want to keep her like this, suspended in bliss. I want to make her do it again.

My hand isn't doing anything but sitting there, but I can feel every ragged gasp roll through it as she tries to catch her breath. Until finally her body relaxes enough that I can move beneath her. I grip her hips, holding her down against me and forcing myself deeper with each thrust.

Kissing along her chest and up her throat, I bring her face to mine. "Next time you come, I want you to scream it." Her blown pupils lock on mine as the air rakes in and out of her lungs. "I want everyone in earshot to know who devours this body..." I thrust up, making her lips part wider. "Who you'll forever run to..." I kiss her throat, nipping at her skin over the mark that's just barely visible still. "Mostly, I want Peregrine to know that you're fucking mine." She whimpers out a moan when I place my hand below her navel, drawing my thumb in small circles over her clit. "And that if he wants to take you, sweet princess, regardless of the reason, he'll have to go through me."

I drive my hips up hard and bite into my mark, and she shatters. Her body trembles into pieces as she screams her release. My name falls from her lips

as she sits back. Her breath even trembles and the sheer sight of her brings my own climax in tow.

Gritting my teeth, I bite back a moan, watching where our bodies connect until the force of pleasure rolling through me becomes too strong. My eyes shut and my head thumps back against the stone wall.

We stay like this for a moment, coming down. Fuck... I'll never get enough of this woman. What was I thinking? There's no way I could even step into death not knowing she was safe. She's mine, and I'll make sure we get out of here. I want all the moments, all the firsts, all the lasts. I want her, and I can't have everything I want from within this cell.

She leans forward, sitting up just enough to kiss my forehead.

"You're a fucking smart woman, you know that?" I stare at her from beneath my heavy eyelids.

"What gave you that assumption?" She grins, her white teeth gleam and I don't think I've ever fully seen her smile until now. Not like this. Her incisors form little sharp points and it's absolutely adorable.

"Because you planned this. Somehow you knew it would yank me out of the depths of despair, and I don't know how you knew that this was the way to do it. Not even I thought this would be the ticket, but it forced some raging part of me to surface, demanding you be mine and only mine."

"It wasn't my idea..." she trails off, lifting my chin to claim my lips. "It was my beast's."

I stare into those gorgeous blue eyes smiling down at me. "Thank her for me."

## Eva

**T**oday is the day... It's been a week of being trapped down here in this dungeon like a rat in a cage, waiting for my father to come experiment or Peregrine to bleed me dry. On the one hand, we know when things will happen here. There's no fear of something jumping out of the woods, or any of the dangers associated with The Enchanted Forest. It's given us time to get to know one another, to formulate a plan, and when we ran out of things to say, there were plenty of other things to do to occupy our time.

*"Are you ready?"* my beast asks. She's been quieter since we've been locked down here. I'm not quite sure if it's her giving us space or if she's just at ease, knowing the responsibility to protect me doesn't only rest on her shoulders anymore. Either way, I've been thankful for the silence.

*"As I'll ever be,"* I answer, pushing away from the frigid metal cell bars. *"So, the cuffs. You said you had a way to get them off?"*

Finn glances up at me from where he sits on the stone floor. *"Um, yeah... I do."*

*"He's not telling us something."*

“Are you going to say it out loud or is it some sort of druid secret?” I ask, crossing my arms and moving to stand in front of him. Finn opens and closes his mouth three times before settling to shoot me a weak smile. “What is it? Our entire plan hinges on you having your magic.”

He closes his eyes and the lump in his throat bobs before he can gather the nerve to speak. “I need you to take my thumbs.”

I nearly choke on air. “Excuse me?”

“I need you to shift and your beast to take my thumbs. I can cast without them, but even if I were to break them, I wouldn’t be able to slip my hands out. The cuffs are too tight.”

“No. I’m not doing that. We can overpower the guard and find the keys. That’s the logical thing to do,” I say, thrusting my hand through my hair and pushing it out of my face.

“That’s what will get you killed, Eva. They have magic and your father and Peregrine have trinkets that can keep you from shifting. Who is to say the guard will even have keys to the cuffs themselves? I doubt they would keep those down here. The gate keys, sure, but not those.”

*“He’s right, human. If he can’t get those cuffs off another way, then dinner is served.”* Shaking my head, I do my best to dispel her comment. I’m *not* eating him. That’s where I draw the line.

“You don’t understand... When she takes over, I have zero control over what she does. She likes you, but who knows what she’ll do once she tastes your blood... Her aim isn’t exactly great either.”

*“Um, speak for yourself. In case you forgot, I got us down that tower. I didn’t see you scaling stone walls. I had to aim for that. It wasn’t a by chance freefall.”*

“We don’t have a choice, love,” he says, standing up and striding toward



me. “It’s this or I get executed at dusk.” The very thought of him dying makes my heart seize. Finn brushes my hair behind my ear.

“This is the only way?” I ask, cringing as the words leave my mouth. Still, those damn emerald eyes captivate me, settling me before I can even panic. This has *bad idea* written all over it.

“It’s the only way.” Gently, he kisses my lips, and my beast takes the sudden silence as her window to add her two cents.

*“It’s impossible. He can’t be serious. I’ve smelled him and he’s absolutely delicious. He can’t expect me to only have a taste.”*

I take a step back. “Well, that’s too damn bad. You can’t eat him.” Finn’s eyes round at my comment, but he doesn’t speak a word. “Promise me.”

*“Fine, I’ll do my best.”*

“Is she going to eat me?” he whispers, as if keeping his tone down will keep her from overhearing.

*“Don’t answer that.”*

“Um, no. She won’t try to eat you.”

“She’s just going to take the thumbs, right?” My cheeks pull a bit tighter, plastering on a fake smile.

*“Definitely don’t answer that.”*

“Mhm,” I say, nodding my head for far too long. “I don’t think you’ve seen her before, have you?”

“No, but she can’t be that bad. You’re dainty, and sure there are *the teeth*, and *the claws*, but it can’t get much worse than that. I’m pretty sure if I didn’t run for the hills after seeing you rip out an elf man’s esophagus, I’m not going to now.” He turns back to me and closes his eyes. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Canting my head, I close the space, trying to resist the urge to snort when my hand connects with his arm and he jerks. “You’re not going to watch?”

“God no... There are some things a man can’t unsee and the love of my life changing into a beast falls in that category. I’ll open them when you’re done.”

“How will you know it’s done?”

“Call it a gut feeling,” he says, bouncing his eyebrows once.

“Alright.” I’m still skeptical, but my beast is right. Him out of those chains is our best option. It’s our best chance to have a life outside these walls, and this castle has owned enough of my life. I’m ready to try something new, to turn over a new chapter with him.

“Fantastic. *Okay...*” He jumps, shaking out his body and making the chains rattle. “Alright, we can do this.”

*“He most definitely can’t do this.”*



## Finn

I close my eyes and hold out my shackled hands. Eva takes a deep breath, and her feet shuffle away to the far corner of the cell, but I don't dare peek. The space falls deathly silent, then the stomach-churning sound of bones cracking and splintering hits my ears, followed by the stretching of muscles. It's like nails on a chalkboard and sends a jolt of pain straight through my teeth.

How does shifting not hurt her? Maybe it does and they've just become accustomed to the pain?

Claws scrape against the floor, creeping closer and closer until I can feel the heat radiating from her creature. Its breath ghosts against my skin, and the sheer sound sends a shudder through me.

This is it. *I can do this.* My thumbs will grow back... *I hope.* I've never exactly lost a whole digit to know, but I've seen other immortals endure far worse and recover just fine. I won't be able to hold a sword for a bit, but that's okay. All I need is my magic, and I can cast with four fingers, no problem.

Widening my stance, I roll my shoulders back. *Okay, gonna do it. I'm going to open my eyes. This is Eva—her beast—and she's promised not to hurt me.* I crack an eyelid, peeking out in the space before me, and coming face to face with razor-sharp teeth.

"Fuck," I breathe, tearing my eyes open. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck.*" Swallowing hard, I shake my head, jerking it from side to side as I angle my body away from the thing that crawled out of my lover and into my nightmares. Clearing my throat, I try to force words other than curses to leave

my lips, but then she breathes again, the air rushing past my face like a subtle breeze, and I squeal. I fight the urge to squeeze my eyes shut as she leans closer, her nose wiggling as she smells me.

This.... *This* was not what I expected. This makes the creature I ran into in the woods look like a *fucking stuffed animal*. Jet black hair covers her entire body, and the same bright blue rings make up her eyes, but now they glow. The pupils are slit like a predator's. She watches me with a sense of curiosity, tilting her head to the side.

Her body almost looks like a hellhound or a large wolf, except where hellhounds are more lengthy, she's more stout. She's strong, and the moment she takes a step forward, I can see the muscles bunch. Eva's beast creeps a touch closer, moving on all fours, and her mirror-like talons scratch against the stone with every step. Her face is directly in front of mine, the structures of it are made of smooth slopes and take on a feminine feel, even though every other piece of her screams of predatory grace, and promises violence.

I hold up my hands in surrender as my back connects with the wall of our cell. When did I step toward it? It's cool against my skin and Eva's beast sticks her snout against my chest, the nostrils on her muzzle wiggling as she assesses me.

"Uh uh, *nope*. I can't do this. I take it all back."

The creature lifts its head just enough to look me in the eye, only now her pupils are thinner. All hints of curiosity gone. Her lips curl up, revealing elongated ivory teeth that form blade-sharp points. Each one is easily the size of one of my fingers.

A growl rolls from her chest, low and deep, vibrating the air, and her ears pin back flat against her head. It's then that I watch in horror as the hair along her spine lifts and her fluffy tail swishes like a cat about to pounce.

It jerks forward, placing its ice cold nose against the hollow of my throat, pushing me back into the stone wall. I yelp, squeezing my eyes shut, turning my head away from her and filling my cheeks with the exhale I'm too scared to release.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I backpedal. "It's not that you aren't beautiful—because you are *so beautiful*—it's just that my head, along with the entire top half of my body, could fit in that mouth."

Something wet drags along the side of my face, and it's now that I realize I'm crying and her beast is quite literally licking away my tears.

"This is fine. *I'm fine.*"

When she stops, I dare a glance, and quickly drag the inside of my arm across the wetness.

"You're not going to eat me, right?" I whisper, and her head shakes no, ever so slightly. "Oh thank the gods."

She backs away, sitting in the middle of the cell with her tail swirled around her.

"Just the thumbs," I say, shaking as I hold my shackled hands out, pointing them up and clenching my hand. Closing my eyes, I inhale deep. "Just be sneaky about it. I'd rather not know when it's going to—"

Her jaws clamp down with a sickening snap of bone. I cry out as pain shoots through my wrists and up my arms. *Both* of my arms. The searing heat is quickly replaced by panic, and the sound of blood dripping to the floor has my head spinning.

I draw in a shaky breath, trying to get myself together, but the room tilts, even though I can't see it. My head grows too heavy for me to keep up and slowly I lose control over my body. My arms fall to my sides and the clank of

the metal shackles hitting the floor has my gut twisting. I'm helpless to stop it and sink into the darkness.

## Finn

Something fuzzy is wrapped around me when I come to, and I snuggle into it. Gods, it's been so long since I last laid in a bed, wrapped myself in blankets, or even slept... Then my memories resurface, and I remember just how the fuck I went to sleep in the first place. If you can call a loss of consciousness that.

Flailing, my eyes flare open, and I try to scurry away, except Eva's beast is curled into a circle, trapping me in between her fuzzy legs. The jerking motion I make is enough to wake her. The beast's head lifts, hovering over my form for a moment before her tongue lashes out against my hands. I lower my gaze. *I stand corrected.* She licks the end of skin-covered nubs where my *fucking wrists should be.*

"You... You *promised.*" The words come out with a growl as I poke my arm at her. "You promised Eva that you would do your best to only take my thumbs. You didn't even *try* to be careful about it. You just snapped first and worried about the consequences later."

With a snarl of her lip and a sinister clicking noise, the beast begins to shift. Bones pop as she shrinks down until Eva appears, naked and curled

around me on the ground.

Eva sits up, rubbing at her eyes as if she's been asleep. "Finn," she breathes, her eyes finding mine. Her lips press into a slight pout as she throws herself against my chest. "I'm so sorry. I tried—"

Leaning my head against hers, I make a shushing sound. "It wasn't you. You warned me that she might not be up to the task." Pain ebbs through my arms, and even though the wound is closed now, it still causes me to hiss the moment her hand touches one of my ends. My nubs are sensitive, and there's no way I can cast magic without my hands to guide it. At least in terms of battle magic. "But we do have a problem. My shackles are off, but until my hands regrow, I'm not going to be able to cast much."

"And without your magic..." she trails off.

"We're essentially back to square one, except with the cuffs I could at least use a sword."

I lift my arm, attempting to pinch the bridge of my nose, and even though my brain is still sending signals, as if my hand is there, nothing happens until the blunt end of my arm collides with my forehead, causing a stinging sensation to ripple through my bones.

"Too bad I can't," I start, only to jerk my head up and search through the cell. "I can reattach them. They'll heal faster that way. If I can somehow mend them together with my arms, they should take hold. I've only ever seen it done once and the guy's arm was mended right after it happened, but there's hope, right? I mean, it's worth a—" I stop, having looked over every square inch of this cell, and besides the dried blood on the floor, there's no sign of what happened here. "Where the fuck are my hands?"

Eva hisses in a breath. "Yeah.... About that."

My body moves at a snail's speed as I turn back to her, twisting my



shoulders and my head. “You *ate them!*?”

“To be clear, I didn’t eat them. She did, but yes...”

“Un-freaking-believable.” I stand, tossing up my arms. “Does she even know how rude that is?!”

Eva raises her eyebrows, looking out the corner of her eye toward the ground. “I wish she did. Believe me, this could be worse. I’ve shifted back to find a finger still in my mouth before. Luckily, she finished before giving me back control.”

Footsteps sound from the stairwell just at the end of the stretch of cells. We lock eyes for a moment before I hold up my stubs. “What are we going to do?” I mouth the words, not wanting the guard to hear.

“Let me handle it,” she whispers, turning to face the gate as the purple-eyed man comes into view, the keys attached to his belt jingle and he hooks his thumbs into the front of his pants.

“The king has requested for you both to be taken to the base of the castle. He’ll be making his address to the public soon, then your execution will follow. I’ll take one of you at a time, starting with you.” He points a crooked finger my way, and my teeth grit.

The warlock’s eyes gleam with a dangerous light as he turns his attention to me, discovering my impossible situation. “I see you’ve met the beast.” His eyes drop over Eva, taking in every inch of her naked body. There hadn’t been time to process, let alone for her to throw my shirt back on. It causes something to flare up inside me that I’ve never experienced with anyone else but her. Jealousy.

I suppose it’s because I’ve never had someone in my life that was mine. After seeing what Alice and Kai have, the way they look at each other, and how they’d walk through fire to keep the other alive, I’ve been jealous of

their connection, but mostly because I've never experienced something like that. I've never had someone who became my sole reason for breathing. Not until Eva and I can't even tell you how or when it happened.

Seeing someone else get lost in the sight of her... It fuels a rage so deep, I might never be able to claw it out. I swallow hard, trying to force down the urge to beat him with my... *Fuck*, I'd hit him with the blunt ends of arms if I have to. The pain would be worth it.

"You're going to behave if I open up this gate, yes?" The warlock raises his hand, revealing a blood red ribbon. "You can't shift, so don't try anything stupid. Lord Grey may have given me specific instructions to not kill you, but it doesn't mean you have to be in one piece."

He shoves the key into the cell door and twists. The pins within the lock cascade open and he shimmies it ajar. Eva stands deathly still, letting him close the space between them, but to do so, he has to cross the entire cell.

Here goes nothing... I might not be able to cast properly, but magic still gushes through my veins. It's still possible to do the most basic spells, ones that don't require hand gestures to weave. One like sparking a flame.

I close my eyes, letting the man worry about her, completely oblivious to the true threat. My cuffs are gone and that ribbon is about to burn. Focusing my energy, I feel magic rush through my body, building and growing stronger by the second. The runes and symbols scattered across my skin take on an amber glow and the scent of scorched fabric singes my nose.

His yelp follows, and when I open my eyes, I find the ribbon is turning to ash, crumbling as orange-hued flames lick across the satin surface. Before he can realize what's happening, Eva partially shifts. Her talons strike as she spins, and a crackle of energy cuts through the air. But the warlock is too late. Before he could finish the spell, her blade-like claws sever his head from his

shoulders and his body collapses upon itself until crimson spills across the cell floor.

Her talons retract, and she whips around to face me. Those blue eyes... so stunning and so filled with joy, it nearly stops my heart. "You did it," she squeals. "You used magic. Without your hands at that."

Footsteps fly down the hall toward our cell and my eyes widen. They must've felt the magic... Whatever that man was cooking up wasn't a simple spell. It was explosive and even though he didn't get a chance to set it off, I can still feel the electric pulse dance across my skin.

Eva lunges for the cage door, but whoever has joined us hits her with magic, sending her flying into the wall. She cringes and lets out a wince the moment her body collides with the rough, unforgiving stone.

"No," I breathe, rushing toward her, but I catch sight of the newcomer and pause, remaining hidden against the wall of my cell. Magic swirls around his hands, glowing a ghoulish green hue. My heart races, panic and adrenaline flood my every nerve.

The warlock advances, his eyes narrowed and locked on her. I'm plastered against the wall, looking for an advantage of some kind, or anything I can use to keep him from hitting her again. Just as he starts casting another spell, I see my opportunity. I launch myself forward, sprinting through the open cell door, and I collide with him in a heap. His head smacks into the stone ground with a loud thud and the impact knocks him out cold.

I struggle to my feet, using my arms to brace against the man's body so I can get my feet beneath me. My gaze flicks to where Eva landed, her eyes meeting mine as she nods, letting me know she's okay.

"We have to keep going," I say, my voice shaking. She transforms back into her human form, and I hold out my stub, allowing her to use my arm to

help get up. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, just knocked the air out of me.”

“If the guy from the floor above felt the magic, there’s no telling how many more are on their way down. Our best bet is to hide the bodies and wait. We can pick them off one by one until we’ve dwindled down the numbers enough to fight our way out.”

She sucks in a breath, still trying to get her lungs to listen and expand. “Okay—” Her eyes snap to where the stairs are that take us up to the next floor. “Two more. Two more are coming.”

“Shift. Your beast can hide in one of the other cells. If she’s quiet enough, they won’t know to look for her. I’ll stay in here and just pretend the door is still shut.” I say, spitting out the words so fast, I’m not sure she can comprehend them.

The steps grow closer, and now I can hear them too. They’ll round that corner at any moment, and I just hope and pray to whoever is listening that we can get past them and up to the surface. That we can *escape*.

I don’t want this to be the last day I spend with her. It can’t be. We have to fight, and fight is what we will do.

## Eva

**M**y creature flaps herself to the ceiling, her talons dug deep within the mortar and stones. There was no chance of hiding in the cells. Something of our size would stick out and we can't afford to make mistakes right now.

"*Any second now,*" my beast says, our minds joined as one. She doesn't make a peep out loud, but just like she can speak to me in my head when I'm in my human form, she can in her's as well.

Asmo comes through the opening first, his mismatched eyes scanning the area, but never looking up. "They'll be here," he says, as he and another—a woman by the looks of it—travel the stretch of hallway to the cell with Finn inside. Her face is covered by the skull of a creature I can't recognize. Dragon, maybe? It's massive compared to her slight form.

Reaching Finn's cage, she pauses, taking in the sight of him.

"She must be the executioner," I say to my beast, but it's eerie not to have my lips move or to be able to hear myself out loud.

"Seems like it." My beast is stealthy as she unhooks her talons from her back paws and silently extends our body to the floor. The pads of her feet

make contact with the cool stone and she repeats the process with her front paws. She creeps closer to Asmodeus and the woman, coming up before her first.

As soon as she's close enough to attack, she rolls her lips back, putting on a display of teeth, and lets out a visceral growl from deep within her chest. It's guttural enough to strike fear into Asmodeus, let alone whoever he's brought with him. His eyes meet us first, and both of our visitors freeze in place, as if becoming a statue will make them disappear.

Saliva drips onto the floor as the woman turns around, arching her back away from us.

"Asmo," she whispers, and he audibly swallows.

I've never thought of shortening his name in that way... but it has a certain ring to it.

"I see you've met the princess."

My beast steps closer, looming over the woman, and slowly she pushes the skull up and off her head. Crimson curls fall, framing her feminine features, and emphasizing her light blue eyes and freckled cheeks. My beast doesn't care about her beauty though. The moment that skull is off, she lurches forward, putting our teeth within an inch of her skin. The woman shrinks away, shuddering beneath our towering form.

"I'm here to get you and my best friend out," she says, and my heart skips. My beast pauses, her lips dropping back over her teeth. This must be the infamous Alice I've heard so much about from Asmodeus and Finn, and if he's here, then he's agreed to help.

"Alice!" Finn yells, rattling the door until it pops open. He bolts in front of her, pressing his back to her and holding his arms out, shielding her from my creature. "Don't hurt her! She's... She's my friend!" He trembles but stays

upright, and my beast moves her snout over his chest, inhaling him. She enjoys the smell of his magic, the sweet scent practically wafts off him at all hours of the day. “I promise. She’s here to help. If you could just bring Eva back, I can ensure we—” his words cut off as she forfeits control to me.

Bones snap and crackle as our form shifts. Joints pop and twist, sending sparks of pressure racing through every part of my body. It doesn’t hurt, not anymore, but it does feel like every piece of me has been squished until my skin will pop. Next thing I know, I’m human again, and naked as fuck in front of my lover, my nephew, and a stranger.

“Oh, thank the gods... At least she didn’t eat me,” Finn breathes, reaching forward to wrap his arms around my neck. It’s a brief thing. Something he’s referred to as a hug, and once he lets me go, he turns to drag the redheaded woman into his arms.

She grips his body tight. Something pangs in my middle and talons push back through my fingernails, but I let them have their moment. He cares about her, I know, but in a different—more familial—way than he does me. Though my beast doesn’t say anything, I can feel my skin prick as she hovers just below the surface, letting them have their moment, but also ready to pounce if someone crosses a line.

Alice opens her eyes, loosening the hug and when she glances to the side, she see’s Finn’s arm ends. “What did they do to you?” she seethes, grabbing what’s left of his wrist. Instead of it being smooth as it was earlier, there’s now a small doll-sized hand peeking out from the end of it.

“Actually... They didn’t do that,” he says, reaching to grip the back of his neck before letting his arms drop to his sides.

“I warned you,” Asmodeus says to Finn while his eyes travel to me and he flashes a grin that’s all teeth.

“I’m supposed to be executed within the hour and I couldn’t get out of the cell with the chains and Eva’s beast isn’t exactly accurate with its bite. We were going to try to escape when you came.”

“We have a problem…” Asmodeus says, the smile gone and now replaced with a worried crease between his eyebrows. “There’s no way for me to siphon enough from you to teleport all of us out. Taking you was hard. Doing it back to back to get Finn out was going to be pushing it.”

“Then take them. I’ll find a way out,” Alice says, earning glares from the men in front of us. Her voice holds an unfamiliar accent. Twangy almost.

“No. I won’t leave you here. You shouldn’t have even come for me to begin with. I told Kai no rescue missions.” Finn shakes his head, crossing his arms in a ‘you won’t sway me,’ stance.

“I can get out. And if I can’t, the king wants me alive,” she says, her armor catching what little light there is in this dungeon. She looks like a warrior… Not a princess, or at least what has passed for one in this realm.

Asmodeus nods, grabbing her arm and pulling on her magic until the air is thick and syrupy sweet. Finn shrugs off the shirt he put on, making sure that I’d have something to change into if we managed to escape. He strides toward me and slips it over my head.

“Do Finn first,” Alice says, and before he can protest, Asmodeus latches onto his shoulder and they disappear, leaving me and Alice alone.

“I like her. She looks out for our mate,” my beast says, but I’m not sure how to feel. I preferred it when we were alone, just the two of us. What’s going to happen now? We still don’t know how his kingdom will react to my presence. We might be on the cusp of freedom, but we’re facing a whole new set of obstacles.

“Thank you for trying to save him,” she says.



Me? Save him? No... He saved me countless times. It was the least I could do to help the both of us escape. I force myself to meet her gaze. Avoiding it looks like weakness, and if there's one thing I will never be again, it's weak. Instead of answering, I give her a sharp nod.

"Take care of him, will you? He's needed back at Hell Hold. If I don't—" I cut her off, stepping closer.

"You will. My father is terrified of you."

It's the truth. The Princess of Hell Hold both intrigues and utterly terrifies my father. She has ever since he learned of her existence about a year ago.

"He should be," she says, offering a closed-mouth smile.

Asmodeus appears again, stealing her power just long enough to take me away.



## Finn

Something doesn't feel right about this. Asmo dropped me in the middle of fucking nowhere, surrounded by the forest I hate more than drinking water. Which is saying a lot.

The problem with this place is that it's crawling with life. Underneath every stone, hiding behind every tree trunk, is something that is equally deadly as it is terrifying. Not to mention the gigantic spiders. A shudder tears through me as I stare at the tree line.

There's a yelp behind me, and my body has never moved so fast. I all but jump and twist midair to find Asmo shoving Eva toward me. She loses her footing and slams into my chest. Out of instinct, my hands—small as they may be—fly to her head, clutching her to me as I step back, trying to keep us from toppling over. I steady her, and scoop up her face, threading her silky white hair through my tiny fingers.

“Are you alright?” I ask.

She nods, her wide, round eyes searching mine for some sort of hidden message. Then they narrow and she spins around to face Asmo. “How dare you shove me? What did I ever do to you?” Her hand lifts, her fingers forming into talons and growing longer as magic swarms around them.

As quickly as I can, I reach up, wrapping my small hand around the girth of a single taloned finger. It's all I have the capacity to do as of late. I just hope my hands grow back fast. Eva's body stills as her head twists so she can glare at me from the corner of her eye.

“We still need him. Unless you can teleport, we still need him to get Alice out.” I swallow hard, hoping she sees my reasoning.

“Fine...” she says with a deep sigh. I breathe a sigh of relief, letting go of her as her fingers return to normal.

“I hate to say it, but plans have changed. Alice will not be joining you.” Asmodeus crosses his arms, as if he’s claiming we have guard drills on a day off instead of the more sinister meaning being his words.

“Excuse me?” My tone is clipped as I step closer. I used to be scared of him, but should he lay a single hand on me, he wouldn’t survive it. Eva would tear him to pieces and use his ribs as toothpicks. Somehow, that gives my backbone strength.

“You both should go,” Asmo says, and light starts to spill into the surrounding space. Against my better judgment, I reach forward, snagging on his arm. The light wanes as his eyes narrow into a lethal slits. “Let go.” His voice is dark and menacing and it sends a shiver up my spine, but my grip stays true.

“You cannot leave her there.”

“I’m not leaving her anywhere. She’s going to choose to stay. I’ve seen it.” His hand lifts, pointing a finger at his white eye. It’s a condition called the oracle’s touch.

When an immortal who can manipulate time tries to scry the future, they put their consciousness into a future version of themselves. However, when they don’t exist, their consciousness becomes trapped. He must’ve tried scrying into the future, and somehow, he managed to pull most of himself back. The white eye, though, was lost to the spell. He’ll forever glimpse random snippets of the future and past while simultaneously seeing the present.

“We knew going into that castle would end with someone not making it out. You know Alice better than anyone, and you know she’d sacrifice

herself for those she loves. It's why she went after you. She's let my brother believe she's dead so he wouldn't take the risk himself. The least I can do is make sure she has a leg up. Especially since I was the one who stacked the deck against her," Asmo says, taking a step back.

The prince believes she's dead? How? I might know Alice, and I believe what he's said about her wanting to save everyone, even at her own expense, but I also know Kai. There isn't a world where he wouldn't move Heaven and Earth to keep her alive. It's who he is.

"Look, any moment now, the king is going to trap her because I warned him of her plan. So, if you know what's good for her, you'll go. Make your way back to Hell Hold. Give her one less person to worry about," Asmo says, right before light floods around him and just like that, he's gone.

I meet Eva's eyes, and she closes the gap between us. "Do you believe him?" Her voice is so pure... divine in every form of the word. The moment I hear it, it's like every worry melts away and the only thing that matters is *her*.

"No. I don't." Reaching up, I graze the back of my little hand across her cheek, gathering a tress of her hair in my fist and pushing it behind her shoulder. "I have a rather short list of people I trust. Alice is one of them, Kai is another, and you. That's it. Not to mention, he tried to kill me once and I haven't exactly let that go."

"Then we stay." she says, lifting up on her tippy toes to kiss my lips, soft enough for me to want more, yet sensual enough to hold my heart in a vice grip. She pulls away, and I find myself chasing her.

"If we go back, we could very well end up being executed. We just got out and the one person who we worried about finding us is apparently now on our side. Going back would be risking our freedom. Alice wouldn't want that, but..."

“You don’t want her to get hurt, either.”

“Yes,” I say, droppin my gaze.

“Then we wait, and if she doesn’t show up or we fear the worst has come, then we go back.”

My jaw ticks as I clench my teeth. “I can’t lose you.”

Her lips slant as she traces the contours of my cheekbones with her feather-light fingertips. “It’s not me you should be worried about. It’d snow in The Seven Realms before any of them would be lucky enough to put my head on a spike.”

A silent chuckle leaves my lips. “You’re so morbid.”

She snorts out a sharp exhale. “You like it though.” Eva steps away, her eyes dropping to the nearly nonexistent hands hanging at my sides. “Now, let’s see what we can do about these tiny hands of yours.”

I tuck my chin to my chest and purse my lips. “I’m certain that my hands were anything but tiny until your alter ego ate them.”

“At *your* request,” she corrects me, grabbing my right hand with two of her fingers and holding it up at eye level to get a better look. “We need to speed up the process somehow. If we do need to go back there, there’s no way you’ll be able to cast with doll hands, let alone hold a sword.”

“Among other things.” My eyebrows raise into my hairline. Her eyes drop to the front of my pants, then cascade back up my body to meet mine.

“I’ll see that you’re taken care of,” she says, and my heart stills as I pinch the bridge of my nose with all of my fingers.

“As honored as I’d be, that wasn’t what I meant.” Her head tilts as she eyes me with an innocent form of curiosity.

“So you don’t like it when I—” I cut her off, quickly shaking my head ‘no.’

“Not what I said... but the last thing I was thinking about... *Nevermind.*”

What I meant was, I'm not sure how I'm going to hold a fork or how I'm going to aim to pee?" I hold my hands out to my sides, spreading my itty bitty fingers wide to exaggerate my position.

"So..." she drags out the word, biting her lip as she steps closer. "You do like it when I..." her hand slides down my torso, coming dangerously close to a very solid part of me.

"Of course, I do. Everyone likes that, but with you it's um... Interesting. It's like playing Russian roulette." I try to force myself to stay the course and look at her, no matter how badly I want to dart my eyes away. I clear my throat as she passes over the front of my pants, applying pressure, and sending tingles racing through my stomach. My eyes flutter. "You're quite good at it for being so new to things. Not to mention it's an interesting feeling. There's pleasure, of course, and... *fear*. Lots of fear."

"She'd never dare to hurt you, not when there's so many things we've yet to do," she says, trailing a finger down my chest. It takes everything I have to swallow.

"She no longer wants to eat me, then?" I ask, holding up my hands and raising my eyebrows.

Her lips twist into a wicked grin. "No. I'm afraid you were right. You're too gamey."

"Well... Isn't that a relief? It only took me losing my hands to earn her affection."

Her hand slips inside the waistband of my pants and her fingers wrap around me, yanking a pained groan from my lips. "I don't think... Now is probably not the best time."

She shrugs, looking at the castle in the distance. "What else do we have to do? And considering your... *condition*, I did promise to take care of you, and

you seem like you're in need of being taken care of."

Her tongue lashes out, wetting her full lips at the sheer thought of me being between them, and that makes it terribly hard to breathe.

"I'm pretty sure you've trained me to be turned on by fear," I admit, my words coming out as a partial laugh. She lowers in front of me, kissing her way down my torso while keeping her eyes on mine. It's the sexiest thing in the fucking world... "Eva... We shouldn't. I'm not sure I could survive losing my dick right now, too."

"Stop me then," she teases, undoing the laces holding the front of my pants closed.

"With what hands?!" Something booms in the distance, splitting the air. The crowd covering Skull Bridge starts to chant, their voices traveling through the vast distance between us and the mountain we're standing on. It overlooks the bay and gives us a clear shot of the towering castle. "What's happening?"

She stands, staring at the place she once called home. "The ceremony is starting. They're waiting for the king to make his address."

## Finn

“**W**hat is taking him so long?” I ask, pacing along the cliffside. We’ve been waiting for hours. At this rate, it’s going to be dark before that man steps out onto the balcony.

Hundreds of creatures have shoved themselves onto the bridge, packed all the way up to the castle walls like sardines. I take Eva’s hand in mine. Even knowing she could kill me faster than I can blink, her touch is the only thing that can ease the nerves clawing at my throat.

I don’t know what’s worse. Him walking out onto the balcony, business as usual, or his absence. There’s no doubt in my mind that he is aware Alice is inside. The future Queen of The Seven Realms is within that castle, and I’m sworn to protect everyone beneath the crown. The prince, her, the king—even if he has grown to be quite the coward lately, all of them.

That girl has kept me sane for the better part of two years, and her betrothed has been my best friend for hundreds. If something happens to her, I won’t have the heart to tell him that I stood by and let it.

Eva’s blue eyes stare up at me in awe, making butterflies swarm in my middle. This girl looks at me like I’m her world. If I try to go back and save



Alice, it won't just be my life I'm risking. There's no way I'll be able to convince Eva to stay here. She'll follow me. Even if the woman can see the logic in staying out of danger, her beast won't.

"Uh oh," she mumbles. "There's that look again."

"What look?"

"The one of a hero... The incessant need to save everyone, even knowing it could put you in an early grave. The last time I witnessed it, you jumped into a hole to keep me from having to go through the City of the Damned by myself."

"Isn't that what you wanted me to be?" I say, tipping her chin.

"It is... You wouldn't be the man I love if you didn't wear that look when someone you care about is in trouble."

"I don't know what to do," I admit on the tail end of an exhale, dragging my teeth over my bottom lip as if the gesture will help my brain figure it out.

Eva stands up on her tiptoes, kissing my cheek. "You do what feels right. If that's turning around and making the trip to Hell Hold again, so be it. If that's marching back toward that castle to help your friend, I'll be by your side. But *you* need to make that choice. I'll support you with whatever you decide."

I glance back at the castle, wondering what the hell Alice could be up to. The king has to have her... She must be trapped. I can't let her die after she came all this way to help me escape.

"I have a bad feeling," I say, right as the king finally steps onto the balcony. His thick red velvet robes hang heavily off his shoulders, swooping out around him. Silver swirls cover the fabric and he places his hands around the railing.

"Welcome," he says. Crystals on the platform glow bright, cascading

vibrant colors around him as they amplify his voice through the air. Even from where we stand, we can hear it as if he's right in front of us.

He waits for the echo to recede before continuing. "Today is the day we take back our land. The world that was stripped from us by the Devil. Today, we set sail for his castle, and by this time next week, he'll be no more. His people are scared, as they should be. We outnumber them ten to one. We're scorned by centuries of being locked in this prison, and our wrath will not be silent. Today, we go to war."

The crowd doesn't cheer. They don't even respond. Not like ours when Kai and Lucifer rode through our ranks before we fought these creatures near the boundary. They were moved, and ready to fight for their home, even facing impossible odds. These creatures don't want to follow him anywhere. They're forced to with spelled collars and invisible chains.

"The Princess of the Seven Realms herself is here, ready to fight alongside us," he says, making the blood drain from my face. *No... It can't be.* Alice would never betray her people. I know that down to my fucking soul. I trained the girl, for heaven's sake. I've spent more time with her in the last year than anyone else. I know her through and through. She'd never turn her back on Kai or their kingdom.

He motions for someone to join them and low and behold, fiery red hair comes into view and my heart sinks inside my chest. Her smile is wicked and I can see it from here, then her hand lifts, a red glow surrounding them. A spell I taught her, which allows you to phase through anything as long as that hue holds true. The king doesn't even bat an eye. It's not until she's directly behind him that he finally turns around and Alice plunges her hand into his chest and rips out the high king's heart.

Claws have shot forth from his fingertips as he attempts to slash at her, but

she simply steps back. She managed to somehow get the jump on him. It won't kill him, but it will certainly take a while for him to regenerate. Once his hand has cleared his swing, a dagger slices through the air, sending blood spraying across the balcony. The king's headless body falls and for a moment, I'm frozen in place. I can't comprehend what I'm watching, yet I've witnessed it with my very eyes.

"Oh no..." Eva whispers to my right. Fuck... She just watched her father die and here I am, just standing here like my brain broke.

"Eva..." I turn to her, grabbing her hand, but she turns to me with the biggest smile on her face.

Before she can respond, Alice's voice floats through the air, "Your king is dead..." The sounds of the crowd blast through the air, filled with roars and cheers as his own people celebrate. "I am Alice Whittaker and I'm here to bring peace to the seven realms, to unite this realm with Hell Hold so we might coexist as allies instead of enemies..."

Eva yanks on my arm, drawing my attention back to her while Alice finishes her speech. "We need to go. If there was ever a time to be a hero, now is it." I shake my head, trying to convince myself I'm hearing her right and not just what I want to hear. "I've never been so happy to see him bested, even if it wasn't me to do it. I wouldn't have been able to anyway without sacrificing myself... But Alice just made a grave mistake. Putting him down was the easy part. Our kingdom will give her the right to the throne, voiding all the 'heirs' my father promised it to. They're going to come for her."

Eva turns to me, her eyes watering, but I'm not sure if it's because her father is gone, or tears of joy that she's freed of him. I'm in shock, my body won't listen to signals. My brain won't formulate words.

"We have to go, Finn. She might've been able to take my father by

surprise, but we're talking about dozens of men like Peregrine. She'll be ripped apart." She's not even finished talking before she's lifting my shirt over her head.

A smile stretches wide across my face, knowing what she's about to do. "Who is the hero now?"

Her blue eyes meet mine, then I witness something so horrific it's going to take me years to wash the image from my mind. Bones snap and muscles stretch until Eva is gone and only her beast remains.

"Fucking hell... *A little warning would've been nice.* You've already taken my hands. Did you have to mentally scar me too?"

I don't get a chance to reach before Eva's beast is charging at me. Her teeth wrap around my middle and I scream as I'm flipping sideways. It's not until I hear the rustle of trees that I open my eyes and find I'm not dead. She's gripped me by the waist and is carrying me while she gallops off through the forest.

"We need to have a long talk about your manners," I grit, trying to hang on for dear life and dodge the brush. Her speed alone is impressive and within minutes we're reaching the bay near the foot of Skull Bridge.

The beast doesn't stop, launching itself with powerful hind legs into the air and catching hold of the petrified skeletons the king used to create his bridge. Her talons grip in, sending bones tumbling to the ground as she climbs higher and higher.

"We're going to have to go around. The front door is blocked." She doesn't even bother trying to get to the platform of the bridge. It's covered in creatures of various species, and there's no room. Instead, she creeps along the side of the bridge, hanging on to the skeletons.

We near the edge of the castle just in time to see the king's head get

dropped from the balcony and swallowed whole by one of the beasts in the crowd.

“All hail The Crimson Queen,” Asmo’s voice echoes across the cavern.

He was in on it... He’s why she knew how to take down the king. Hell, he said it himself that he would kill him in a heartbeat if only he had his power. The cuff denied him of it, so he used her to do it for him.

The crowd cheers, but we’re far from being out of the woods... If what Eva said is right, those inside are her biggest threat. Those creatures are ruthless killers, and each had to survive the gauntlet to be named a potential heir, and now they all have a common enemy. Alice.

The very woman who risked her life to save mine is at the mercy of monsters, and all I can hope for is that we get up to that balcony in time to help her.

## Eva

“Don’t you dare do it!” I warn, but my beast doesn’t listen. She launches herself at the tower, holding up the observatory and sinks her talons into the stone. Finn screams as we climb higher and higher, burying our claws into the cracks. Our muscles flex and bunch with every step.

*“I know what I’m doing.”*

“Do you, now? You’ve descended one tower and now you’re a pro?”

*“Let me focus. My job is to get us up to that observatory, and yours is to shhhh.”*

Finn flails in her jaws, slowly slipping to one side. She tries to re-adjust her grip only for him to slip farther into her mouth. She rocks her head side-to-side, then tosses him onto her back. His little hands smack against us, grasping at air as he tries to hold on. Once he wraps his legs around her middle and buries his hands into her black fur, she continues.

“This is bullshit! There was a front door!” He yells, wrapping his arms so tight that we struggle to draw in air. Still, my beast ignores his pleas, climbing until she reaches the domed top. Her claws scrape the glass panes,

screeching with every swat of her paw. Then the window shatters and we freefall to the ground inside.

“I told you I didn’t kill him,” Asmo says, stepping over the diamond-like glass riddling the floor. It crunches as Finn scrambles off our back and falls flat on the floor as if he’s never been more thankful for solid ground.

“Never again!” he yells, lifting up to a sitting position. “*Ever.*”

My beast relinquishes control and little by little, I become human again.

“It was your idea to go around,” I say, finally able to speak of myself. “My beast thought it was a great idea. It was better than fighting the horde of men downstairs.”

“I said let’s go around, like go through other doors or hallways. Not crawl along the *outside of the fucking castle.*” He lays back with a *thunk*, his arm slung across his face.

“But did you die?” I ask, propping my hand on my hip.

“Luckily, no.” He mumbles something under his breath, but I pay it no mind.

I haven’t been in this room in ages... The tapestries still hang in the same spots, the windows are now scattered in pieces across the floor, but they used to make up a dome and I swear at night, it was the most beautiful sight to behold. There are no stars in the seven realms, but at night, if you look close enough, you can see the dragons.

My father might have killed all of those in this realm, but the rest exist outside the boundary. When the hell flame slips behind their islands—the chunks of land that act as our moons—they glow in the sky above, making their shadowy silhouettes easy to see from down here.

The heavy scent of magic fills the room, the reason making me cringe. It’s not because my father still lies dead on the balcony, but because he burns

dragon blood as incense. His body is crumpled and for the first time in my life, I feel like my future is unknown. That this could be the beginning of my freedom, and a chance to carve out my own fate.

“Um... I’m sorry for your loss.” Alice comes to stand beside me. Her red hair hangs in coils, her blue eyes full of ambition. It’s no wonder Finn thinks so highly of her. She looks like she was born to rule realms. And now, I suppose she does. At least this one, so long as we can disband the mob that’s likely forming in the great hall.

“Don’t be,” I say, finally tearing my eyes away. “I don’t think any of his children would oppose letting him be picked apart by buzzards. He was a wicked man, and we would’ve done it ourselves if we weren’t hexed to be incapable of doing so.”

Then it hits me... This woman will be my ticket into Hell Hold. Her opinion of me is what will decide if I get to stay there, and if Finn gets to stay with his people. I bow, dropping to one knee before her. It’s a show of support—of loyalty—and if it means getting to stay with the man I love, I’d support her to the death. “I’m forever in your debt.”

“Actually, I’m in yours,” she says, extending a hand to me. I hesitate for a moment before taking it. “Somehow, you managed to keep this fool alive long enough for me to rescue him.” She points a thumb at Finn, who sits up like an exorcized demon and scowls at her.

“Don’t forget who taught you these things.” His eyes land on the king’s body and he convulses, his cheeks blowing full as he crawls away. “Oh no.” Finn lunges for one of the broken windows.

*“Every single time,”* my beast says, mentally shaking her head at him.

Suddenly clothes are shoved into my hand, and Alice gives me a sweet smile. “Here. These will help. I’m no stranger to how shifters do things, and



you might not want them, but they're here if you need them.”

I stare down at the folded up outfit in her hands. “How did you...”

She twirls her fingers in the air. “A little bit of magic goes a long way.”

“Ugh,” Finn groans, wiping his mouth on his arm. “I need a drink.”

“Actually,” Asmo skip-jogs to one of the shelves, pulling off a bottle of blue liquid. “This might fix your hand situation. It’s not permanent, but it will help for a bit.”

“What is it?” Finn takes it, casting a side glance at me and Alice.

“The king was fascinated about your mustache spell facade. So, he replicated it and made some small tweaks. It allows you to shapeshift into anything, including a two-handed version of yourself.”

My throat goes dry as I let what he’s said sink in. Was this too easy? Alice presses her hand against the lid of the glass box holding my father’s heart. It must be spelled to keep him from regenerating. She must have the same thought. Asmo meets her gaze and double takes. “No! I didn’t mean it like that. The king told me about it.” Asmo moves toward her, but she matches his paces back and he stops, deflating his shoulders.

“Prove it,” she commands, and I have to commend her. The sheer will of her voice would have anyone following her every order.

“Okay. I rescued you from trolls after you went into that ravine.”

Finn gasps behind me as Alice shakes her head no, telling him his answer wasn’t good enough.

“Fine,” he stutters, rubbing his jaw. “I know the other night when you tried to summon objects, we discovered you created them instead.”

Finn gasps again, his tone a bit higher than before.

He takes another step forward, but Alice holds out a hand, telling him to stay put.

“The king would know that, because you were planning to turn me in for your freedom. You would’ve told him anything about my abilities to sweeten the pot,” she says.

“Fine. You tried to shove your tongue down my throat in the forest.” He arches an eyebrow and Finn gasps, yet again, only exaggerating more this time. “Happy? Surely, I wouldn’t dare tell the king that, seeing as he wished to impregnate you to have a damn son. At least, not if I valued my life and it happens to be the only one I value these days.”

“Alice... *How dare you?*” Finn says, holding a baby hand over his heart as if she’s struck him there with an arrow.

“Fair enough,” she says with a scowl, clearly still unsure.

“Please tell me you didn’t kiss him,” Finn protests, covering his face with his little hands and dragging them down until his skin stretches.

“I thought he was Kai. I’d seen an oracle and its magic was intoxicating,” she explains, incapable of gathering the nerve to meet his eyes. Oracles are no joke. They can tell you anything you want in riddles, but the moment you leave, you can’t see for shit and, based on my father’s maid kills, I’d say it affects people in other ways as well. He always seemed to kill the most right after visiting our kingdom’s oracle.

“Ahh... That makes more sense. I can see the resemblance a bit. Maybe if you covered up the scar and ignored everything from the chest down...” Finn continues, sarcasm lacing his every word.

“I need you to take Finn to Hell Hold,” she tells Asmo, stopping Finn from protesting further.

“Me? I just rode Eva up here to help you.” Finn stalks forward, talking with his baby hands.

“I know. And you will. You’re going to take the king’s heart with you.

There are only two people I trust unconditionally, and you're one of them. You'll need to bring Kai back. We'll need his help to contain whatever is happening downstairs. Asmo sealed the entrance to this floor, but it won't last forever."

"I understand." Finn bows his head to her, taking the glass box. He leans toward her, his lips curling in a mischievous way. "For the record, you did great, young grasshopper. I'll see to this getting dropped into a bottomless pit."

"Not dropped. Floated," she teases, summoning a shirt to cover his torso. "If the glass breaks, the king will be reborn."

## Eva

“Well, I’m not sure about you... but I’ve grown quite the appetite, or rather my other half has,” I say, making my way toward the stairwell.

Asmodeus sealed it off before me and Finn arrived, ensuring no one could reach the observatory until we were ready to take them on. I adjust my hair, tightening the elastic Alice gave me along with my clothes. I’ve pulled my hair back into a ponytail with it, but I doubt it will matter much if I end up shifting.

“Tell her to open the doors already,” my beast sneers. “Mama is hungry.”

“What? You mean Finn’s hands didn’t tide you over,” I say beneath my breath, ensuring Alice doesn’t hear. Finn said she has a creature, one that doesn’t share a body with her, but there’s no need to scare the woman who quite literally holds my fate in her hands.

I chose to stay here, mostly because going to Hell Hold sounds absolutely terrifying. Creatures like me don’t belong there, but I’m going to have to force myself to fit in if I’m going to make it my home, and honestly, it’s not

an option to not. Hell Hold is Finn's happy place, and it wouldn't be right of me to deprive him of that.

When I told Finn I wanted to stay and help Alice work through the castle, he hesitated, but caved and let me do as I wished. Then the two of them were gone, off on a mission to hide my father's wretched heart, so he can't return to our world, and to retrieve the Prince of the Seven Realms.

From what I've been told about my nephew, Persephone's sons are the most dangerous creatures in all the realms. They can take out entire legions of men, and I know it's true based on what I've seen Asmodeus do. If Finn can bring him here, I know we can take this castle. Especially since the cuffs haven't turned off in my father's death. They're running on limited magic and if we fight together, that gives us a solid chance.

Alice's hands lift, and I watch the barrier Asmodeus erected around the door bow and thin until it splinters and magic spills into the air. The men on the other side don't waste a moment. Four charge through and my talons burst through my fingertips. I spin with lethal grace, colliding claws with swords.

Fire ignites to my left, the heat caresses across my skin, and when I turn, I find Alice engulfed in flames. Her eyes black and the veins are raised around them, wiggling beneath the skin. The men lift in the air and on her count of three, they explode, peppering the hallway with blood and gore.

*"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph... I like her."*

"You like anyone who will feed you body parts," I say, swirling and landing my talons into a man's throat before he can make it past the doorway.

"We should split up," Alice says, following me down the stairs. "I'll take one wing; you take the other on each floor. It'll be quicker and there's less of a chance of us getting in the other's way."

I nod my head, my feet flying over stairs. “It’s a good idea. My beast wants out and I’m not sure I trust her to navigate the small spaces like hallways. She’s pretty clumsy and I’d hate for her to cause you trouble.”

“Alright,” she says as we reach the next landing. “I’ll go right, you go left.”

My beast remains partially shifted, my teeth long and sharp, my claws ready at my fingertips. The castle is oddly quiet. These are the guest quarters, and they should be flooded with people. That is, unless they’ve all convened on the bottom floor.

I tiptoe my way from room to room, looking for movement and letting my beast’s senses flood me. This wing is empty. Returning to the stairwell, I drop down floor by floor, scouting, searching, waiting. It’s not until I’m five away from Alice that I run into my first victim.

It’s a guard with his sword drawn, and a helmet covers most of his face, but the fact his eyes don’t glow tells me everything I need to know. He’s a shifter, not a mage. His sword slashes at us and my beast takes the wheel. She moves in such a convincing way. If I didn’t know better, I’d think we’ve been practicing combat for years rather than learning on the fly. She ducks and dodges, then her nails catch along the blade, scraping down the length of it until sparks rain to the floor.

He pushes off us, flips his sword in his hand, but instead of charging at us with it, it clangs to the ground as he shifts faster than I’ve ever seen someone do before. It was instant. One moment I’m staring at an armored man, the next, his dire wolf is ripping through him.

It snaps its teeth in the air, lunging for me, but I wait. I wait until it’s seconds away from plowing through me to spread my claws, and I drive them through its chest as we collide. I’m slammed against the floor, rounded talons

digging into my shoulders, but the wolf doesn't move. His body lays limp on top of me, and I retract my talons from his chest cavity and push the bastard away.

Blood slides from the shallow wounds along my shoulders that the wolf opened, and from the mortal one it received, painting blood lines across my skin, but I keep moving. This is my bedroom floor. My sister's rooms are just down the hall.

I stare down the dark passage, spotting their doors. What will they say when they see me? What will they do? I know deep down that this is the right move. That we're doing the right thing, but will they see it that way?

Taking a hesitant step, I move closer until I'm in front of Aeres's door. My youngest sister, only four years old. I've raised her, just like my older sisters did me. She's so young... so innocent. She deserves a better life away from all the destruction and chaos my father built our home around. She deserves a family... something I never had.

I push open the door, finding the room dark. Not a single thing out of place. The bed is made and dressed in silks that look like the night sky. It's dark with the outline of dragons on the fabric, as if the creator had been looking out of the observatory when they stitched it.

"Aeres," I whisper, "It's me. Eva. You can come out, little one. No one is going to hurt you." Waiting, I listen for movement before continuing into the room. The girl's favorite game has always been hide and go seek, but she's never been much good at it. I step farther inside and bend at the edge of the bed. This is her hiding spot. The one she goes to every single time we play.

Peeking my head beneath the frame of the bed, I find glowing green eyes.

"There you are," I say, a smile creasing my lips. Her small face pulls tight as the tears slipping down her face trail faster.

“Evie,” she breathes, just as small vines twist from her hair and she rolls out from beneath the bed. She’s barely out from under it before she’s throwing herself into my arms. Sobs rake through her little body and it’s all I can do to shift back into my human form and grip her tight.

“I’m here, and I promise, I’m never letting go.”

“They said father... That he’s gone,” she says, lifting from my chest just enough to look me in the eye.

“He is... I’m sorry... but I promise it’s for the best. You’ll never have to face what I did. You, my dear, will get to marry for love. No more gauntlets.”

She hugs me tight just as the door creaks open behind me. As if electricity has burst through my veins, my talons and teeth come surging to the surface as I spin to find a familiar face.

Asmodeus.

“Oh um... I see you beat me to it.” he stutters, pursing his lips and gripping the back of his neck. He rubs at the invisible tension there. “I couldn’t stand the idea of her being up here alone while the castle falls. That and with the king... I didn’t want one of his asshole chosen ones to think they could just take her.”

He crouches down next to me, his mismatched eyes scanning over her beautiful face. She reaches up to run a small hand down his jagged scar, and I let her move into his arms.

“I’ve got her,” he says, and I don’t question the truth in it. He’s always had a soft spot for kids, and some of the fondest memories I have with the man are from when I was young. Still, he keeps himself at arm’s length, knowing the moment we came of age, we’d be sold off and likely buried. It doesn’t change the sprinkled memories I have of him, though. “Go find Cera. I’ll make sure she gets somewhere safe.”



I lift my feet, stealing one more glance before I pace toward the door. “I’ll be back, I promise,” I tell her, then leave them and travel deeper into the hall. When I reach Cera’s door, I all but suck in a breath. It’s open and scratch marks mar the wood grain as if someone shifted and clawed their way out.

“Cera,” I call out gently, pushing open the door the rest of the way. Only what I see has me squeezing my eyes shut. She’s gone... In pieces. The man I killed in the hall must’ve gotten to her, and figured since the king was dead, that he could take what he wanted. “No... no, no, no.... This wasn’t supposed to happen this way.”

We were never close, with us being so close in age we never tried to be, but she deserved so much better than this. She deserved to live and experience life outside this castle, but she was also the only one of my sisters who was powerless. She was born with nothing, and it left her defenseless against someone as mundane as a shifter guard.

Pulling the door shut, I wipe away the tear that’s managed to drip down my cheeks despite my eyes being closed, and I head to the next floor... and the next, until our home is cleansed of the monstrosities my father invited in.

Helping the future queen with this task will hopefully secure a safe place for me and Aeres to start over, so we can carve out a new home. There is no time to mourn, but there is time to ensure what happened here never does again.

“*Until the next life,*” my beast says, and warmth floods through me like I’ve been hugged.

“Until the next life,” I say out loud.

## Eva

I clear three more floors, doing my best to put the image of my sister, bloody and broken, out of my mind. War is just a nasty thing... It knows no bounds and doesn't care what blood runs through your veins or what species you are. It's brutal and hurts more than just those who die. I was too late. There's nothing I can do about Cera's death, other than to keep moving forward and ensure Aeres and I don't share the same fate.

Coming to the next floor, I step cautiously into the hallway, the sound of my footsteps echoing off the cold stone walls. The air is thick with the scent of burning candles and flickering torches cast dancing shadows on the ancient tapestries that adorn the walls. At the end of the stretch of stone is another staircase, shrouded in darkness. Slowly, I head toward it.

This is the apothecary and the royal healers' quarters, though the healers themselves are likely in the great hall. My father always invited them to his celebrations, because more often than not, they were needed at some point in the night.

Quirky bottles are staggered across long wooden shelves, and I breathe in the heavy scent of dried herbs. My heart races, my senses on high alert as I

feel a sense of foreboding creeping over me. A drip slithers down my spine, making me shudder. I'm being watched... I can feel it. Just from where, I don't know.

I scan every nook and cranny. There's nothing, not a single soul.

*"It's got to be your nerves. I swear that anxiety of yours is going to put us into an early grave,"* my beast taunts.

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't have anxiety if it weren't for you scaling towers or jumping from windows every time you take over. So, if anyone is to blame, it's you."

*"Fair enough."* I pause, listening intently to the sound of my own breathing. The silence is oppressive. The only sound is the faint rustling of fabric as I move forward. *"See, it's all in your head. Now, keep moving."*

"Pushy much? I'm going."

Then I feel it again, the trickle of cool sweat. Something else is here, I can feel it lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce. Whatever it is has magic, and the sweet scent of it permeates the air. Spinning around just as I reach the final stair, my eyes rove over every crevice of the hall, looking for something to move. Then I see it. A ripple in the air. Someone is using magic to hide in plain sight.

"Who are you?" I ask, lifting a taloned hand. "Show yourself."

A rough voice cuts the air... One I know well enough to fear. "You've been busy," Peregrine says, revealing himself in a wave of ripples as the magic dissipates. My mind races as he shows me those perfect teeth. "Don't stop on my account. You're just going to make it easier for me to ascend."

*"I take it all back. Every word."*

"I thought you didn't want the throne," I say, and he rolls his body off the wall he's leaning on and flips an old dagger in his hands. I shoot him a scowl

that could shatter glass, and he laughs.

“It’s not that I don’t want it, it’s just not the priority. At least it wasn’t when I won you. Now, with your father gone, there’s a void in this kingdom that I wish to fill. It doesn’t mean my previous interests have escaped me, though.”

The oily feel of his magic slithers around me, snuffing out my beast like a candle flame. It’s not as strong as it used to be, but he does wear one of my father’s cuffs. It keeps him from pulling as much magic as he did in the gauntlet when it was off, and that’s going to work in my favor. Especially if he’s going to smother my other half. I’ll need all the help I can get.

He stops spinning the blade, and his silver eyes meet mine through the dim light. The tip of the dagger pulls a single drop of blood from his finger. “I think you’ve done enough killing for one day... I think you’ll be rather useful somewhere else, don’t you?”

“You mean my blood will be.”

I snort, pacing a circle around him as he steps into the center of the hall. Running isn’t an option. He’d use his magic to catch me, and even then, I won’t let him have the satisfaction of turning me back into a coward. I won’t hide. Not this time.

His lips tip up as he tucks his chin to his chest. “Someone’s paying attention.” Sarcasm drips from every word as he tries to close the distance, lunging not once, but twice, and I barely evade him, arching my stomach away before the blade can meet me.

My eyes lock onto Aeres’s door, but I know both her and Asmodeus are long gone. He’s likely taken her to Hell Hold already, which leaves me on my own and defenseless. But I’d rather have to do this alone than have her here. Knowing Peregrine, he’d try to use her against me.

“What’s wrong, wife? You look positively terrified,” he coos.

My heart races in my chest, pounding into my ribs, but I refuse to let it show. I clench my fists tightly and lunge forward, aiming for the dark elf’s face. But he is too quick, dodging my attack effortlessly. His glowing eyes bore into mine, and he taunts me with a voice dripping with malice. “What chance do you have, little mortal? You have no magic, no weapons. You... are... *nothing*.”

I feel his words weigh on me, but I gather my strength and launch myself out of the way the moment his blade swings at me again. Peregrine is always a step ahead, though. Before I can see it coming, his boot lands against my stomach, sending me flying into the stone wall. Pain shoots through my body, my bones ache and my vision swims as I try to get to my feet... I refuse to give up. I’ve come too far for that now.

Peregrine laughs, as if this is child’s play and to him I suppose it is. The moment I’m on my feet, his magic slams into me. It wraps around my throat, coiling like a snake until I can’t breathe. My lungs scream for air, my body trembling in distress. I grit my teeth, feeling the pressure fill my face.

Thrashing out, I try to kick my legs, claw at his hands, do anything to break free, but nothing works. Sparks burst in my vision as Peregrine raises the dagger. He starts to speak in some unknown language to me, and markings along the blade glow gold.

My muscles ache, and I am growing tired, but I continue to fight on. I may not have magic or weapons, but I have my bravery, my determination, my love for Finn and a will to live. Peregrine drives the blade deep into my stomach and a searing pain explodes through me.

“Do you feel that?” he asks, holding the blade in place. “That’s the key I crafted, filling with your blood, and the moment I stick it into the lock on the

gate to The Shadow Realm, I'll have what I want."

He wrenches the dagger free from my stomach and drops me to the floor. No... I can't let him win. He *can't win*. If he opens that gate, everyone I care about will be in danger, and it'll be all my fault.

Blood spills from the wound as I crawl forward, gripping Peregrine's leg before he can leave. I grit my teeth, but his boot lands against my face, knocking him from my grasp. Pain throbs through my head, and I can feel every pulsating beat of my heart, every ounce of blood flowing through my veins.

"Thank you for your noble sacrifice," he sneers.

He can't win.

My beast surges within me, stretching up against the magic he's used to smother her, but with his weakness, she's able to break free just enough. Blood pours from my nose, and I'm pretty sure it's broken, but I push through, scrambling across the floor as my teeth grow long.

He crouches just out of my reach. "You're not entirely pathetic... Had you cooperated, we might've ended things differently, but now I have what I need, and I no longer have a use for you." He brings the tip of the dagger down hard and I see stars before the pain even registers.

Peregrine whistles as he walks away, heading toward the stairwell, and my teeth grind as I push up to all fours. With one final surge, my beast breaks free. She transforms so fast I hardly hear the movement of bones and joints. Her claws rip against the stone floor, and she lunges. Her teeth mash around Peregrine's shoulder. He screams out as she rips her teeth away, sending blood spraying through the air.

His magic strengthens and her vision wavers.

*"I'm sorry... I tried."*

I don't have the energy to answer as Peregrine sprints down the steps. Her legs buckle and she drops to the floor. She shrinks away, leaving me naked against the cool stone. My fingers tremble over the slash in my stomach. The knowledge that I failed to stop him hangs heavy in the air, but I fought with everything I had... It just wasn't enough.

## Finn

**B**ack in Solaria, Kai and I land in the foyer. Booms and crackles sound from the wing to our left and Kai takes off, running after Alice. Asmodeus descends the stairs before I've gathered my wit and figured out where to start.

“Glad to see you're back,” he says in that haunting voice of his.

“Why wouldn't I be? Eva's here. This is her home. Of course I'm going to come back.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Smitten is a bad look for you,” he says, turning into the opposite wing of the first floor. Blood covers his now bare chest, gathering in the divots of his scars. A sword twists in his hands and he reeks of magic. “I've cleared the lower levels, no thanks to you and my brother, and locked everyone who isn't an immediate threat in the great hall. Alice is clearly finishing up clearing out the right wing, but Eva took this side.”

Asmodeus continues walking as he speaks, his leather pants slung low on his hips as he fishes his fingers through his dark hair. “Are you coming or are you just going to stand there?”



Jogging to catch up, he materializes a sword in his hands and holds it out to me as I near. Out of habit, I reach out to take it, only to remember I can't... My hands have grown some, having upgraded in size from that of a doll to being child-sized, but still not large enough for the task.

When I don't take it, Asmo glares at me, then drops his gaze to my arms. "I can't fucking take you seriously with those."

"Well, nice to see you're just as sour as ever... I have magic."

Asmo stops, gripping my wrist and forcing me to face him. "Have you tried using battle magic yet? It's not as simple as basic spells you can do in your sleep. One wrong finger movement and you lose a hell of a lot more than your hands."

He pushes something through me, constantly checking the lights on his cuff as his magic tangles with the threads of mine. My hands grow a bit bigger, not quite the size they were, but enough that I can hold the sword and not drop it.

"There... Now use this." He thrusts the sword into them before continuing down the hall. "It takes muscle memory to cast hard spells, and new hands mean starting completely over. Trust me. I'm rather versed in the phenomena, seeing as I was pushed in here to fend for myself. You thought running around the woods for a week was exhausting. Imagine doing it for years."

"Thank you," I mutter, following behind him as we reach the far stairwell and start journeying up.

"I didn't do it for you."

Canting my head, I climb the steps faster, trying to catch up with him. "What do you mean? Who would you have—" My words cut off as the puzzle clicks together. "You did it for her... Alice."

He grumbles and sends a string of curse words out with an exhale. "Yes,

but not for the reasons you think. I'm happy that she's with my brother, but she reminded me of something. More specifically, someone."

"That's why you changed your mind and decided to help us," I say as we reach the next floor. Asmo doesn't answer, but he doesn't have to. She's the very reason he changed his mind and there's no denying it. "I'll take the next floor."



The sound of feet flying down the steps echoes above me as I climb to the second floor. Whoever it is, they're in a hurry, because if they miss a single one of the narrow steps, they're going to go tumbling down.

The stairs spiral around a thick column, obscuring everything from view besides what's directly around me, but as I crest the second landing, something blue comes into view. It sees me and darts on to the second level before I can register what or who it is.

Rushing after it, I pause the moment the elf man comes into view. His blue skin is covered in blood, a gash ripped open in his shoulder sends streams trailing down his body, soaking his clothes. His silver hair is pulled into a knot on top of his head, and the moment he locks eyes with me, he removes his hand from where he's been putting pressure on the wound and faces his palm toward me.

As his magic flies through the air, I slip into a cove in the wall, and it sores past me into the stairwell. My heart sinks in my chest. Eva had to have made that... He found her. If he's still walking it could only mean one thing... My stomach churns at the metallic scent of blood and Peregrine's eyes meet mine.

He lifts a blade and my pulse races, my senses in overdrive as I prepare to square off with the man I hate more than Eva's father...

We circle each other warily as he nears, closing the distance between us in the hallway. The sound of our footsteps echoes through the dimly lit chamber and the air is thick, the danger palpable.

The dark elf lunges at me with his sword, his movements swift and deadly. I dodge to the side, the blade whistling past my ear. My heart pounds in my chest as I summon all my strength, calling upon the very essence of magic to aid me. I swing my sword, packing power behind the blow and the blade connects with his, and the sound of metal grinding together splits my eardrums.

We push away, only to collide again and again, until his magic lands against my middle. I barely have time to counter, sending bolts of orange lightning crashing through the room. He ducks, matching me blow for blow as the clash of steel reverberates through my bones.

"You should've seen the way she fought," he grits, our blades locked as my magic mingles with his. "You should've heard the way she screamed when I drove my blade into her."

My heart breaks, tearing open in my chest as I fight to keep it together. My power surges, the emotions adding to the spell at play.

Finally, he backs away, pushing me back. I flip my grip as Peregrine charges forward again, his long, curved dagger catching the light from the torches. I swing, closing my eyes and summoning every ounce of power within my veins, and I try to do battle magic. My fingers twist and move to complete the runes and a burst of light engulfs us, exploding. I'm shot back against the wall, my spine cracking as I collide with stone.

When the light settles, I find black soot along the floor, and a burned

outline on the wall is all that remains of Peregrine and his dagger. They've been eviscerated. Asmo bursts onto the floor, his chest heaving as he locks eyes with me.

"I said *no battle magic*," he yells.



Running up the steps of the castle, my heart pounds with fear and desperation, threatening to crack bone as my chest heaves. With Asmo's power running on fumes, we had to take the stairs instead of teleport, and for all I know, we could be completely out of time.

I search floor after floor, calling out Eva's name, but there is no response. The air is thick, and the sounds are drowned out by my own ragged breaths echoing through the empty halls.

My mind races with a thousand fears. What if I am too late? What if she is already gone?

I push myself harder, taking the steps two at a time until finally I catch a glimpse of white hair pooled on the stone floor. My world screeches to a halt, my body going numb at the sight of her broken and bloody. I rush to her side, my heart shattering, seizing at the idea of losing her.

"Eva," I whisper, gathering her up in my arms. Her skin is so cold, but she blinks. She's still there. Still fighting. "Eva baby... I'm so sorry. I should've gotten here sooner."

My lips quiver as I take her in, finding a stab wound in the middle of her stomach, just below her ribs. It's enough... That wound, combined with the blood loss, is enough to kill a mortal. She's dying. Her once bright blue eyes have dulled, gazing up at me with tears slipping down her cheeks. It's not

until one of my own land on her skin that I realize they're pouring out of me as well.

"It's not your fault. I tried to be a hero, and just like I warned you... Heroes have an incessant need to save everyone, regardless of the cost they pay. I paid it, Finn... but it wasn't enough."

The sheer sight of her bottom lip trembling, the tears clouding her eyes, has me falling apart at the seams. My heart can't beat. My lungs won't breathe. How am I supposed to do this if she doesn't come back? How am I supposed to keep going, or learn to smile again?

She wrecked me in such a beautiful way, yet I'm losing her, and I'm not sure that's something I'll ever recover from. My heart aches. The pain isn't physical, yet it hurts worse than any wound I've ever experienced in my lifetime, and I'm helpless to stop it. I'm left to watch her slip away.

Clutching her to my chest, I rest my head against hers, twirling a silky white lock of hair between my fingers. "I killed him, Eva. Peregrine is gone. He can't hurt you or anyone else anymore." Her head lolls, her eyes growing vacant by the second. I take her hand in mine, feeling the coolness of her skin against the warmth of my own. I want to scream, to cry, to rage against the world. But I know that I must stay strong for her.

If these are her final moments, I don't want to miss them. I can't miss them. "I love you so much," she says, struggling to keep her eyes open.

"I love you too. More than anything..."

"I'm sorry..." she whispers, the grip of her hand growing weaker around mine.

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

"I made you love me and now I'm leaving," she says, trying to still her lips with her teeth.

The wound on her stomach is losing less and less blood, and it's not because she's healing. She has nothing left to give. I can see the life slowly fading from her eyes. I can feel her slipping away from me.

"No, pretty girl. I don't regret ever loving you. My heart is yours, and it will always be. It was yours to steal, and now it's yours to break. Regardless of how this ends... Regardless of how it devastates me, I'll never regret it."

Stroking her hair away from her face, I watch a smile tug at her lips just as her eyes close and her body goes slack. She still has a faint pulse, but it won't last long. Seconds... a minute or two, maybe.

I bite my lip, turning my head upward as if I can trap the tears inside that way, but they only fall faster. Every piece of me turns cold, and it's not until my lungs seize as if I've put them in a vice grip that I remember to breathe, inhaling deep only to cry out the exhale as I clutch her close to me.

Asmo places his hand on my shoulder, letting me know he's there without words, and I jerk upright.

"You..." I breathe. "You can save her."

"Finn... I used everything I had left to heal your hands as much as I could. I don't have any more magic, and even if we were to go get Kai to do it, she'd be too long gone, but there's still hope. She might be immortal."

I shake my head, remembering what Eva told me about her sisters. Persephone was the only one to date who's been proven to be, and they're only half sisters. The chances are slim and I'm not willing to risk it.

"Take mine. Take all of it if you have to."

Asmo grips the back of his neck, squeezing as if he's holding his stress there. "I'd have to take it all, and you're not like Alice. It won't come back. You won't be a druid anymore, and she wouldn't want that for you."

I grit my teeth, my gaze unwavering as I stare up at him. "Take it. If

there's a chance it could save her, that's all that matters."

He sucks in a breath and holds it, then lowers to sit next to me. "It still might not work."

"I don't care. I'll do anything," I say, laying her down onto the floor. Turning my hands palms up, I let Asmo hold them.

"Here we go," he says on an exhale. "Here goes nothing."

As if I've been stuck with a billion little pins, he yanks on my magic until my skin feels like it will break, until my muscles contract, trying to stay together, and my soul screams within my chest. I grind my teeth, desperate to hang on and push through the pressure. Then he stops, he places his hands on Eva's stomach, and power leaches into her, making her veins glow with it.

My chest feels as if it's been flayed open, like an organ that's been inside me my entire life is gone, but I watch as the wound on Eva's stomach knits closed, but her eyes don't open.

"That's all of it," Asmo says, removing his hands and sitting back. "Now we wait."

## Finn

The seconds feel like minutes and the minutes feel like hours as we sit, staring at Eva who I managed to find a shirt for in one of the guest rooms. She's been still, lifeless, and I'm starting to fear I might never get to see that beautiful smile again. I might never get to stare into those bright blue eyes, and all they're going to do for the rest of my life is haunt my dreams. Every time I sleep, I'll get a taste of what we could've had, only to wake and remember that I lost her...

"Finn..." Asmo says, his voice softer than his usually growly persona, and it's void of his usual sarcasm. "It's time to start looking at the worst."

I shake my head violently, my arms propped against the top of my knees. I've barely taken my eyes off her. "No. I won't."

"It's been an hour. If it was going to work, it would've by now. It was only a stab wound, and it healed as I infused her with your magic. She's gone. I'm sorry, but she's gone."

My teeth grit together, sending a pulse of pain through my jaw. No... I won't accept it. There's gotta be another way. Then I feel it... the flicker of



magic deep within the void Asmo left when he took mine. My head swings toward him.

“You didn’t take it all. You stopped, and now it’s too late.”

Asmo purses his lips, his gaze falling from mine to the floor. “I wouldn’t leave you without it. Not when she could’ve been immortal. Not when it could’ve been too late to begin with. It would be asinine to give that part of you up.”

“You know nothing about it. I’d have given up everything,” I seethe.

“I know...” his voice is nothing but a whisper as he stares at Eva. “I know you would’ve. Hell, I would’ve, but it wouldn’t have changed anything. The fates are going to do what they want, and there are some things magic can’t help.”

My chest deflates, having forgotten what he went through once upon a time. The Devil has been known to be obsessive, and he’s pushed both his sons to the brink, and I witnessed that in person with Kai. The poor boy would get pushed an inch from death, only to claw his way back.

Asmo’s mother spellbound him, believing that rendering him powerless would set him free, but it only did the opposite. The Devil pushed harder and harder until one day, he snapped. Asmo set the entire castle on fire when the binding broke and he couldn’t control it. All that magic came flooding back in at once. It killed everyone inside, including the love of his life.

If anyone knows how I feel, it’s him.

I part my lips, trying to piece together an apology, right as Eva’s eyelashes flutter. The pink returns to her cheeks and I fling myself forward.

“Eva,” I whisper, smoothing her hair out of her face. “Eva, baby, please answer me. Do anything.”

A burst of joy and relief washes over me and I rush to her side, my heart

beating wildly in my chest. I take her hand in mine, feeling the warmth of her skin and the growing strength of her grip. Slowly, she opens her eyes, now back to their glorious bright blue, and I cup her face, my lips pulling into the smile that's all teeth, as tears flood my eyes again, only this time of joy.

“How did you...” she starts, but I glance at Asmo, his lips tugging into a smirk as he lifts from the ground and walks toward the stairwell to give us space. He didn't say it, but even unspoken, there's an agreement. Since he didn't take all of my magic, it'll recover, and Eva's here, alive and well. That's all that matters. There are no apologies needed or thank yous to concern ourselves with, only the peace that comes from her drawing breath.

I sit her up and cradle her in my arms, feeling the steady beat of her heart against my chest. It's as if my world has tilted back into alignment. She is here, she is with me, and nothing else matters.

“The castle,” she whispers.

“Is fine. All of it will be just fine.”

Her hand gently reaches up so her fingertips can glide across my bearded jaw.

“I don't know what you did, but thank you.”

Lowering my head to hers, I kiss her forehead and hug her against me. “Promise me you'll never play hero again.”

She snorts out a silent laugh and snuggles against my chest. “Deal.”



**T**he siege is over by the time Eva and I join Asmodeus in the foyer... The air is heavy with the smell of smoke and ash, and I am weary to my bones. But my heart is light, as I squeeze Eva's hand a little tighter. She's

alive and well, and things can only go up from here.

Asmodeus is stretched out on the stairs as we enter, blood splatter still clinging to his chest and his bloody sword next to him. “They haven’t returned yet, but I don’t think it’s because there are still enemies to slay, so... I stayed out here.”

My lips twitch into a smirk. “Probably a good call. Alice and Kai have been apart for far too long. Having lived in the room next to them for—I’ve lost track of how long now—I can assure you, the last thing you want to do is walk in on them.”

Asmo grumbles, but he doesn’t make a snarky remark. He just glares at the front doors of the castle. A couple of guards enter and Asmo directs them into the other hall, the one Alice and Kai aren’t occupying.

“There should be more bodies that way.” He glances at us, linking his fingers behind his head and laying back on the steps. “They’re starting to smell and, well, they offered.”

“I didn’t say a thing.” I hold my hands up in a silent surrender.

Eva leans her head on my shoulder, and I wrap my arm around her, take a seat on one of the concrete benches in the foyer, and tug her into my lap. From inside, we can see the gentle orange glow of the flames and it’s almost peaceful. Then the sound of footsteps coming toward us draws all of our attention, and Kai and Alice come into view.

“So they live,” I tease.

Asmo stands up and formally bows. “Your Grace.... Make that plural.”

Before me stands the future of our realms. They steal subtle glances at each other, both covered in the blood of our enemies, her more so than him, but it’s that look in their eye... *Affection. Adoration.* I used to envy it, but now I

know it well. Meeting Eva's eyes, I find that she gives me the same look, and that's all I've ever wanted.

## EPILOGUE

Eva

**A** *few days later...*

Finn and I have been invited to join Hell Hold's Council of Lords, and I smooth my dress, standing in the hall outside the room where Alice, Kai, and the other Lords of the Seven Realms are waiting. I've never done something like this before. I don't know what the procedure is, but as long as Finn is by my side, I can't be led too far astray.

Solaria has been incorporated beneath the King of the Seven Realms and has since been cleaned up. The pyres have all died down and the castle has returned to its former glory. Aerness and I held a small prayer for Cera when we placed her amongst our kin in the family crypt. It's been a busy few days, but normalcy is in sight.

"Head up, pretty girl." Finn slides his arms around me, kissing the crook of my neck. "They don't get to see you tremble. Only me." My eyes flutter shut as I lean into his touch, and I feel him smirk against my skin. "Besides, the meeting hasn't started yet. The king and queen wanted to see us early.

"Why?" I ask, gently running my fingers up the length of his forearms, admiring the veins that flex to the surface.

“I’m not sure, but there’s only one way to find out,” he says, the warmth of his body leaving mine as he moves to open the door. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” I follow after him, adjusting the dress Alice conjured for me. It’s a lot less poofy than the ones in my room back in Solaria, but I like it. It’s delicate, a blood red color that’s soft to the touch. The bodice is fitted, but there’s no chemises or petticoats to worry about. Just a dress. It swishes just below my knees and is held up across my shoulders by tiny straps.

Inside, the room opens up, the smooth obsidian stone walls making a statement. In the middle is a long wooden table surrounded by various leather chairs. The Hell Hold crest carved into the center. Two snakes winding around a rose. Alice and Kai sit on one end, and both of them stand when they see us.

Stopping immediately, I courtesy and bow my head to show respect, but Finn pulls me up.

“If there’s anything you should know, it’s that neither of them enjoys being treated like royalty. So, instead of bowing, you can just say hi.” I squint at him. That’s absurd. They’re the king and queen of the seven realms. It’s the highest honor a person can hold, but I don’t argue. Instead, I fix my face and give them a sweet smile.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Alice says, gesturing to the seats around the table. Finn guides me to the one next to Kai and pulls it out for me. “We wanted to see how you felt about... um, being the lord and lady of Solaria.”

My eyes round, snapping to meet hers at once. What? Us?

“Are you sure?” Finn asks, his thumb stroking over my hand.

“Yes,” the king says, leaning forward to rest his weight on his elbows against the table. “There’s no one I trust more than Finn, and this is your home, Eva. You grew up there and you don’t deserve to be evicted from it.”

“However,” Alice adds, “we understand if it holds too many memories for you.”

The door creaks open to reveal Asmodeus, and at his feet is my sister, Aeres. She bolts across the room and throws herself into my arms. Someone has taken care of her—whatever Asmodeus took her to from the castle—because she’s now in a beautiful little dress. Her hair is braided back, cascading over her shoulder.

“Sorry I’m late. Clamara wanted to finish her hair before she’d let me take her.” I glance at my nephew, telling him thank you with my eyes, and he gives me a curt nod, coming to sit down across from us.

“No,” I say, finally answering Alice. “I’d love to return to my home.”

Kai looks around me to Finn. “You’re awfully quiet,” he says, and when I glance at Finn, his eyes nearly dance with sparkles, watching me with my sister. He reaches over to brush a stray chunk of hair behind her ear, and she giggles, latching onto his hand and pinning it between my body and hers as she sits in my lap.

“My home is wherever Eva is.”

Alice grins, meeting my eyes. “Then it’s settled. Lord and Lady...” Alice trails off, scrunching her brows. “I’ve never asked you what your last name is.” She looks at Finn, whose face has dropped, but he still holds Aeres’ hand.

“It’s Morningstar,” Kai says, and Asmo echoes it.

Finn glances between the two brothers, his mouth opening and closing.

“Finn, you’ve always been my family. It’s only right that you wear the name, too.”

I squeeze Finn’s hand, his eyes filling up with unshed tears. “I’d be honored,” he says, nodding his head, before turning his gaze back to me. This

man has stolen my soul, and the way he looks at me is entrancing. There's no one else I'd rather spend my life with. Not one.

"Lord and Lady Morningstar... Let's fill the others in, then." She gets up to open the door and lords shuffle into the room, taking seats at the wooden table.

"This is mine now." Finn stands and takes Aerness from my arms. "We'll be blowing bubbles in the garden if you need us."

"What? You're leaving?" I ask, twisting to face him. "The meeting is just about to start."

"They only need one of us here, and you're more than capable of making decisions for Solaria. You've lived there your entire life and are a hell of a lot more qualified than me. Besides, it gives me time to get to know this little monster." He tickles her side, making her giggle. "You're going to be one of the most special girls in the entire world."

"I'm a Midicious. I'm not sure anything special exists for us," Aerness tells him, and it nearly breaks my heart. I remember what it was like to grow up in Solaria, having a constant reminder of our bleak future... We can give her a better life. We can give her what my other siblings and I didn't get—a home full of love and laughter... A family.

Finn plants a peck on my cheek before heading toward the door, and just before he leaves, I hear him tell her, "Oh no... Sweet girl, you've gotten it all wrong. You are going to be the most special of them all."

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.

Almost all of her books take place in The Seven Realms, which she's often described as, "If Hell and Wonderland got together and had a baby." You'll

find creatures of all kinds—fae, demons, dragons, witches, and more—along with morally gray villains, and steam. So, grab you some pearls to clutch and get lost in the chaos.

Check out the link below for extra goodies and places you can find Amanda!

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