

1-3

VOLUMES

BLACK ONYX
ACADEMY SERIES



BLACK ONYX
ACADEMY
NIKITA PARMENTER

Black Onyx Academy

Books 1-3

Nikita Parmenter

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter one](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Twisted Shadows \(Black Onyx Academy\) Book 2](#)

[Contents](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chaos Unleashed \(Black Onyx Academy\) Book 3](#)

[Contents](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Books by this Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter one

I thought nothing good would come from the hell that I endured, but luck is on my side for once in my life, and I find myself being shipped off to the elite training academy in the Onyx. Unfortunately, it's still in my home realm, the Fae realm, so still too close but it's better than being where I was. I'll take the panic attacks, the nightmares and the hatred if it means that I get to escape my Father. The Academy is nearly a week's ride from my Father, and any distance between us is a bonus. The downside, though, is that, as the name suggests, it's a school. I don't want to go to school, especially to an elite training academy that trains supernatural beings from all over the many realms, that means Fae, Witches, Shifters of every kind you can imagine, Vampires, Banshees and multiple others. The only species that doesn't attend are the Dragons; they stick to their own realm, unrest in their kingdom pushing them to retreat from the rest of the realms.

As I said I don't relish the idea of attending school, I know everything I need to know when it comes to combat, weapons and murder, and a lot of shit I wish I didn't know. Father made sure of that. They call it a training academy, but I've always thought they should just drop the pretence and call it what it really is, an academy for assassins. Of course, there are factions of the main academy that are devoted to just that but in reality, everyone that attends this school is taught how to kill in the most efficient way. They say it's so that we can police the Realms, protect the innocent Supernaturals and Humans in the Earth Realm's case, and we do, I just can't help but feel that we're being trained for something more, something bigger.

I guess I'll find out now.

I'm actually not entirely sure how my Uncle managed to convince my Father to send me here. My Father has kept an

incredibly tight leash on me for my whole life. It probably has something to do with the incident, and it can't hurt that my Uncle is a well-respected instructor at the Academy.

I don't want to be here at the damn Black Onyx Academy, that's for fucking sure. Even if it does give me a reprieve from my Father. I don't have a choice, not really, but I do need some sort of escape from him, even if it is just temporary. All I know for sure is that I'm going to keep my cards close to my chest like I always have because although I don't want to be here, the alternative is going on assignments for my Father and I fucking hate doing that.

He shouldn't even be sending me on these assignments in the first place, not until I'm twenty-five, anyway. My Father plays by his own rules though, and has been sending me out on assassination missions since I was only fifteen. Now at twenty-one, I've done more jobs than I care to admit, and my hands are practically streaming with blood.

My Father is an influential man, to say the least, and that is the only reason he got away with sending a fifteen-year-old out on assassination missions. Of course, no one knows that it's me. I take precautions to make sure that I am never identified. Everyone is too afraid of the power and influence he wields, so those very select few that know what goes on behind those castle doors just turn the other cheek, pretending they're not aware. The last person who actually tried to help me was pulled apart by wolves as my Father made me watch, and laughed, as if it was the best thing he'd ever seen. That only left my Uncle, who knows what my Father is like and has been trying to get me out of his grasp without losing his life ever since.

The fear he's instilled in everyone who knows him, not to mention the support he has garnered through either bribes or sheer charm. That last one always infuriates me; how can people fall for the utter bullshit he spews?

Because of his vast influence, I have no choice but to obey him. Not only because I am a child in the eyes of the Fae kingdom until I reach twenty-five, but also because if I don't, if I disobey him, the punishments I receive are far harsher than

his usual ones. He always finds out; there are plenty of people who want to gain his favour and do so by reporting any wrongdoings I may make.

Straight after the incident, my Uncle came to my Father with the idea of me enrolling in the Academy. Using the excuse that it would be to hone my skills, make me a better soldier for him. We both know that there is very little the Academy could teach me, but my Uncle saw an opportunity to give me a bit of breathing room away from my Father and took it. He couldn't get me in here straight away though, and my Father took advantage of that. I've done six jobs in the three months it's taken my Uncle to get me here and get everything in order in time for the new year to start.

Excellent.

Not all of those jobs were assassinations, but not one of them was pleasant. Let's just leave it at that.

So, here I am, Black Onyx Academy, the elite of all the academies in all the many realms. It's notoriously difficult to get into and has a waitlist as long as I am tall. The fact that I got in after only a three-month wait is a testament to my Father's political pull.

I stare up at the monstrosity of a building from the back of my carriage. I don't know why my Father insisted on me taking his most lavish one, but I can only assume there's some political angle at play here. There normally is. Unfortunately, the technology that the Earth realm has managed to invent rarely works here. Some of the more minor things do, like the cameras that I plan to put up in my room and the laptop that links them all, but things like cars definitely don't. Several supernaturals have tried to bring cars or motorbikes here over the years, but either they don't survive the portal, or the magic here messes with them, and they simply won't start.

Earth's televisions work over here, though, and some of the more tech-savvy Fae have managed to get their many subscription services over here. It always amuses me, especially the British programmes. They gained their accent and dialect from the Fae that travelled there thousands of years

ago. We shared many things with not just them but all the countries on Earth.

No one is really sure why some of Earth's tech works over here and why some of it doesn't, and frankly, I couldn't give a fuck.

I'm stalling, and I know it. The thing is, I'm not exactly a people person. In fact, I fucking hate them. Especially people my own age, and I'm going to be surrounded by them for at least the next four years unless I manage to get myself kicked out.

I briefly consider the idea before dismissing it entirely. My Uncle pulled a lot of strings to get me in here, and I'd hate to let him down. He's one of the few people I can actually stand to be around. Not to mention the other consequences that would accompany me getting expelled courtesy of my Father. I shudder just thinking about it and shut that thought process down immediately.

Sighing, I decide that I'd better leave the solitude of my carriage and face the Academy. I am many things, but a coward is undoubtedly not one of them. I grab my small backpack that contains the only clothes I own. Anyone who knows my Father would find that very hard to believe, considering he's one of the richest men in this realm. I then grab the two duffle bags by my feet. These two bags contain the only possessions that I actually give a shit about. Clothes you can always buy more of but a perfectly balanced sword or throwing knives that have been made specifically for your hands? They're much, much harder to replace.

I'm not really sure what it says about me that my most valued positions are the multitude of weapons I have in these bags, but I don't give a shit.

As I walk towards the huge castle with its turrets and gargoyles that actually come alive when they are needed and ridiculously manicured lawns and flower beds, it occurs to me that I should probably be feeling impressed or something. I live in a castle. You've seen one, you've seen them all. I walk up to the giant stone steps that lead to the enormous wooden

doors. Uncle Magnus wanted to meet me at the door but had a last-minute thing come up. It's no skin off my back. I'm not exactly the needy type.

I push my way through the doors and take a second to study the expansive stone flooring and high ceilings.

Just as I thought, it looks like a castle.

Cautiously, I move further into the impressive room, ready to make my way to the Headmaster's office to get my schedule and, more depressingly, receive my team assignment. That's right, not only am I going to be subjected to people on a daily basis, but I'm also going to be forced to be on the same team as them. It doesn't sound that bad, except getting a team here means that you are stuck with the same team forever. You are bonded together by bonds that are unbreakable.

They have a spear. It was spelled centuries ago by an all-powerful fae, or maybe a god. The histories are a bit hazy on that. Anyway, anyone who joins this prestigious Academy, sense the sarcasm, has to hold this spear, and it chooses your destined team. Once the spear has declared who you belong to, you're bound for life, and there are no take backs.

There is a lot of darkness in my past and a lot of people who are still looking for me, thanks to the shit my Father made me do. Therefore, I am not safe to be around, I work better alone anyway. This was one of the main points I argued with Magnus, but he quickly turned it around on me and made an equally good point when he said that I could just disappear when the time comes. It's normally hard for people to separate themselves from their teams, but I highly doubt I'll have an issue with that. I've been alone for most of my life, and I've grown to like it that way.

If people and I are a no go, then women and I are basically just hell. If I don't stab one of them by the end of the first week, I'll be incredibly surprised. There's no chance of me being put with a team that has a mix of genders, which would only be mildly better. It's not like the Centre and Bonded groups that are so incredibly rare these days. These teams are

purely for warriors, enforcers, and assassins, and the teams are always either all male or all female.

Which is just bloody peachy.

I turn down a vast hallway. Magnus gave me vague directions when he let me know that he wouldn't be able to meet me, so I sort of know where I'm supposed to be going. I scan the hallway, studying it for escape routes when my steps falter.

Coming my way is an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous demon. That alone almost has me stopping in my tracks. My reaction to men is never this instant, but I challenge anyone not to want him. His black as night hair is streaked with purple and navy blue. He's built like a tank, muscles upon gorgeous muscles all wrapped in tinted dark purple skin. He has two black as night horns perched on his head, and I can just see the tops of black wings peaking over his shoulders.

Suddenly, a flash of a different demon with wings skitters across my mind and sours my mood. I forcibly push it away—different demon, this is a different demon.

This demon stomps towards me, cursing under his breath. His head snaps up as soon as he hears my approach, and his already scowling face darkens further; when I meet his eyes, I have to admit they are pretty a mix of black and blue, but some of their beauty is quickly diminished by the utter lack of emotions in their depths.

He has his emotions locked down tight.

He sneers as he very obviously studies me, scoffing when he sees my two bags and crossing his arms over his broad chest as he stops in the middle of the hallway. I pause in my advance, wanting to get this shit over with, and I know just from his demeanour that whatever comes out of his mouth next will be a whole bunch of shit.

“Typical spoiled princess.” He jeers, and I simply raise my eyebrow, waiting for the rest of the insult. “You do realise that this is a training academy, not a fashion show? So you won't

need that many bags of clothes.” He taunts, wrongly assuming that all of the bags are full of clothes.

My anger starts to rise. I have anger issues, hardly surprising with my upbringing.

“But then again, you only got in because of who your daddy is, isn’t that right, Farren? I feel fucking sorry for whatever team ends up with you. You’ll get them all killed with your inexperience.” He spits.

My blood boils in my veins. Spoiled! I fucking wish, as if that man would do anything that would benefit me in any way. I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop and my Father to issue some sort of order that would make him allowing me to be here make more sense. He is right about one thing, though. I will most likely get my team killed, but not because of my lack of experience. I have more experience than any of the elitist idiots that attend this Academy could ever hope to have from sheer experience alone. No, I’ll get them killed because of who is after me. They’ll get caught in the crossfire if I’m not careful, and there isn’t anything I can do to change that. It’s just the way it is.

I’m not surprised he knows my name. As I said, my Father is powerful, and he’s been meticulous about how he portrays me. I am the shy, politely spoken, spoiled and pampered daughter of a powerful man to the Fae world. One that he likes to keep out of the spotlight as much as possible, for my own safety.

“Problem dickhead?” I growl, my voice husky from disuse. My teal and black eyes are no doubt flashing with rage.

Shock ever so briefly crosses his eyes at my lack of fear of him, but he shuts his emotions quickly.

“You won’t last the week. You haven’t got daddy to protect you here.” He scoffs, no genuine emotion showing anywhere on his stoic face.

I can’t help the loud laugh that escapes me. That fucking man has never protected me.

This time, his entire face shows his shock for a fraction of a second before he once again locks it down. I feel grim

satisfaction that I managed to get him to react like that.

“Fuck you,” I snarl as I barge past him.

His laughter follows me down the hall. I’m generally not this easily riled up; I can’t be not in my line of work. That would mean a death sentence for me, but something about that fucking prick just rubs me the wrong fucking way.

I take a deep breath as I get to the Headmaster’s door, trying to find my calm before I enter. I knock on the door, and it opens to reveal a man in his mid to late forties, considering supernaturals age a lot slower than humans, that makes him ancient.

Judging from the flash of fang, I’m guessing he’s a vampire.

“Ah, Farren, come on in.” He smiles, gesturing for me to go ahead of him.

“After you.” I smile in return, hoping it doesn’t look as forced as it is. I never let supernaturals I don’t know walk behind me if I can help it.

He walks ahead of me and behind his desk, gesturing for me to take a seat.

“Now, we expect you to pull your weight here.” He starts obviously thinking the same as the dickhead in the hallway that I have no training at all and no willingness to train. I chose to stay silent. Let him think what he wants. He’ll soon see differently. “Your Uncle has vouched for you, but, was fairly vague about your affinities?” He asks.

“Air manipulation and force fields,” I reply with a bored note to my voice that I can’t help as I name my two more common affinities.

No one needs to know about my affinity with the Void. Not only is it rare as hell, only one person who I know of has it, and he is currently studying at the Blood moon academy. His Void gift works considerably differently from mine. I can use it in ways that I’m not supposed to, ways that no one has been able to use it, and I’ve done the research. My Father has an extensive library of books. Ones that are incredibly rare, and he probably shouldn’t have. I have spent hours there, poring

over any fucking book that mentions the Void, people who have the gift, and what they could do with it. Nowhere did I find anything that was even close to what I can do with it.

“Impressive. Just so we are on the same page, we will not be giving you any special treatment because of who your Father is.” He tells me, and I nod as I silently seethe inside.

All this judgement of me before I’ve even had a chance to prove them differently makes me want to prove all these mother fuckers wrong. I mean, I am stuck here for the next few years at least. So I may as well make it worth my time.

“In your room, you will have a rule book. I suggest you read it. I’m just getting your schedule printed and sent to my assistant, who will bring it in when we’re done. I feel I must warn you, this place is not for the faint of heart. Everyone here is looking to be the best of the best, and if you show a sign of weakness, they’re going to take you down like the predators they are. I suggest you find someone to give you the basics in fighting techniques as soon as possible.” He warns, and once again, I nod.

Magnus is head of combat here, and I find it interesting that he’s assuming that he hasn’t trained me.

It’s starting to become amusing just how much they’ve all underestimated me. It also pisses me the fuck off. I notice that he didn’t offer to train me or find someone to give me the basics. When it comes down to it, although people fear my Father and the power he wields, they also hate him, which will affect how people treat me, especially since they all think I’m some weak, spoiled princess, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

“Good, now I need you to wrap both of your hands around the spear. It will glow for a minute or two while it finds your destined team. We haven’t had anyone who hasn’t found their team here or at least a part of their team. The fates always allow them to arrive simultaneously, or as close as possible. However, having said that, your admission was a little unorthodox since your Uncle works for us and holds some sway, and of course, your Father.” He states, trying to remain

professional despite his glaring dislike for him. “So, don’t be surprised if you don’t find your team here.”

I clamp my mouth shut, clenching my fists and reminding myself that it would be a bad idea to stab the Headmaster, even if it was just a little bit.

He stands up and turns to the display case behind him, muttering something in Latin that momentarily makes the case glow before it pops open, and he reaches in, pulling out the spear.

The tip is made out of Black Onyx, the only material known to be able to kill any supernatural. Hence the name of the Academy. The spear’s shaft is black ebony wood and decorated with runes inlaid in gold and copper. I have to admit that now he’s said it’s a possibility that I won’t get a team; I’m equal parts disappointed and relieved.

It would be better for everybody if I didn’t have a team.

The Headmaster brings the spear over to me and motions for me to stand. I finally let go of my bags and stand up, pushing down my nerves. I’ve faced far more terrifying things than a glowing stick.

“All you’ve got to do is hold it with both hands, and the name of your team leader will appear along the length of it. The team leader is always called first. Then, if I recognise who it is, I’ll have my assistant bring them in and make the introductions.”

“And if you don’t recognise the name?” I ask, not moving to take hold of the spear.

“I’ll talk to the other academies in case your team leader is there. It’s improbable that will happen, though. Now, take hold of the spear.” He says firmly.

I sigh, swallowing my nerves and taking the spear in my hands. It starts to glow immediately, the light almost blinding. A name appears in less than a few seconds.

I look up from the still faintly glowing name to the Headmaster and catch his shocked look. I guess it rarely

happens that fast. I feel smugly satisfied that I have a team after all.

Even though he thought I wasn't good enough.

Chapter Two

“Storm Arkyn,” I say out loud. “Do you know her?”
I ask.

“I, er, yes I do. I don’t really understand how you’ve matched with their team though. They’re the best we’ve had.” He muses, taking the spear away from me and placing it back into the case. “They’re also a male team.”

“What!?” I exclaim, “I thought there were no mixed enforcer teams?”

“There has never been one before.” He says, studying me in a more suspicious light. “I’ll get my assistant to bring him and his team here for you to meet, and then they can show you to your room. Like with all teams, your room will be in the same suite as theirs.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” I gripe.

The Headmaster ignores me entirely as he picks up his phone and dials a number asking his assistant to get Storm and his team.

I know I said I didn’t want to be in a team of women, but I have certain issues when it comes to men. Although I find them easier to get along with, I am easily triggered by them if they do certain things thanks to the incident and other things in my past, my father being one of the main reasons. How the fuck could this happen?

I am going to have to stay so much on my guard that it’s going to make me pissy as fuck, even more than I usually am. As I sit there stewing in my own thoughts and making no less than five escape plans before turning them down and deciding just to try if for no other reason than to prove the fuckers who think I can’t, that I can fucking kick all of their sorry asses. The door behind me opens, and I immediately stand, moving to the side of the room where I can see all the people entering and the exits.

The first guy who enters the room and sees me move, raises his eyebrows, a level of understanding on his handsome features that I do not like. He's very obviously fae, with his pointed ears and bright orange eyes. His hair is bright white with varying strands of orange mixed through. His build is larger than is typical for the fae, and he's tall as fuck and equally as gorgeous.

I scowl. I don't particularly appreciate that this is the second guy I've met here, and I've had a powerful reaction to both.

"This is Rival, second in command." The Headmaster starts. "Then there's Mayhem, his twin."

The only difference between the two of them is that where Rival has orange features, Mayhem has bright electric blue. The guy that follows behind him is as frustratingly attractive as the twins. He's taller than both of them but has more of an athletic build, tightly corded muscle and looks ready to strike at any time. He has bronze coloured hair and yellow eyes that have a vertical slit instead of the usual pupil. He's a shifter of some kind, but I couldn't tell you what since he has his magical signature completely locked down. Whatever he is, I'd be very surprised if he didn't turn out to be an alpha of his species, and they're as rare as fucking rocking horse shit these days. The next one through the door is all vampire, and his grin is wide, showing off his sharp fangs. He has an air of pure mischief and joy surrounding him that almost makes me smile. It's that infectious. I can sense it's a front though, and that behind that façade lies a dark past and things that he still struggles with to this day.

Don't get me wrong, I highly doubt anyone else would be able to see through the happy, joyful act he puts on but like recognises like, and something in him calls to the broken part of me. His purple eyes are haunted, and the longer I look into them, the deeper I can see the hold his pain has on him. His smile wobbles, and he looks away from me, blood-red hair falling across his forehead as he turns.

I push those thoughts away. There's no need to be dwelling on things like that. All of these men need to be kept at a distance. I push my emotions down further and bury them

deep inside me. The guy with the yellow eyes crosses his arms as he watches me curiously. Keep watching gorgeous; you won't get anything from me.

"The following two are Loki," the Headmaster nods towards the vamp, "And Reaper. Finally, we have their leader, Storm."

"You!" He exclaims as soon as he walks through the door.

"Me." I grin a saccharine sweet smile, his wings are gone now which means I'm far more at ease to be my snarky self.

All the guy's eyes flick between us rapidly.

"You two know each other?" Reaper asks.

"We've had a run in," I say vaguely.

"I see. Well, this is Farren. You probably recognise her. She's Magistrate Godfrey's daughter."

"Like fuck is she going to be on my team!" Storm explodes. "She's weak."

"He's right. There's got to be some mistake. She's got no training and got in here purely on the fact that the magistrate is her father, and her uncle works here. Don't get me wrong, I have the utmost respect for Magnus, but this is taking the fucking piss." Mayhem adds in.

My anger simmers quietly. It's not like I want to be on their fucking team, as much as I hate to admit it, Storm was fucking right. I will get them killed, just not for the reason that they think.

"Unfortunately, boys, there's nothing I can do. I will do some research and reach out to some contacts. I can see if the connection can be severed, but until then, you will have to make do. There won't be any missions for a while since it's the beginning of term. Hopefully, I will have some good news for you by the time you get your first assignment." The Headteacher says, completely disregarding me.

Deep breath Farren, keep your fucking cool.

"Speaking of which, please pass this letter on to your father." He adds, finally turning to me.

I take it reluctantly, like hell will I give it to him. That would mean actually having some sort of contact with him. I'll have to ask Magnus what to do with it.

“Now, show her to her room and then it's straight to combat.” He finishes dismissing us all.

Storm immediately strides off down the hall, all but Loki following him. He sighs as he watches them.

“Come on; I guess it's up to me to show you,” he says, glancing down at me. “Don't worry. We'll get this all sorted out and go easy on you. Well, I will. I can't guarantee that the others will. Being a part of a team is serious, and we put our lives in each other's hands. Having someone untrained and spoilt ... I mean, someone who is used to a different lifestyle is dangerous for you, as well as us.”

Wow, even the sunshine of the group is a judgemental prick, fantastic. I am going to need to let off some steam in combat.

He silently leads me up several flights of stairs and down an ornate corridor. Finally, stopping at a large door. He opens it to a circular room. The central part of the room is open plan and houses a kitchen and living area as well as a mezzanine area in the rafters. Around the edge are several doors leading to what I assume to be bedrooms.

“Each bedroom has its own bathroom, and this one is yours.” He says, gesturing to the third one on the left.

“This is mine?” I ask, unable to hide the unbelieving note in my tone.

I have never, ever, had a room this nice before. I mean, it actually has a fucking bed with blankets and everything! I almost grin.

He frowns at my reaction, watching me closely for a second before obviously deciding I'm taking the piss. I mean, why would the daughter of a magistrate be in awe of what anyone else would consider a simple room? It puts his back up, and whereas before he was cold, now, he's decided to take a similar route to the others and become damn right degrading.

“I hope you packed some sensible clothes in there.” He gestures to all my bags, “I need to get down to the gym, dump your stuff and get changed into something suitable for combat class. I imagine you’ll be sitting out for a while until Magnus can convince someone to teach you the basics. No weapons are allowed in the rooms. There are lockers down in the gym where we keep them. That won’t concern you though, as I highly doubt you’ve bought anything other than clothes and shoes.” He sighs, pinching his nose as if he’s exasperated with me.

Stay calm, Farren.

“The gym is two flights down. Take a left, and then it’s the door on the end. The class starts in five minutes. Don’t be late.”

With that parting statement, he storms out of the room. Well, this is off to a great start.

I glance around the room, and it’s heaven. It would be simple in most people’s eyes, just a basic room. I guess it is, but it’s a thousand times better than anything I have ever had. Not only does it have a bed, but it has a soft-looking carpet on the floor and a freaking window. Fresh air! I immediately stride over to it and open it wide. The air may still have a distinctive chill to it, but the fact that I actually get fresh air in my room is such a novelty that I’ll happily take a bit of cold. Next, I take a quick glance in the bathroom, turning on the tap and revelling in the warm water that immediately comes out.

No fucking way I get hot water too? And privacy?

Right, okay, pull yourself together, Farren. You can explore more later. But, for now, you need to get going.

I’m not too fond of the idea of putting all of my weapons in a locker so far away from me. Anyone could mess with them. I have some fun prevention I can set up on the locker to stop that from happening, but I would still rather that they were kept close to me. Of course, the other problem is that some of my weapons are unique. It would take just one person to recognise them, and that would be it. People would realise who I am and what I’ve done. I can’t risk that, but I also can’t

give them the satisfaction of thinking that I don't own any weapons. I quickly sort through my weapons bags, placing all of my more unique ones in one bag and reluctantly storing it under my bed. Not the safest place for weapons that could reveal my identity, but it's the best I've got in the short time frame I have. I will have to find a more suitable hiding place for them later. I look down at my outfit: black jeans, a black tank and a leather jacket. I ditch the jacket. It means that the scars and tattoos are visible on my arms, but I stopped caring about what other people thought about them years ago. I've had them for so long that they have very definitely become a part of who I am, and I'm proud of them. They're proof that I survived.

I am aware that they are likely to bring me even more attention. Supernaturals don't scar.

My father and some other assholes found a way around that though.

I shut my bedroom door and throw up a quick force field to keep people out before I jog down the hallway with my last remaining bag of weapons and that damned letter the Headteacher gave me. I'm cutting it pretty damn close, so when I arrive, I skip the lockers and go straight to the gym, placing my bag off to one side before jogging to the middle of the room where everyone else is gathered. I'm immediately met with disdainful looks and snickers. I deliberately stand away from my so-called 'Team'.

Storm catches sight of my bag and rolls his eyes.

"This isn't a multiple outfit kind of thing." He sneers, making everyone laugh. "You didn't even change. Can't expect to be able to fight in that."

I clench my teeth and force the Darkness rising within me to settle. I can not let out my Void gift.

"I'd rather fight in something that I'm more than likely to be wearing if I actually need to fight than in loose-fitting clothes that the chances of me being in, in a combat situation is pretty damn slim. I'd rather learn the restrictions of normal clothing now than be caught off guard when it matters." I reply, my

voice becoming gravelly by the end. I'm unused to speaking so much.

"Well fuck, she got you there, Storm." Rival chuckles smacking him on the arm.

Magnus chooses that moment to enter the room, and everyone immediately stands to attention, quieting down and wiping the smiles off their faces. My uncle pays me no mind, but I don't miss the quick glance in my direction to check me over. He frowns as he somehow sees through my mask, and to the simmering rage churning beneath, he's not unaware of what will happen if it bubbles over.

"Today, we will be sparring, set up teams against teams and do one on one and then add in multiples. Farren with me." He says, grimacing as he rolls his shoulders, preparing himself.

The surrounding students obviously think he's grimacing because of having to go back to basics and teach me. But, in reality, he's remembering the last time he had to help me let off steam.

I stride over to him as the others disperse, realising for the first time that there are no girl teams in here.

I get to Magnus just as Storm and the others do.

"Don't you think she should spar with us?" Storm grins smugly. "Team morale and all that."

"I don't think that's a good idea right now." He replies.

"No, I mean she shouldn't get any preferential treatment, should she?" Mayhem comments, challenge in his eyes as he looks my way.

My uncle can sense the undercurrent going on between us and raises his eyebrow. I shrug in response. I'm happy to go up against them. However, I'm not in control enough to hold back fully.

"On your heads fucking be it, idiots," Magnus says to the guys, causing their heads to snap in his direction, all of them looking confused apart from Storm, who just looks as stoic as ever.

“Come on then, consider this your welcome to the team.” Storm grins viciously.

“One second, Farren, come here, boys you carry on setting up.”

The guys reluctantly go over to the other team and seem to concoct a plan with them, no doubt to make it harder and knock me off my princess high horse.

Yeah, fucking right.

“How in control are you?”

“I haven’t got full control, but father got in a punishment before I left, so I’m weakened enough,” I reply bluntly.

“Fucking hell. That also means that you won’t heal Farren.” He replies, rage lighting his eyes.

“What else is fucking new?” I reply, striding over to the team.

“Alright, you’re up first.” Storm grins, while Loki, Reaper and Rival all look uneasy.

Since I’m standing closest to Rival, he easily sees the scars running up my arms and across my shoulders. His eyes widen, and genuine unease and understanding start to fill them.

Nope, I am not having that. I step forward onto the mat.

The largest guy from the other team steps forward, and they all chuckle. I keep my mask in place, rivalling Storm with his stoic appearance. The guy charges at me, and with barely any effort on my part, I strike out, knocking him to the floor, following him down and snapping his arm in the process, making him bellow in pain. There’s a beat of silence before two more of the other team come charging at me. Their fighting technique is okay, but nothing special and ridiculously predictable.

I let one of their hits through to see how much power they’re really putting into it out of pure curiosity. My head snaps to the side, my cheek bursting with pain as my lip splits. Adrenaline fills me, and for the first time today, I let a savage grin break free.

Rival's eyes widen as he nudges the others.

"Fuck." I hear him curse, his eyes worriedly scanning the broken side of my face.

I salute him because I can, and fighting makes me happy before I turn just in time to snap the knee of the guy charging me, and in the process, I get a glancing hit from one of the other team members on my thigh.

That's going to leave one hell of a bruise.

This is fun.

It doesn't take long before I get bored. They're all too predictable and not at all challenging enough. So I stop playing and decide to end it quickly, leaving the remaining three members with a broken jaw, dislocated shoulder, and several broken ribs.

I spit out a mouth full of blood before starting to jump up and down, adrenaline still coursing through me and the Darkness demanding a better fight.

"What the fuck!?" Loki exclaims. "How the fuck did you do that?"

I keep my emotionless expression in place as I watch my uncle approach the pile of groaning men on the floor. I turn to face them.

All of them, even Storm, pales as they catch sight of my battered face. By now, I imagine that it's turning a lovely shade of purple and judging from the tightness in my cheek, it's swelling pretty nicely too.

"What?" I ask as they keep staring. I reach up to poke the cut on my lip. Eh, it's not that bad.

The pain is kind of addicting, actually.

"Why did you let that punch through?" Rival suddenly asks, his bright orange eyes sharp.

The other's eyes snap to him.

"I didn't." I shrug.

“Yes, you did,” He replies, not letting it go.

I cross my arms and stare him down defiantly. I don't have to explain anything to these fuckers.

“Seriously, Farren. No broken bones!” Magnus says, coming up behind me.

“She broke bones!” Mayhem interrupts, sounding impressed despite himself.

“How the fuck was I supposed to know? No-one told me!” I retort, still shaking out my arms and bouncing.

He watches me, knowing that it still isn't enough.

“Go sort your face out.” He orders and I nod, jogging over to my bag and not missing the wide berth that everyone is giving me.

Sweet.

Chapter Three

I grab my bag before remembering I needed to ask Magnus what to do with the letter for my father from the Headmaster. Fishing it out of the end pocket of my bag, I sling the strap over my shoulder and then jog back over to where Magnus is still talking to the team.

“Magnus, what do I do with this?”

“What is it?”

“A letter from the head to father,” I reply.

“Get rid of it.” He answers immediately, and I grin.

I nod in reply, ignoring the confused look the team share with each other, and then jog towards the locker room to sort out my face and store my weapons. The locker rooms are clean and spacious, with a central area where the lockers and sinks are and then either side male and female changing areas and showers. I find an empty locker easily, and before I put my bag of weapons in, I pull out some C4 and a detonator, a small bomb that won't do much damage but will get my point across if someone tries to mess with my locker and then pull out my first aid kit too. I place my bag inside and set up the bomb to go off if anyone tries to get in the locker before shutting the door with a satisfied grin.

There is a line of sinks, with mirrors above them on the same wall as the door, and I walk over to them. Laying out the first aid kit, I search through it, pulling out a needle and thread and quickly threading the needle. Unfortunately, my earlier suspicions are confirmed when I look in the mirror and see that not only is my cheek a lovely shade of purple already, but my lip does, in fact, need stitches. Usually, I wouldn't have to worry about stitching it as by now both my cheek and lip should've healed, but thanks to the aftereffects of my father's last punishment coursing through me, I won't be healing any

time soon. I will heal slower than a human until it's finally out of my system.

I clean the drying blood off my face and then push the needle through the skin just below my lip. The dude got me good. I can feel a stickiness along the middle of my back and slight pain. I'd be willing to bet that the wound, another thing leftover from my father's punishment, has reopened during the fight. There's not much I can do about that one now though, so I'll ignore it and deal with it later. I can't feel blood sluggishly running down my back, but my tank is black, so it'll be fine for now.

I'm on the third pass of the needle through my lip when the door next to the row of sinks opens, and I turn to see who's entered. Reaper stares at me in shock and, for some reason, worry. It takes me a second to realise why he's looking at me like that.

"Fuck. Sorry, I'm nearly done, then I'll be out of your way." I say, realising that I've dropped down into a defensive crouch with the needle and thread, paused halfway through my lip.

"What in the underworld's name are you doing?" He bellows.

"Stitching my lip, one second," I say, starting to get frustrated and trying not to react visibly to the mention of the underworld.

I quickly finish the job while he watches silently, clearly pissed about something, if his crossed arms and deep frown are any indications. I clear up quickly, making sure I pick up the letter, C4 and detonator, which I keep out of sight of the still stewing Reaper.

"There you go, all yours," I mutter, barely restraining myself from calling him a dickhead and my voice even rougher than usual, thanks to all the talking I've done today.

I walk out of the door, planning to find my way outside so I can dispose of the letter. But, surprisingly, Reaper follows me out, muttering something under his breath.

“What’s wrong with you?” Loki asks as they all appear. I carry on walking. I’ve got no interest in listening to them bitch.

“I, she ... Look at her damn face.” He finally gets out.

“Farren!” Rival calls, and I pause, having slowed my pace when Reaper started stuttering out of pure curiosity.

I slowly turn around. Ready to get this latest round of bullshit done with so I can go and do my favourite thing.

“Did you go to the infirmary?” Mayhem asks.

“That’s what I was trying to say. She stitched it up herself!” Reaper finally announces.

Loki raises his eyebrow in question as Storm just stands there watching stoically. I shrug in response, turn on my heel and walk out of the gym door. No one gave me a schedule, so I have no idea if I’m supposed to be in a lesson now or not.

“Where the fuck is she going?” Storm growls, and I hate that I like the sound.

Why do I like it?

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?” Mayhem replies.

I can still hear them, so I assume that they’re following me.

“Farren! We need to talk to you.” Loki calls after me.

“Busy,” I yell back, finally finding a door to the outside and pushing through.

I come out onto a large, empty expanse of grass. It’ll do. I carry on walking until I’m further away from the buildings. I don’t want to blow any of them up.

“Trouble, we’re trying to talk to you.” Storm growls as I bend down and set up the C4, placing the letter on top.

“You might want to back up,” I say, ignoring his previous comments.

“Why the fuck would I listen to anything you have to say?” He sneers, his eyes darting to my lip.

“Fine, don’t.” I shrug, walking a safe distance away, the others follow me, and reluctantly Storm starts to follow too.

I press the detonator before he’s completely out of the blast zone, causing him to fly forward and land on his face.

“What the fuck was that!?” Mayhem yells.

“C4,” I say, a smartass grin on my face.

“I can see that, but why?” He replies.

“Cause I can.”

“I’m starting to think that you’re not quite what we judge you to be,” Reaper mutters.

“No shit.” Rival replies.

“For fuck sake, Farren!” My uncle suddenly yells, appearing from the same door we came out from. “How many times do we have to have this conversation? Stop blowing shit up!”

“This is a regular thing?” Storm yells, just getting up off the ground as Loki starts bouncing excitedly.

“You told me to get rid of it?”

“Yes, in a normal way.” He replies, trying to hide his amusement.

His look darkens as he sees my stitched lip.

“You, okay?” He asks.

I see Rival studying us both closely. The guy is way too observant for my liking.

“I’m good,” I say, done with the conversation.

“Okay, we’ll catch up tomorrow. I’m going to have to stay here and explain to the other teachers why there’s a scorch mark on the lawn.” He grins, this time not even trying to hide his amusement.

I nod and turn on my heel, walking back towards the school.

“Where are you going now?” Storm calls, sounding increasingly frustrated.

“To bed,” I reply, glancing at the dimming light.

“Don’t you want dinner?” Loki asks, frowning.

I tilt my head to the side, aware that I’m showing more emotion than I should be.

“Food?” I ask cautiously.

“That tends to be what people mean when they say dinner,” Reaper chuckles.

My frown deepens, not quite comprehending.

“Trouble probably only eats salads and food that costs more than most people’s homes,” Storm sneers as he barges past me.

My anger rises again.

I’m getting sick of the fucking snap judgements.

Rival

I watch her as she glares after Storm. I’m not quite sure what’s crawled up his ass, but whatever it is, it’s preventing him from seeing what’s really going on and believe me, something is definitely going on. I admit that I had certain reservations about her at first, especially considering she’s so damn beautiful that she could throw this team into turmoil. I was expecting a manipulative, shallow, and entirely inexperienced woman.

What we got is someone who’s overly cautious, is an incredible fighter, and she didn’t even use her magic. I even got the feeling that she was holding back. I know for a fact that she let that punch through, but what I don’t understand is why? Pain doesn’t seem to bother her, and that worries me, so does the churning sick feeling in my stomach. Her shoulders and arms are covered in scars, and Supernaturals don’t scar that fucking easily.

Mystery surrounds her.

She looks confused by the simple offer of dinner, and I just can’t fucking stand it anymore. Storm wanted us to keep her at

arm's length, insisting that she's not going to be around for long, and if we can convince her to leave, that would be better. I'm done though. There's so much more going on here, and the spear has never made a mistake before. It's not just that though; I can't deny the connection I feel towards her. It's not the same as the connection I feel with the others, but there's no denying it, and I know they feel it too. That's their problem. It scares the shit out of them.

"Come on. I'll show you to the cafeteria." I say, walking up to her and ignoring the others shooting me looks.

I'm right about this. I know I am.

She doesn't say anything, just follows along beside me. Loki comes up on her other side, his arm brushing against her and causing her to tense. He steps further away, noticing her flinch before he shoots me a look, finally starting to pick up on what I am. An uncharacteristic frown crosses his features as he subtly inhales before his eyes widen, the worried look intensifying.

I raise my eyebrow in question, and he shakes his head, mouthing later at me.

We make it to the cafeteria without incident, leading her through the tables to the lunch line. Since it's midway through the week, we only have cold options like sandwiches, baguettes, salads and wraps available. She follows, but she looks unsure for the first time since she arrived. This time, I share a look with Reaper and Loki.

"Here," Reaper says, handing her a tray and placing it in front of her.

Loki walks down the line, and she moves behind him, watching him like a hawk as he picks up a couple of sandwiches, some crisps, a chocolate bar and a bottle of blood.

"I can have anything?" She asks.

Her voice sounds a lot harsher than it did this morning, almost as if she's not used to using it or even that it's taken some damage.

“Yep,” Loki replies. “It’s free.” He adds quietly, and I frown. It’s hardly like she has to worry about money.

At least that’s what I thought until I see the relief briefly flash across her stunning features.

Fucking hell.

She picks up three sandwiches and a packet of crisps and, when she thinks we’re not looking, she places a couple of granola bars in her trouser pockets. It’s all signs of someone who doesn’t know where their next meal is coming from or when. I should know I’ve lived like that, and so has Loki.

She shouldn’t have had that sort of experience though. Something just isn’t adding up.

My mouth drops open in shock when we take a seat as she finishes her food within five minutes. I’d be willing to bet that she had timed eating when she was allowed to eat. I nudge the others, so they stop staring, and Loki clears his throat, looking at her as if he’s just realised something.

“You’re not what you appear to be, are you?”

“It depends on what you see.” She replies cryptically, a slight smile tilting her lips for a fraction of a second before it disappears. “I’m going to bed.” She pauses, looking us over. “Thank you.”

I nod, staring after her as she leaves. As soon as she’s out of the cafeteria, I turn to the others to say I’m not going through with what Storm wants us to do, but I’m interrupted by Reaper.

“I’m not doing it. Something is going on with her, and I want to know what.” He says firmly.

“Me too.” Loki agrees. “When I showed her the room, she was almost shocked, and for a brief second, her barrier dropped, and I could feel the sheer joy radiating from her. It was gone within a second though, and I assumed she was being sarcastic. Now I’m not so sure.”

“She just sewed up her lip right in front of me. She didn’t flinch, not once, and I couldn’t see any numbing stuff in her

supplies. Not only that, but she actually thought I was angry at her because I needed to use the sinks. Not because I know full well that you have to be damned used to stitching yourself up to do it that quickly and without fucking flinching.”

“That’s another thing though; she’s not healing.” I muse. “Most supernaturals would have healed by now, even the weaker ones, and she can’t be that weak, or they never would’ve let her in here, magistrate father or not.”

“Come on. I’m not hungry anymore. Let’s go back to the room. She’s there alone with Storm and Mayhem.”

“You sound protective of her,” Reaper observes.

“I guess I am?” Loki replies, confused by his own reaction.

“Me too,” I mutter, and Reaper agrees with a nod.

“She’s bleeding,” Loki says quietly as we walk the halls.

“What?” Reaper asks.

“Farren, when I got close to her earlier, I could smell fresh blood, and it wasn’t from her lip; there was too much of it.”

“But there were no weapons allowed in the fight, and we would’ve noticed if she got an injury that large during it,” I say.

“No, which means she had the wound before the fight,” Loki says, a dark look crossing his features.

“Fuck.” Me and Reaper curse at the same time.

We need to get to the bottom of this.

We increase our pace as we make our way back to the room. Mayhem and Storm are lounging on the couches when we get there. Farren is nowhere in sight. A panicky feeling that I don’t understand starts inside me, and I frown.

What the fuck is happening?

“Where’s Farren?” Reaper asks, trying to sound casual, but there’s a tense undercurrent in his tone that has Storm frowning.

He points in the direction of her room, and I relax slightly, knowing she's in there.

"Think she's asleep." Mayhem replies and I catch the worried frown he gives her door.

"Look," I start, "I think we need to consider the fact that the spear has never gotten it wrong before, and she's meant to be on this team. There's something more. .." I start, but Storm jumps up.

"No. She will never be a part of this team. She's weak. She's not even healing!" He exclaims.

I have known Storm ever since we were kids, and I can hardly remember a time when he showed emotion. But he has shown more brief flashes of it in the last few hours than he has for a very long time, and I can't help but feel that there is something he's not telling us.

"Come on, man. Listen," Loki tries, but it's no good.

Storm is in no mood to listen to us and glares harshly before getting up and walking to his bedroom door, his stoic facial features back in place.

"What about you?" I ask my twin.

"I agree with you to some extent." He replies. "Something more is going on with her, but I'm not sure it's our place to figure out what."

He gets up quietly and goes to his own room, leaving the three of us in the living area together.

"Well, that went well." Loki scoffs, hopping over the back of the couch and landing with a bounce next to me.

"They'll come around. They need to." Reaper replies.

"What's the plan then?" I ask.

"Well, we observe, and we try to get her to open up to us. We can't help her if she doesn't trust us."

"I have a feeling she doesn't trust easily," Loki says, darkness once again crossing his eyes as his past rises. "I

recognise something in her that's in me, and that fucking terrifies me."

Without another word, he gets up and quietly makes his way to his room.

"That statement was more worrying than anything else he could have said," I say into the silence.

"We'll figure it out. We have to."

The rest of the night I spend tossing and turning the unknowns about Farren driving me crazy and what's worse is I don't fucking know why I care so damn much.

"Someone needs to wake up Trouble." Storm mutters as he fills up his mug with his third cup of coffee this morning.

It looks like someone else didn't sleep very well either.

"I'll do it." Loki offers.

Just as he's about to knock on her door, the main entrance to the dorm swings open and in walks a muttering Farren; she shuts her mouth abruptly and darts her eyes to the side as if she's looking at someone. My mind stutters over what she's wearing, tiny running shorts and a tank. She's got far more tattoos than I ever thought the daughter of a magistrate would have.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Storm says his only emotion is apparently anger.

"For a run." She answers simply, walking to her room and closing the door behind her. A few seconds later, we all hear the shower turn on.

"Well, you can't call her lazy," Loki comments, making Storm scowl.

He strides up to her door and bangs on it. "We're leaving in five minutes!"

He's barely made it across the room when her door opens again, and she walks out fully dressed, raising her eyebrows at Storm and smirking. It's pretty clear that she enjoys sparring with him. There's a change in her today, almost as if she's made a decision.

"It's weapons training today. Do you need to borrow a weapon?" Mayhem asks, and I'm glad to see he's not sneering. I'm rarely at odds with my twin, and I hope that he sees what the rest of us do soon.

"No, I stored mine in the locker yesterday." She replies, and she makes a beeline for the coffee.

She pauses just as she gets to it. "May I?"

"Of course, help yourself," I reply, smiling softly. I'm rewarded with a small smile in return, and for some strange damn reason, it makes my heart hurt.

What is this girl doing to me?

Not just be actually but the others as well. She's a mystery and one I want to solve.

Chapter Four

Farren

As I sip my coffee, I look around at the guys. I heard them talking last night, and although I don't want them to figure out what's going on with me and, more importantly, my father; I figure that the best way to throw them off is to be more open with them about the things that I am willing to share. Unfortunately, that doesn't leave much to be honest about, but a small part of me is telling me that I'm in the right place, and this is where I'm supposed to be.

That's pathetic thinking, and I know that, so I push it away.

I ignore the snort from Poca. He's clearly listening in on my thoughts and finding them amusing. I have no idea why he decided to show up this morning. We had both agreed that while I was here, he would stay away. As far as I'm aware, there's only one person with a familiar, and hers is a reasonably normal animal, certainly not a freaking hellhound. Poca being a hellhound however, does have its perks. For instance, he can make himself appear completely invisible. The only downside to that is that it makes me look like a crazy person when I talk to him.

"Why aren't you healed?" Loki asks, sounding concerned. "It looks like it's still fresh."

I feel my defences going back up. It turns out being open with them is more challenging than I thought it would be.

"I heal slowly," I reply.

"Wait, did you say you had weapons?" Rival asks, not so subtly giving Loki a warning look.

"Yeah, they're in my locker." I reply, taking a sip of coffee and then grinning,, "Where do you think I got the C4 from?"

“You know what? I hadn’t thought about that.” Reaper grins.

“Alright, let’s go!” Storm orders, striding out of his room and completely ignoring me.

I put down my coffee and look through the drawers, finding some scissors before jogging out of the door behind them. Poca rubs against my leg, deliberately singeing the fabric. He’s pissed because he wants me to introduce him to the guys, but he’s never wanted to be introduced to anyone before, even to the point where, when I’ve tried to introduce him to my uncle, he’s made me look fucking nuts by not becoming visible. I still don’t think Magnus believes me that he’s real.

“Holy shit,” Loki suddenly exclaims, “Your pants are smoking.”

His exclamation gains the attention of the others.

“Why thank you, Loki, you’re not so bad yourself,” I reply, grinning and knowing that the line doesn’t entirely work. I’m still hoping it’s enough of a distraction, though.

“I, er, what?” He stutters, making the guys laugh and Storm scowl.

Fortunately, we arrive at the locker room, and Loki seems too flustered to remember that my pants were smoking. Instead of going to their own lockers, everyone follows me to mine.

“Erm, you guys might want to step back,” I warn them.

“Last time you said that something blew up,” Reaper replies, raising his eyebrow.

“Exactly.” I grin, and their eyes widen as they all back right up.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Loki replies, just as my hand is on the handle. “What about you?”

“Well, I’ve got to disarm it. Don’t worry. It’s not C4.” I reply, and they relax, “It’s a bomb.” I add.

“What the fuck?” Mayhem exclaims.

I open the door, taking the scissors out of my back pocket and side-eyeing Poca, who huffs happily next to me, clearly enjoying the distress that my actions are causing the guys. It takes me seconds to disarm it, and I set it to one side as I pull out my duffle bag. The guys all start edging closer, even Storm.

I had an; I guess you'd call it an epiphany last night. I want to break through that emotionless barrier that Storm always has up. If only to annoy him.

"You're fucking crazy." Loki grins.

"Yep," I reply.

"Hang on, those bags you arrived with weren't filled with clothes, were they?" Loki asks.

"Nope."

"Where's the other one?" Rival asks.

"What weapons are we using today?" I ask, trying to deflect. I don't want to answer that question.

"Swords." Storm says, opening his own locker.

"Sweet." I grin as I pull out my Katana.

"Let's go." Storm orders again as we all grab our swords and make our way to the same gym we had combat last night.

"Your blade has got some nicks in it." Rival comments.

"That's what happens when you use them," I say without thinking.

"Like you have ever used your blades, Trouble." Storm scoffs.

I feel the memories push forward as my steps begin to slow, the others moving ahead of me. More recently, the memory of the incident tries to come forward, and my hands start to shake.

"Hey," Loki says gently, quiet enough that no one else can hear. "Whatever you're seeing right now, you're not there. You're in the gym at the academy, and you're safe. I promise

you Love, you're safe." He reaches out and cautiously takes my hand.

I grip it tightly. I have never had someone pull me out of a panic attack before, and it leaves me feeling exposed, which of course, makes me want to go into defensive mode. I force myself to relax, though, and look up at Loki.

"Thank you," I say sincerely.

"Any time, Love."

"Are you two done?" Storm asks, his voice completely void of emotion.

We pull apart like naughty kids, and I feel ridiculous.

"Right, Farren on the sidelines. Your uncle has vouched for you, but we all know that there's no chance that you know what you're doing with your background." A wolf, which I'm assuming is the teacher, announces in front of the whole class, and my blood boils.

Surprisingly, it's Storm that tenses and comes to my defence.

"Actually, Ross. We want to train with her since she's a part of our team, so we will spar with her." He says tensely, turning his back to the offended instructor as he nods over to the side of the room.

We all follow, the guys smirking and sharing a look.

"Loki and Farren." He orders and Loki steps forward, looking wary.

We go through a couple of warmups, and he gains confidence in me, realising that I know what I'm doing. After that, we take it up a notch, and by the end, we're both sweating. He's actually pretty good, and even if I was at full strength, he might even give me a good run for my money.

"Impressive," Mayhem says, once the class is over and earns a scowl from Storm.

"Lunch!" Loki exclaims excitedly, running past me and into the locker room. He trips over fuck knows what, and I react instinctively.

I throw my hands out, forgetting that most people need to use words to control their magic. It's too late now. I stop him millimetres from falling on the edge of his sword, using air to stand him upright again and floating his sword back into his hand.

"Didn't anyone teach you not to run with swords?" I chastise.

"How did you do that?" Storm asks, for once no sneer on his face.

I shrug, not willing to answer and push past them into the locker room, quickly putting away my sword.

"We'll order food up to the room. I've got to get my books for magical battle theory." Loki says, "You're with me, Farren."

"Sounds good," I reply.

My magic's beginning to stir, which I'm hoping means that the potion is nearly out of my system, and I should start healing soon.

"What do you fancy?" Reaper asks me when we get to the room.

I have a mild panic.

"Erm, just get me whatever you're having?" I ask, and he smiles softly.

I try not to notice how his smile lights up his eyes. I get up to distract myself and make my way to the kitchen to grab a coffee. Storm steps up next to me to make his own cup, and I see something move out of the corner of my eye. I turn to get a better look and notice shadows curling their way through his fingers.

No fucking way! Storms got shadow manipulation. That's as rare as rocking horse shit. No one known has had that gift for fucking centuries, and his is bloody strong.

He grumbles under his breath as his magic signature increases in the air around us, gaining the guys' attention. The

black inky shadows he controls reach for me, and he tries to pull them back, but they don't seem to let him.

"Storm," Rival says carefully, a warning in his tone.

Ignoring the vicious scowl on his face and the warning in Rival's voice, I can't help but be enthralled as the shadows curl around my fingers, weaving in and out. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were playing? I bring my hand closer to my face, completely missing everyone's reactions around me. As soon as it's close enough, the shadows gently nuzzle my cheek, and I smile.

"Hey, that tickles," I smile fondly, and the shadows do it again, and I just can't help the following words that come out of my mouth, "You know you're kind of cute."

The portion of shadows that are reaching for me from him breaks completely from Storm and forms itself into the form of a massive smoky edge dog with glowing amber eyes and deadly claws and teeth that could break you in one bite. He comes forward, wagging his tail and nuzzles his massive head under my palm.

"So, fucking cute."

"What the fuck is happening? Did you do that?" Mayhem asks.

"Fuck no! You know the shadows, they've got a mind of their fucking own. They've decided they like her, obviously." Storm says through a clenched jaw, clearly not pleased by the development.

I tilt my head to the side, making it evident that I'm studying him. He sighs heavily, his ice cold stare intact until he raises a single eyebrow at me.

"What?" He growls impatiently.

"Just trying to figure out what would get the biggest reaction out of you and finally crack that emotionless mask you hide behind," I say bluntly as I study his features.

"Farren," Rival warns me this time, and I smirk, ignoring him.

“So far, I have two options, the first being to punch you in that sinful mouth of yours. The second is to kiss you fucking stupid.” I shrug and suppress a chuckle as heat flares in his eyes briefly before he snuffs it back out. “Ah, now isn’t that interesting?”

He sneers at me and forcibly calls his shadows back to him. They reluctantly go, and I’m a bit sad they’ve left if I’m honest. He stomps into his room.

“Foods here!” Loki calls out into the silence as someone knocks on the door.

Poca growls deeply next to me, and I tense, all signs of the previous light-heartedness disappearing in an instant.

“I’ll get it,” I say, making my way to the door before anyone else can get up.

“What’s going on?” Rival asks.

I open the door and duck as a sword swings at me. As I call my sword through the Void, I hear the guys exclaim behind me and curse their lack of weapons.

“What the fuck is going on!?” Storm exclaims.

The masked guy comes for me again, ignoring the others and focusing on me. I’m still slow from that bloody potion. I’m damn lucky my Void powers worked well enough that I could call my sword through it. Unfortunately, because of that, I miss a swing, and he impales me straight through the stomach; at the same time, as I swing and manage to behead him in a swift motion, he crumbles to the floor, thankfully letting go of his sword that’s still impaled through me.

“Fuck, fuck!” Rival exclaims, rushing to one side of me as Reaper rushes to the other, Loki appearing in front of me, Mayhem and Storm appearing behind them, their eyes wild.

I glance down at the sword in my stomach.

“I fucking hate being stabbed in the stomach.” I sigh, grasping hold of the pommel and preparing to pull it out.

“What do you mean you hate it!?” Loki yells. “This has happened before?”

“A few times,” I reply, forgetting my filter for a minute.

“You just beheaded him. No fucking hesitation.” Storm growls. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Pulling out the sword,” I answer like he’s stupid. “It can’t stay where it is.”

“We need to get you to the infirmary,” Reaper says urgently.

“Nah, it’s not that serious,” I reply, pulling the sword out before anyone can protest. I grit my teeth, breathing harshly.

“Fuck!” I curse, grabbing someone’s t-shirt off the back of the couch and pressing it against the wound on my stomach.

“I do not understand what is happening right now,” Loki says. His voice seems off, and I glance over at him.

“None of us fucking do.” Mayhem retorts, all of their eyes are on me, so they don’t see that Loki’s about to lose his shit.

“Hey!” I snap, shocking the others as I grab Loki’s shirt and pull him closer to me. “Look at me.” I wait until his eyes, black as night, drop to mine. The pain in them guts me, and I don’t know why. “You’re not there. Remember? You’re at the academy with your brothers. You are safe.”

“That’s not going to work. He needs to know you’re safe.” Rival says.

“Me?”

“Yes, seeing you hurt has triggered him.” Storm says through clenched teeth. “Reaper, go and get Magnus.”

“Oh fuck, I’m so sorry.” I apologise, genuinely upset. This is my fucking fault.

They look at me confused, my reaction seeming to have taken them aback.

“Loki, look, I’m okay. I promise I’ve been through a lot worse. This is nothing.” I try.

“That’s not helping,” Mayhem mutters as an inhuman growl bursts from Loki’s chest.

“I’m not used to fucking comforting people,” I growl back.

“Of course, you’re not.” Storm mutters, rolling his eyes, “Just say what people normally say to you.”

“I did!” I reply, slightly panicking, “He’s the first person that gave me any comfort! Okay, I’m going to just talk. I really am okay. I wouldn’t be able to talk to you if I wasn’t right?” I say, trying to use logic. His fangs retract. “I get it, I do. Memories are pulling you under, but they’re not real, look.” I say, grabbing his hand and placing it over my heart, his eyes clear more. “See still beating. Let’s try some distracting facts. Did you know that spaghetti freaks me out?” I ask, and he cracks a smile.

“Why?” He asks roughly.

“Because it looks like worms.” I smile, and he laughs. “You laugh, but father made me eat nothing but worms for an entire month once.”

A growl not from Loki comes from somewhere in the room.

“He what?” Storm growls.

“It was nothing. Better than not eating.” I say, which was apparently the wrong answer.

I turn back to Loki to see his eyes darkening again.

“Fuck, I’m going to regret this.” I start, as questions get thrown at me and yelling increases. “I’ve got a familiar!” I yell.

Everyone freezes as Loki’s eyes clear completely.

“What?” He asks, shock evident in his tone.

“I have a familiar,” I repeat, already regretting telling them.

“No one has had a familiar for decades.” Storm scoffs, clearly on edge.

“Poca, I swear to god if you stay invisible right now, no belly rubs for a month!” I say to the grinning hellhound.

He stares at me defiantly before a slight shimmer overtakes him.

“Fucking hell. That’s not a familiar. That’s a fucking hellhound.” Rival exclaims, staring wide-eyed at the glowing with embers, horse-sized hellhound they can now all see.

“Tone it down, Poca,” I say tiredly, as he growls playfully before putting out his embers and turning into a great Dane sized hellhound instead.

“You’ve got some fucking explaining to do.” Storm growls.

“I’d like to sit down now,” I say, swaying on my feet slightly.

“Fuck,” Loki growls as he carefully leads me over to the sofa, and I sit down.

“What’s happened?” Magnus exclaims as he bursts through the door, Reaper hot on his heels. “Is that a hellhound?”

“I told you he was real,” I grin.

“Fuck, look at you. Is it still in your system?”

“Yep.”

“Is what still in her system?” Reaper asks.

“I knew it! I can’t have someone on my team who does drugs.” Storm sneers.

“It’s not drugs. It’s a potion that stops my healing and blocks some of my gifts. It’s starting to wear off now, hence why I could call my sword to me.” I say, stopping his rant in its tracks.

My eyes drift closed.

“Why the fuck would you take that?”

“I didn’t take it willingly,” I argue.

“What?” He growls before demanding, “Who?”

I don’t reply as my eyes drift shut again.

“Farren. Stay awake.” Loki says gently.

“Who, Farren?” Storm demands.

“Her father, now get out of the way!” Magnus demands, and everyone falls silent.

Thanks for that, Magnus.

“Sweetheart, I know you don’t want to, but you’re going to have to do it. You’re too close to the edge.”

“Nope.”

“Farren, be reasonable. You’ve lost too much blood.”

“Do what?” Reaper asks.

“No, if I do that, I could hurt someone. You know what I will be like after.”

“The guys and I will spar with you. There’s enough of us, and we can take turns. They aren’t weak.”

“I can’t,” I mutter as I feel myself fading.

“You’ve got no choice!” He yells as he picks me up. “I’m moving you down to the gym. Just hold on a little bit longer.”

“What’s happening?” Loki asks.

“I’ll explain. Just follow me, all of you, please. She’s going to need every one of you.” He declares as he jogs down the hallway. We finally reach the gym,

“Lock the doors.” He orders.

“I can’t believe I’m going to do this. Warn them!” I demand, opening my eyes and finding them all towering above me with various levels of panic on their faces.

“What is she going to do?” Storm demands.

“She’s going into the Void. It’s the only thing that will save her now with that fucking potion still in her system. The problem is that once she comes out, she will have an abundance of power and not enough control. She is going to need to spar with each of us to get some of it out. She will beat all of you.” He warns them. “Now, Sweetheart, go.”

Chapter Five

Darkness consumes me as the Void swallows me whole. I hear Magnus reassuring the guys as I disappear from their view. Aw, they care. I would have thought they would be glad to see me disappear. Immediately, the Void welcomes me as its own, healing me and filling me with delicious power. I land in a crouch, aware of everyone and everything in the room, my senses becoming even more acute. The Void didn't only heal my wound but also burned the remaining poison from my veins. The only thing it won't have healed are the slashes along my back. They were made with a spelled blade, designed to take a long time to heal.

"Fuck me, look at her eyes," Mayhem exclaims.

"They're glowing!"

"That's normal," Magnus replies.

"That's not fucking normal." Storm retorts.

"It's normal for her. I'm up first." Magnus replies, approaching me slowly. "Any control?"

"Enough," I growl.

"Don't kill me." He says, looking amused.

"I'll try not to," I reply sincerely and charge at him.

He throws a full power energy ball at me, making the guys curse and step forward to stop him before they all gasp in shock as it hits me in the chest and doesn't make my steps falter. It takes less than a minute before Magnus calls on one of the guys to take over, his breathing harsh. Storm steps up next, his horns sparking as he calls his power to him, his wings flapping behind him. I grin, my eyes still glowing. He's fast, faster than most, but even so, he doesn't land a single hit but takes many. He lasts a full ten minutes, though, which is longer than anyone else has when I've just come out of the

Void. He's made a considerable dent in my power level and given me back more of my control but not enough.

"Reaper, you're up." He orders.

"Remember, it's helping her," Magnus mutters as Reaper hesitates.

I let loose an inhuman growl, making their eyes widen in shock. Reaper rolls his shoulders and flicks out his hands, flames instantly engulfing them and my eyes widen. I have no idea what kind of supernatural can do that. His slitted eyes glow as he uses my distraction to his advantage, striking out and actually making a hit. Panic enters his eyes as my skin smoulders until he sees that by the time he's pulled back, I'm already healed.

We fight hard. Reaper's strength is incredible, and if I weren't newly recharged, he would've beaten me easily. In the few minutes we've been fighting, he's managed to give me all of my control back, my gifts settling back down inside me.

I drop my guard altogether, dropping my hands to my sides. Reaper's eyes widen, and he tries to stop his forward momentum turning at the last minute and landing on the floor and groaning.

"Why did you just drop your guard like that?" He groans.

"I'm good now."

"You're good already?" Magnus asks, surprise colouring his tone.

"Yeah, they're good," I reply easily.

"What the fuck was that?" Storm growls, his wings moving with agitation.

"You were right. I am going to get your team killed," I admit crossing my arms over my chest. "But not because I'm inexperienced and can't fight. Thank you for helping me."

I push past them all, knowing that they want a different explanation and also knowing that I can't fucking give it to them. They are going to want to know about my father,

though, and I'm not sure that I can keep that from them. I let too much slip myself.

"That's it, no other explanation?" Mayhem calls after me.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, taking the steps two at a time. I need to get a good look at the fucker who tried to kill me and find out who sent him.

"Why did your father give you a potion to suppress your gifts and stop your healing?" Rival asks, his orange eyes studying me closely.

"He likes control," I say shortly as we get to our room. I open the door to find Poca standing guard over the headless body.

"Good boy Poca!" I praise, reaching out my hand.

"Wait! Don't touch him. His fur will burn straight through your hand and down to the bone!" Storm warns me, a thread of panic in his voice that has us all staring at him in shock.

"It's okay, he doesn't burn me, but thank you for your concern," I smirk, making him scowl and the others grin.

"That's another thing. How the fuck do you have a familiar and a fucking hell hound at that?" Storm asks, obviously trying to distract us from his previous show of emotion.

"I don't know," I shrug, telling the truth, my fingers weaving through Poca's fur, "He showed up when I was three. He's been with me ever since."

"Three?" Mayhem asks, bright blue eyes suspicious. "I've only heard of familiars showing up early if their supernatural is under direct threat."

I shrug, not answering the hidden question that was in that statement.

Rival narrows his eyes on me. "I'm surprised that your father hasn't mentioned it. It definitely seems like something that he'd like to brag about."

I share a look with Magnus, who's been silently watching our interactions up until now. "He doesn't know. I'll leave you

to it, as always, Farren, check-in, please.”

“Got it,” I reply, walking around the body, looking for anything that could tell me who sent him. I fish around in his pockets, and the guys raise their eyebrows.

“What are you doing?” Reaper asks curiously.

“I’m trying to find out who sent him.”

“You mean it could have been more than one someone?” Loki asks, concern colouring his purple eyes and darkening them.

I scoff and decide not to answer that question. Finding nothing on the body, I walk over to the head and pick it up by the hair.

“Fucking hell, you are nothing like I thought,” Mayhem mutters.

“Huh?” I ask, not really paying attention as I study the head and, more specifically, his neck, “Son of a fucking cock sucking bitch, he didn’t!”

“Erm, what?” Loki asks, a broad grin on his face.

I growl, throwing the head on the floor. I can’t fucking believe he’d send someone to kill me, and I’m going to find out why he’s turned into a pussy assed cock sucker.

I flick my hand, and the body turns into dust, floating out of the nearest window and scattering in the wind. The head I leave.

“Whoa, how the fuck did you do that?”

“I don’t need words for my magic,” I mutter distractedly, my mind going a mile a minute. Why the fuck did he send one of his assassins after me?

“Everyone needs words to make their magic work, especially for a spell of that strength.” Mayhem points out.

Once again, I ignore him.

“You missed a bit.” Storm sneers, nodding to the head.

I stomp into my room, and aware that the guys are following me, I use a concealment spell to hide the weapons that would give away my identity and grab some of the others, including some holsters. I put two swords in the holster on my back, the pommels showing above my shoulders. I pull on a belt, tightening it and then sheath my knives in their holders. When I turn around, the guys are staring at me with shock written all over their faces.

“What are you doing?” Storm asks, a frown darkening his features.

“I’m getting ready to pay the guy who sent him,” I point to where the head is still sitting macabrely on the floor, “To kill me a visit.”

“No, you’re not.”

My whole body freezes at his command, a cold mask dropping over my features. I have been controlled my entire life, and I will not be controlled by him.

“Oh fuck, wrong thing to say, dickhead.” Rival mutters.

“I am, and there’s fuck all you can do to stop me,” I reply, my voice cold. I have searched for his signature many times over the last few months. Still, it’s only just become available to me again, which I’m hoping means that his home is no longer cloaked. Unfortunately, since I only travelled to it via the Void, I had no idea how to get there by traditional means, which means he’s been elusive to me for years now.

“The fuck there isn’t,” he growls in response.

I grin, calling the head to me. It appears in my hand as the Void opens up behind me. Storm’s face changes to panic, and I turn to walk through the portal that the Void has opened up behind me. As I step over the edge, two sets of hands grasp me, and my eyes widen. I look over my shoulder as the gateway closes behind us, and I sigh as I see the panicked looks on Rival and Loki’s faces.

“Fuck sake, whatever you do, do not fucking let go of me. I don’t have time to search the Void for you. Follow me and step where I step.” I order as we start to move forward. I keep my

senses acute as we move, the things that live in the Void tend to ignore me, but I have a feeling they'd be more than interested in the guys. They are powerful supernaturals.

“Got it.” Loki nods, his head moving up and down like a bobblehead.

“Couldn't get me to let go if you wanted me to.” Rival adds with a wary grin.

“Why is it so cold?” Loki asks curiously, his hand unclenching from my shirt and moving up my back, over my shoulder and down my arm so he can thread his fingers through mine. I look at him in shock, “It's easier than holding onto your t-shirt.”

Rival looks around me to see what Loki is talking about and grins. “Good idea.”

He does the same before pausing at my wrist, and I realise I'm holding the head of the assassin. Whoops, I completely forgot about that. I materialise a backpack on my back and magic the head inside; he raises his eyebrows as an impressed smirk tilts his lips before he threads his fingers through mine, and for the first time in my life, I find myself holding hands with two hot as fuck men. My heart flutters.

“It's the Void. The creatures here thrive in the cold and dark.”

“Creatures?” Rival asks.

“Yeah, don't they teach you guys that there are creatures in the Void?” I ask, surprised that there's a gap in their prestigious education.

“No, they don't.”

“Huh,” I reply eloquently, “Listen when we get there, just stay quiet. Okay, I've dealt with him before.”

“We're going to his haunt?”

“No, we're going to his house,” I grin.

“I'm sure that's going to go well,” Loki mutters sarcastically.

“Hold on, stepping out of the Void can be a bitch the first time,” I warn them as a glowing door appears in front of us.

“Whoa, that’s so fucking cool,” Rival grins.

“Remember, stay back and stay out of it. He will kill you in seconds,” I remind them.

I pull open the door and step through. As soon as I know that they’re completely out of the Void, I drop their hands and summon the head back into my hands, as well as my sword, it clangs against the one swinging for me in the dark, and we parry for a moment before I invoke a witch’s light and cast the room into the light.

“Killian!” I growl, and he stops dead, his eyes widening as he takes me in.

Relief colours his handsome features as he swipes his long black and silver hair behind his ear, his liquid silver eyes glowing with happiness. Instantly, he drops his sword and opens his deliciously muscled arms, arms that I’ve had wrapped around me more often than anyone else’s. I point my sword at him, and he raises his hands in defence, confusion in his eyes.

“Killian?” Rival mutters in shock, and Killian tenses as he studies the guys beside me. Recognition lights his eyes, and I frown.

A quick glance at them both shows that they are more on edge now than they have been the entire time.

“What’s going on?” Killian asks, his emotions locked down.

“Apparently a lot, but let’s start with the most important,” I lower my sword, putting it away and throwing the head at him. He catches it effortlessly, with no disgust or fear in his eyes as he turns it around and studies the face.

“Huh, it’s Larkin.” He mutters, “Why did you behead Larkin?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the guys share an astonished look. What the fuck is that about?

“Because he tried to kill me and got pretty fucking close, I had to go into the Void,” I growl.

His eyes become deadly as the embers within them start to glow, his tail whipping back and forth behind him agitatedly, the horns on his head sparking with his emotions. Rival and Loki step closer to me.

“I did not know that the hit was on you. You know I never would’ve let it go ahead otherwise,” he reassures me, his hard features softening enough that I can see the plea in his eyes.

“What the fuck?” One of the guys mutters under his breath.

Killian ignores them and opens his arms to me.

“Farren, don’t,” Rival warns, and I roll my eyes, making Killian grin.

I bury my head in Killian’s chest as he wraps his arms around me tightly, his face burying in my hair, even his tail wraps around my thigh.

“Where the fuck have you been, Kill? I couldn’t locate you?”

He pulls back. “You’ve been looking for me?”

“Of fucking course I have. Did you think I just abandoned you? We had a fucking pact Kill. One that you’ve clearly gone back on, judging from the fucking smell coming off of you.”

“Yeah, I did think that,” he mutters, and it breaks my heart.

“Never. Now come on.”

“Whoa, hold on, Darlin’. Where do you think you’re taking me?”

“To have a fucking shower, and to somewhere I can fucking make sure that you fucking take one and have a decent meal. Are you fucking kidding me, Kill?”

“Erm, Farren?” Loki says, and I step out of Kill’s arms and turn around, facing them.

Their faces are pale, and their eyes are not concealing their shock.

“Yes, Loki?”

“It might not be a good idea to bring Killian back.”

“He’s right, Darlin’ it’s probably not the best idea,” Kill adds.

I get a pang of intuition that this is somehow important, and I sigh.

“Tough, we made a promise to each other, and I’m following up on my end. So you’re coming with us. This is not up for debate,” I tell them, crossing my arms over my chest. We can get to the bottom of why the guys recognise Killian after he’s showered and eaten.

Loki and Rival open their mouths to argue with me, but they’re cut short as Kill comes up behind me, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“I know better than to argue with you. I’ve still got the scar from last time.”

Loki’s eyes widen, “Supernaturals don’t scar.”

“They do if you have the right weapons,” I mutter, opening the Void, Kill doesn’t let go of me, and I reach my hands out to Rival and Loki, who reluctantly take them, trying to stay as far away from Killian as possible. “This is going to be almost instant on the way back, and you’re probably going to get sick.”

I don’t wait for them to reply as I step through, pulling them all with me. As soon as we reach the other side, Rival and Loki let go of my hands and bend over their hands on their knees as they groan. Motion sickness from the Void is a bitch. Kill’s arm slips from around my waist as he steps back, shrouding himself in shadows in the corner of the room and effectively shielding himself from view. I have a second to wonder why before Storm is raging towards me, his eyes focused on me, Mayhem and Reaper close on his heels.

“What the fuck did you think you were doing?” Storm yells, a ball of flames spitting angrily between his horns, and I cross my arms over my chest. “Do you have any fucking idea how

dangerous it was to go after the person that sent that fucker to kill you?”

Apparently, the only emotion he's comfortable with showing is anger. Go fucking figure.

“He means we were really worried about you guys, and we're glad that you're okay,” Mayhem mutters, concern etched into all of his features. His hair is standing up on end like he's been running his hands through it, and when I glance around the apartment, it seems like Storm let his anger out on the room.

“Like hell is that what I fucking mean,” Storm growls, coming towards me. I tense as he reaches his hands out towards me.

I'm suddenly yanked back against a hard and familiar chest. Killian's tail wrapped around my leg, and a sword pointed at Storm's face. Storm comes to a halt instantly, all colour draining from his face as his eyes land on Killian.

“That's close enough, brother,” Kill says firmly, and my head snaps around to him.

“Brother?” I ask.

“What in the hell are you doing here, Killian? Actually, scrap that. How in the hell are you fucking here?”

“That's a long and complicated story,” Kill replies stoically.

My gaze snaps between him and the still silent Storm; now that they're in the same room, I can sort of see the resemblance, but it's only slight.

Kill chuckles, and all of the other's gazes widen in shock. What the fuck is that about?

“I'll explain, Darlin'. I had no idea that you two knew each other, or I would've told you a long time ago.” He tells me, kissing my neck, it's a familiar thing between us. We've actually never had sex, but we've come pretty fucking close a hell of a lot.

Chapter Six

A flash of anger and I could swear jealousy darkens Storm's eyes before he snuffs it out along with the fire ball between his black as night horns as he becomes emotionless again.

His face drops into a snarl as he opens his mouth, and I interrupt, "Oh no, whatever you have to say can wait until Kill's taken a fucking shower and had a hot meal."

I try to turn to move Killian back towards my room so he can shower, but he doesn't let me go, his arms tightening around me.

"Kill you've got let go, come on, you fucking stink. Get your ass in the fucking shower!" I order.

Storm's eyes cloud with worry at my words, and I have no fucking idea why.

"Yes, ma'am," he chuckles, unwinding himself from me.

"I'll order food; it'll be here when you're done. The shower is straight through there," I say, pointing towards my door.

As he turns to leave, my eyes move over his muscular form, and I admit I watch his tight ass as he walks away. Reluctantly pulling my gaze away, I focus back on the others; Reaper's mouth is literally hanging open, which would be comical if I knew what the big deal was.

No one says anything, and I decide to leave them to it and wait it out. I'm sure there's a whole heap of fucking questions coming; I can almost feel it. I walk over to the screen that Reaper used to order food before, and after a few moments of tapping the screen with no idea of what I'm doing, I finally find the menu and order all of Killian's favourites. I order extras for the guys as well, just in case they're hungry.

"Erm, Farren?" Loki starts, and I look up at him.

“Yeah?”

“How do you know Killian?” He asks, shooting a worried look at Storm, who is sitting in a chair facing my bedroom door, his emotions completely shut down.

“That’s a long story, and I think it might be better explained when Kill gets back out,” I reply, stalling. I’m not sure how much Kill will want me to share. Especially since they seem to have a shared history that I know nothing about.

Before any of them can protest, Poca appears in the middle of the room, making them all jump, and I smirk. It’s strangely satisfying to watch these dangerous big men jump at the sight of my hellhound.

“Fucking hell has he been here the whole time?” Rival asks.

“Nope, he just materialised in.”

“I have so many fucking questions, and I don’t understand anything that is going on right now.” Mayhem adds in.

I know I owe them an explanation after everything that they’ve seen or heard over the last couple of hours, but I barely know these guys. I know we’re a team, and that should usually come with some level of trust; however, normally, teams are excited to be together, and Storm fucking hates me, Mayhem doesn’t trust me, and I’m not sure of the others yet. I can’t share the darkest parts of my life with them, not until I trust them and they trust me. If Storm gets his way, he will have broken the bond long before that can happen.

I will give them the bare minimum I can get away with, and that’s it. If they don’t like it, then it’s fucking tough. I’m not putting myself at risk and exposing my secrets to them without complete trust on both ends.

I’m pulled out of my thoughts as my bedroom door opens, and out walks a shirtless Killian. I sigh; I will never fucking get tired of seeing all of his taut muscles on display. Seeing them reminds me of the last time I got up close and personal with them. My eyes collide with his sparkling ones, and I grin, looks like his mind went to the same place mine did. My eyes

dip and land on the scar over his heart, the one that I gave him and he's stupidly fucking proud of. I know it shouldn't, but it always makes me smile knowing that he carries around something that will always remind him of me. I carry the same one over my heart, thanks to him. I can feel the other's looks burning into the side of my face as they try to work out what the fuck is going on between us.

Killian strides towards the door, pulling it open before the server on the other side can knock and scaring the shit out of him in the process. He looks over the laden cart and sighs before glancing back over his shoulder at me.

"Little help, Darlin'?" He asks.

I grin and materialise all the plates on the coffee table in the middle of the lounge, my grin widening as Kill slams the door in the shocked server's face. He strides over to me, his tail whipping behind him and then sits as close to me as possible, swinging his arm over my shoulders and trying to pull me in close, much to the obvious shock of the guys who are once again just staring at Killian.

"Oh no you don't," I warn him, "eat first, and then you get cuddles. I'm still fucking pissed at you."

"Erm Farren, I don't think you should talk to him like that," Loki points out, looking uneasy and worried.

Killian's gaze snaps to Loki, a decidedly chilly edge to it now, "She can speak to me however she wants."

The guy's eyebrows hit their hairlines.

"Alright, clearly there is stuff going on here that I know fuck all about, and we'll get to that, but right now I need to see you eat something, Kill, I'm fucking mad at you."

His eyes connect with mine again, "I thought you'd left."

"Never," I vow.

I know it hit him hard when I didn't come back, not that I had a fucking choice, I tried, but I was blocked from using the Void to get to him. I thought he'd blocked me out. I also know that I'm going to have to reassure him of that for a long time

before he believes that I'll never voluntarily leave him. "I don't know why I couldn't get to you the last few years, but we will figure it out. After you eat."

"Okay, Darlin', I hear you," he picks up his plate and then smirks, "when we find the person responsible, what's the plan?"

"Oh, I think I might bring out my favourite weapon for this one."

"Want to play who makes the most slices in ten minutes, again?" He grins.

I chuckle, "Hell fucking yeah, I'm ready to defend my title."

"I can't take it anymore, Kill where the fuck have you been? You were supposed to come here with us, and then you disappeared with no warning. We had a fucking search party." Storm growls, anger ever-present, but there's a hint of something almost desperate in his tone.

"We were your best friends. You could have told us anything," Loki mutters, and I study them closely.

Some of their reactions make more sense now. They were once as close with Kill as they are with each other, not to mention that Storm is his brother.

"I had something more important to do," he replies between bites. His blunt tone makes the guys all frown. "Besides, there was no guarantee that we'd end up on the same team anyway."

My intuition starts to gnaw at me, "Wait, when was this?"

Kill stops eating, and his eyes meet mine, "Four years ago, thirteenth month, twenty-sixth day."

That was only a few months after we first met. The more I look into his eyes, the more certain I am that I was the reason or at least a part of it, but why? Why did he give up coming here with his brother and, from what I can tell, friends?

His mind brushes against mine, and I open a channel so we can speak without the others hearing.

“I will tell you, Darlin’, but I can’t yet. It’s not the right time.”

I study him closely; he has never lied to me, never betrayed me, and I trust him more than I trust anyone else; I nod.

“I trust you. I do have a request, though. I think you should enroll here now, I don’t want you out of my sight,” I practically plead, aware that it makes me sound needy as fuck but really not caring.

I don’t know why but I know that he needs to be here. It’s such an intense feeling that it’s almost making me panic.

“Are you two done making love eyes at each other?” Storms snaps.

Uh oh, Kill’s eyes move to the side to watch his brother before he leans closer to me and seals his lips to mine in a familiar and searingly hot kiss.

“Now I’m done,” he says with a wide smile, as he pulls back and eyes Storm, who’s so mad his horns are sparking, and his shadows are starting to gather.

I roll my eyes.

“Storm, calm down,” Rival warns.

“Are you staying?” Reaper asks, a thread of hope in his voice that lets me know that although they’re pissed at him and there are still things going on that I don’t know about, they all really missed him.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. I’m not the same person I used to be.” He replies.

“Because of her,” Storm sneers, his eyes on me, and no, I have no idea where he got that idea.

“No,” Killian snaps, the blue spark between his horns hissing slightly with anger, and Storm recoils, “for her.”

“What?” I ask.

“Darlin’,” he mutters, and I sigh.

“Fine, never mind.”

“I don’t understand?” Storm growls.

“And I can’t explain it to you yet.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Storm retorts, clearly getting frustrated with the short answers he’s actually getting.

“Oh, come on Storm, you know it means that he’s had a vision, and he can’t share it yet,” Reaper admonishes.

Storm sighs heavily, moving forward in his chair and placing his head in his hands.

“I know that. I’m sorry, man,” he says, his voice softer as he looks up at Kill, “I really fucking missed you,” he looks at me as if deciding whether he wants to say the next thing in front of me.

I decide I’ll make it easier on him and start to get up to give them all some privacy to catch up. Maybe that’s the reason that I’m here, it’s not to be on a team or even to escape my father, which is a nice perk, but it’s to bring them back together.

My stomach churns. There has to be a reason why Killian couldn’t be with them and me, so if it is my destiny to bring them together, does that mean I forfeit Killian?

Now I want to escape the room to run from my own wandering thoughts. Before I can get far though, Killian’s big palm lands on my thigh, and I look at him.

“You know almost everything about me. There’s nothing he could say that I wouldn’t tell you anyway.” Killian says softly, and again I receive perplexed looks from all of the guys.

“You’re different,” Reaper starts, “still as deadly as ever, or even more so actually, and you’re still a surly bastard but not with her. She brings out a side in you I don’t think I’ve ever seen, and I’ve known you since we were two.”

Killian just shrugs; clearly that’s not something he wants to explain right now.

“You were saying?” He prompts Storm.

“Our father,” he starts, and I interrupt.

“Oh shit yeah, if you’re brothers, that makes your father, King Lucien.”

“You really did tell her?”

“Of course I did. I told her everything, which is why, despite the spoiled barbs you have been throwing at her since she got here, she hasn’t done the same to you,” Killian replies, his voice hard.

I smack him on the chest, “How many fucking times have I told you not to dig around in my head like that? Do you want me to block you completely again? How long did you last?”

His eyes widen, “An hour; I only lasted an hour when you blocked me completely. No, I’m sorry I just wanted to see if they’d treated you well and if I need to do any damage.”

“What do you mean block you completely?” Loki asks curiously, he moves to sit on the other side of me, and I expect Killian to have a problem with it, but he doesn’t even bat an eyelid, even sharing a knowing grin with Loki.

I feel like Loki’s figured something out before the rest of us even realised that there was something to figure out.

“We can talk to each other in our minds and feel each other’s emotions and wellbeing if that makes sense.” Killian starts to explain.

“And we can block one or both of those, so if I chose, I could block him from feeling my emotions, but he could still hear my thoughts. It’s not pleasant, though. I’m so used to Kill being there that it feels like I’m missing a vital part of myself when I can’t feel him.”

“Wow, that’s pretty intense.” Reaper frowns.

“Yeah, it can be,” Killian admits and an amused look takes over his face. “Although in other situations, it’s fucking spectacular.”

“And that’s enough of that, dickhead.” I interrupt with a chuckle. “I really do think that you should enrol here.”

“Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. The waitlist is a mile fucking long.” His face falls serious again, “besides, Farren,

you know better than anyone that it would be incredibly dangerous for everyone else if I attended here. They'd not only have your enemies to contend with but mine as well."

"What does that even mean? How does she have enemies? She's the spoiled daughter of Magistrate Godfry." Strom spits.

"Who is a close personal friend of our fathers. What does that tell you about the kind of man he really is?" Killian growls back.

Storm just shakes his head in denial, gets up and storms back out of the room.

"Moving on," Rival mutters, "you actually could enrol here if you wanted to, Storm made them keep your place open, and since your test scores were so fucking high, they easily agreed."

I feel a flicker of indecision come through the channels, and instead of pushing, I let him work through it. It doesn't do anyone any good to push Kill; he just becomes even more stubborn.

"How long have you been here?" He asks me.

"This is my second day," I reply.

"And someone has already come for you." He mutters, not needing a reply.

"Killian, you can't tell me that this doesn't feel like where you're supposed to be," Reaper adds in, and the others nod.

It's clear that they want him here as much as I do.

Before Killian can reply, his eyes swirl the red and gold flames spinning into an inferno.

"Whoa, what's happening?" Loki asks.

"He's having a vision," I reply, confused as to why they don't know that.

"They never used to look like that," Rival explains, seeing my confused frown.

It only takes a couple of minutes for Kill to come out of, and he smirks, which is never a good sign, “Alright, I’ll stay. I might have to leave occasionally, the Crypt still needs me to run things occasionally, but Rhett has been taking over more duties the last few years since I was wallowing.”

“Crypt?” Storm mutters as he makes an appearance.

“Yeah.”

“They’re the deadliest and most feared sector of assassins. How are you even working for them before you’re twenty-five?” Rival asks.

“I’m not. I run them.”

Silence greets his statement, none of them knowing how to reply to that.

“We talk more later,” Loki grins, hopping up and then moving to stand in front of Killian. “Right now, I want you to enrol officially. I’m not risking you changing your mind again.”

“You’re staying?” Storm asks, his face back to being the stoic mask, and Killian just nods in response before focusing back on Loki. He stands with a smile and pulls Loki in for a hug, which seems to shock him.

“It’s good to see you again.” He mutters before stepping back.

“That’s quite a scar,” Mayhem points out.

“You can thank Farren for that,” he grins, and the guys turn to me.

“What he got me too,” I defend, pulling down my top slightly and showing them all the scar just above my left boob.

“Supernaturals don’t scar,” Storm growls.

“And yet I’m covered in them,” I retort. “Go put a shirt on, Kill. Let’s get you enrolled.”

“I think that’s the first time you have ever asked me to put a shirt on,” he says, as he strides into my room.

“Don’t get used to it!” I yell after him.

“You guys have an interesting relationship,” Reaper mutters, not so subtly fishing for information.

“Yeah, we do,” I reply. I don’t really know how to answer what he’s asking me. I don’t know what Killian and I are in relationship terms. I don’t even know if there’s a definition for what we are to each other. We’re more than friends, closer than lovers but not even lovers in the true sense of the word. I can tell you this though, he is mine, and I am his.

I stopped trying to figure it out a long time ago. Like many things, it is what it is.

“I see,” Reaper replies, even though I didn’t really say anything, and a sheen of sadness covers his eyes before he gets rid of it.

“We still need to know what happened in the gym,” Storm demands.

I sigh, he’s not going to let this go, and I guess that’s fair. I can answer this one thing I think, “My strongest gift is with the Void.”

“I guessed that. Why didn’t you tell the Headmaster, though, something to hide?” He replies snarkily.

“Yes, actually, I can use it in ways that no one before ever has. From what I can tell from my research, Void users do just that they use it like any gift. But for me it’s more than that, it’s a part of who I am. She shares more with me every time I use the Void to heal me, but it always comes at a price.” I explain, feeling nervous. This is the sort of information that they could use against me.

“What’s the price?” Reaper asks curiously.

“Two things,” Killian answers, coming out with an old t-shirt on and answering for me, “the first is pain; when it heals her, she feels everything, and from what she’s described, it feels like liquid fire running through her veins every single time.”

The others look at me in horror, and I shrug; I actually don't mind that. Pain I am more than used to. I can't tell them that now though. That would open a whole new can of worms.

Chapter Seven

“What’s the second?” Reaper asks.

But my attention is on Loki. His eyes are on me as if he’s trying to figure something out. I’m not sure whether I want him to or not.

“Control,” I answer this time, “when I come back from the Void, I’m filled with my power, my gifts completely replenished and released from the binds that I use to keep tight control of them. You saw what happened, I had to fight Magnus, Storm and Reaper to get complete control back, and that’s unusual. It normally takes a lot more.”

“That’s why you didn’t want to go in?” Reaper asks, and I nod.

I’m ready to get this conversation over and done with so that we can get Killian enrolled. There’s an urgent need that’s riding me hard to get it done sooner rather than later, but before I can make the suggestion, Loki strides over to me. He gently wraps his arms around me, which surprisingly doesn’t make me flinch and buries his head in my neck before taking a long inhale.

“Wha ...?” I start to ask, but he pulls back with a dark frown on his face that is so unlike the person that I’ve come to know over the last couple of days that I look to the others for reassurance, only to find them all looking at him just as shocked as I am. The fact that they also look slightly wary is worrying.

“Loki?” Reaper asks, a cautious note in his voice.

The others all step closer, I know I should be worried, but I’m not; I instinctively know that he would never hurt me. I’m more curious than anything. The guys, though, they clearly are worried, apart from Killian, who just stands back and watches this unfold like he knows something that we don’t. To be fair he could; visions are a bitch sometimes.

“Farren,” he starts, his voice betraying an inhuman growl to it that has the guys moving even closer, including Storm.

“Yes?” I reply, my voice steady.

“If the Void heals all your wounds whenever you enter it as you did earlier, then why do I still smell fresh blood?”

“Darlin’?” Killian asks, a thread of worry in his voice now, not because of Loki but because I might be hurt.

I decide it’s probably easier to show them, and I’m still wearing a sports bra anyway, so I quickly whip my shirt off and turn around, showing them the long score marks that mark my back.

“I fucking knew it,” Loki mutters, and I turn around, seeing the turmoil and, for some reason, indecision in his eyes.

“Fuck,” Storm hisses.

“What happened?” Reaper asks, concern darkening his features.

I look to Killian, needing some sort of sign that I should proceed with this and not just shut them down; he nods with a gentle smile. That’s all the reassurance I need, at least to tell them this.

“Erm, well, from the couple of things that I let slip when I was stabbed ...”

Loki and Killian growl at the same time at my words, and I ignore them both. I also ignore that I found the sound of their combined growls stupidly fucking hot. Loki’s growl turns into a confused frown, and I look away, I guess I’m not as good at hiding my emotions around these men as I am everyone else.

“As I was saying, you have probably realised that my father is not a great one.”

“He did this to you?” Storm seethes, and once again, we all look at him, slightly shocked at the amount of anger he has on my behalf.

“Yes,” I reply shortly.

“Are you not healing because of that potion he gave you?” Rival asks, proving he was listening before.

“No, that burned out of my system when I went into the Void. Father spelled the wounds on my back to heal extremely slowly, and he used dark magic to do it. They won’t heal for a long time yet. Not even the Void can do it.”

“That’s fucking insane. Why would he do that to you?” Rival asks.

“Because he’s psychotic, he likes control and more importantly, he likes hurting me,” I reply blandly.

“So you’re just going to carry on bleeding and being in pain until it heals?” Loki asks, his voice slightly strangled.

“Yeah, but it’s okay, I’m used to it, and I won’t cause any issues for you guys. I think I proved that I could still fight well enough in combat and weapons class.” I try to reassure them.

“You think we’re worried because your injuries might cause issues for us?” Storm asks incredulously before he shakes his head and starts to pace, muttering curses.

I look at the others, and seeing my confusion, Killian takes over, “Darlin’, they’re upset because you’re hurt, and they don’t like that, not because they’re worried that you will cause problems for them.”

I wrinkle my nose in confusion, “Huh?”

“Oh Farren,” Rival mutters a myriad of emotions in his voice that I can’t even begin to decipher.

“You’ll see,” Kilian mutters cryptically and kisses me on the forehead.

I stopped questioning him, and his little cryptic comments after it became apparent that he wouldn’t tell me anything more. He actually can’t, or he risks messing with the timeline and that causes catastrophic consequences.

“Can I try something?” Loki asks, his voice quiet but determined.

“That depends on what it is. There isn’t much I won’t try.” I reply, making it sound deliberately dirty and trying to get him to smile, he hasn’t smiled since this conversation started, and I don’t like it. I miss his smile.

His lips tick up slightly as the other’s grins grow wide.

“I want to see if I can heal you.” He mutters in a rush.

“What?” Reaper exclaims in hushed shock.

Even Storm’s face is portraying his utter shock, and I know I’m missing something massive, especially since Killian has the same look on his face. I also sense that this needs to happen. That annoying little flare of intuition rears its head again, and I never ignore my intuition. For some reason, I don’t think that their shock is because vampires aren’t supposed to have the gift of healing. In fact, I haven’t heard of a single vampire having that gift, but something that I’m beginning to learn about these men though is that they are all so much more than they seem. They each have that something that’s a little bit different and just extra. I decide that bringing up my shock that he has the gift to heal will be counterproductive here, especially since there’s something else going on, so I just reply instead.

“Sure.” I reply, with a nonchalance that doesn’t fit the current tone of the room, “but don’t be surprised if you can’t, even the Void can’t counteract it, and it has brought me back from the very brink of death.”

He nods once, his eyes filled with determination and motions me towards the couch.

“I need to see all of the wounds, sorry,” he mutters, and I shrug; grabbing my discarded shirt, I hold it up to my chest and then take my sports bra off before lying down on the couch.

It suddenly occurs to me that I trust him. It’s a new and quite alarming realisation. My instincts have never steered me wrong, not so long as I’ve been listening to them, so I try to calm my heart. I turn my head to the side so that I can see Loki. None of the others have moved an inch as if worried

about frightening him or something and my curiosity roars to life. He stands there staring at my exposed back, and I swear I can feel the apprehension coming off him and something that is akin to profound sadness. That should be impossible though, I have only ever been able to feel Killian's emotions, but I know that these feelings aren't coming from him or me. Following a hunch, I send a flood of warmth and reassurance towards him, in a similar way that I send feelings towards Killian.

He jolts, and his eyes snap up to mine, widening in wonder. Well holy shit, I guess that answers that question. I watch as he takes a deep breath and then stalks towards me with determination etched into his handsome features. He kneels down next to the couch and then holds his hands just above my back, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from them.

"I haven't done this for a really long time," he says softly, "so if it does work, it won't be completely healed."

"If you manage even to heal it a small amount, I'll be grateful." I reply before deciding to be completely honest with him, "It hurts like a bitch."

"I never would've known that you've been in pain," Reaper mutters quietly as he moves into my eye line.

I shrug awkwardly since I'm lying down, "As I said, I'm used to it."

"I hate that." Rival mutters.

"Just lie still, and I'll try my best to heal it at least a little bit," Loki mutters, and I nod, closing my eyes to prepare myself for the pain that is sure to follow if he does heal me. It hurts having things stitch themselves back together.

Loki

take a moment just to breathe as she closes her eyes. I don't know what made me offer to heal her. Actually, that's a lie; I

I can't stand the thought of her being in pain, especially when there might be something that I can do about it.

"You okay?" Reaper asks quietly, coming up behind me.

I nod in response. I'm not sure what will come out of my mouth, if I'm honest. They all know what a big deal it is for me even to offer to heal someone; they all know what happened last time. Dark thoughts try to swarm my mind and drag me into a place that I refuse to go, but before they can sink their taloned hands into me, a small hand on my face has my eyes snapping open and colliding with Farren's black and teal ones. I was so absorbed in fighting off my own thoughts that I hadn't even noticed that she moved.

"It's okay. Loki, you don't have to heal me, It'll heal up on its own fairly soon, and then I'll be as good as new." She reassures me with a soft smile.

She's only been here for two days, and somehow she already notices when I'm having trouble with something. I don't know how but I do know that there is no way that we can break the bond between us, the spear has never been wrong, and Storm is just going to have to get used to the fucking idea.

"I'm okay. I want to try." I tell her honestly.

She studies me for a minute, making sure that I'm telling her the truth. Once satisfied, she lies back down.

Right, enough stalling. As she said, it probably won't work anyway, but I've just got this inkling that I should try. I hover my hands over her back, being careful not to make contact and hurt her and focus on my gift. It has been a decade since I used it even a tiny amount, and I did think that because of that, it would take some convincing to coax it forward. I couldn't have been more wrong. It rushes towards me with all the exuberance of a puppy, and I can't help but smile at the feeling of peace and joy that consumes me at being connected with my magic again. As I have always done, I direct the gift into my hands and then open my eyes, unsure of when I shut them. I get a flare of panic when I see that my hands are glowing

brightly, gold and green magic swirling around them. That has never happened before. I start to pull back, not wanting to hurt her more, but a reassuring nudge from my magic keeps my hands in place.

“Loki?” Storm asks, a thread of worry in his voice that no one who hadn’t known him for years would be able to hear.

He can act like he hates Farren all he fucking wants, but the truth is he doesn’t, and that terrifies him.

“It’s okay,” I reply, not daring to take my eyes off of my hands.

I can feel them all shuffling nervously around me, but I need to focus on what I’m doing. I don’t have time to reassure them. My eyes widen as a rush of power, more potent than I have ever felt before, flows through me and into Farren, healing her wounds in an instant.

“What the fuck?” Mayhem mutters.

“Whoa, that felt fucking fantastic. I have never been healed, and it not hurt before.” Farren mutters before sitting up and flinging her arms around me in a hug.

My arms instantly wrap around her and hold her tight as my power fizzles through my veins happily.

“I don’t understand,” Kill mutters, and I glance over at him, Farren still in my arms, “have you been practising?”

“No, that’s the first time I’ve used my gift since ...” I trail off, , they all know when I last used it; they were there.

“Erm, I hate to interrupt, but in my haste to thank you, I sort of forgot that I was topless,” Farren mutters, and I tense slightly as the guys all turn heated gazes towards her.

Oh yeah, we are definitely fucked.

My eyes flicker to her sports bra and top, discarded on the floor by the couch.

“Oh, er,” I start, praying that my attraction to her doesn’t become more noticeable.

Killian chuckles, no doubt guessing my predicament and grabs a throw from off the back of the couch, laying it over her shoulders, smacking his tail away when it tries to sneak under the blanket and makes her giggle.

“There you go, Darlin’. I’m sure the others will be gentlemen and avert their eyes as you get yourself sorted.”

She turns her head, her eyes narrowing at Kill, “I notice that you didn’t include yourself in that.”

“Nothing I haven’t been lucky enough to see before,” he smirks, and I’m surprised to find that instead of jealousy, I have a swirl of curiosity in my gut.

“We’ll look away,” Storm mutters before adding pointedly, “all of us.”

Killian gives a knowing grin that I remember all too well before he looks away, and my eyes move to the ceiling so Farren can cover herself. That grin means that he knows something that we don’t.

I find their relationship shocking and intriguing. Even before he left, Kill was hard, never let anyone close and was utterly ruthless in the way he dealt with everything. It doesn’t surprise me in the slightest that he is now running the most deadly group of assassins the fae realm has ever seen, even though he is only twenty-four and shouldn’t be anywhere near those missions yet.

What is surprising though, is the way that he interacts with Farren. He gravitates towards her, adjusting his body if she moves to a different part of the room, and I’m not even sure he realises he’s doing it. More shockingly is that he lets her boss him around and talk to him in a way that I know people have been wounded for in the past. It’s abundantly clear that he is head over heels in love with her and that she is entirely unaware of it or the power that she truly holds over him. I have this nagging feeling that it won’t be long until we all follow in his footsteps, and I’m not sure whether that will make us stronger as a warrior team or be the death of us.

The only thing that doesn't worry me is that we all seem to be developing feelings for her, even Storm, although I know he's going to fight it for as long as he can, the stubborn bastard. Multiple partner relationships are normal in our society as they are in most of the realms apart from the Earth realm. They seem to have classed it as something unusual.

"I'm done," Farren announces, interrupting my thoughts, and I glance down at her. "Thank you so much for healing me."

"Of course," I reply. My mind is still trying to pull the dark thoughts forward, but strangely enough with my magic coursing through my veins again and Farren standing as proof in front of me that I healed her, I'm finding it a lot easier to push them back.

"I'm surprised you haven't asked him about his healing gift, considering vampires don't have the gift. You just accepted that he could do it," Rival points out, curiosity burning in his tone.

She smiles, "I may not have known you guys for very long at all, but I do know that you are all more than the standard supernaturals. The fact that it only took two of you to spar with me for me to gain my control back was proof enough, and I don't even know what Reaper is." She starts, and he opens his mouth before she interrupts, holding her hand up, "I'm not asking. I sense you aren't ready to share that with me yet, and that's more than okay. Tell me when you are or don't. Either way is good with me."

"Thank you," Reaper replies.

"Alright, enough sucking up to Trouble," Storm, the grumpy bastard, mutters, "let's get Kill enrolled and find out what team he's going to be with."

Kilian lets out a long sigh, and I furrow my eyebrows. Not sure what it's about, but Farren apparently knows him better than we do though because she pats him on the chest and smiles up at him.

“They’ll be fine without you. We can go back and check on them regularly.” She tells him as he lays a hand over hers holding it to his chest.

“You’re right. You should come. I know they’d like to see you all again. I do need to go back and see if I can get Rhett to look into how one of my assassins got sent after you.” He finishes with a growl.

Chapter Eight

Farren

“**W**hat are you guys muttering about?” Loki asks curiously.

“Crypt. As I said, I run it. I can’t do it from here, but my second in command can take over in my absence. I’ll still have to return occasionally though. The assassin that came after Farren was one of mine, but I didn’t issue the order. So, I need to go back and see how that happened and if there are more that we need to be aware of.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Mayhem asks, a concerned frown on his face.

“Just be on the lookout, and I’d suggest keeping some weapons up here. The people after me are extremely well trained. They managed to get through the so-called stellar security here at the academy.” I point out.

Storm snorts, and everyone ignores him.

“We can do that,” Reaper readily agrees before he narrows his eyes at Killian, “are you sure you want to enrol here? It seems like Crypt needs you. We all know that it’s not a small group of assassins you’re running.”

The others shoot him warning looks, but Reaper just keeps his gaze steadfastly on Killian.

Killian sighs heavily, and I see disappointment cross the other men’s features. “As much as a part of me would like to stay in the shadows and run Crypt, it’s out of my control, and this is where I need to be for now. This is how it was always meant to be,” he finishes cryptic as always.

“Even with the trouble it will cause with your father?” Mayhem asks.

“It’ll be worth it,” Killian replies with finality, his eyes on me.

“Right, that settles it then. Let’s go and get you enrolled, let the spear choose who your team is and then get on with the day.” Storm orders.

“Er mate, all lessons are over for the day,” Rival calls after him, and he pauses his hand on the door. He shakes his head and then pulls it open, stomping through it and expecting us to follow.

“I knew you were going to be fucking trouble,” I hear him mutter and raise my eyebrow.

“How in the fuck is this my fault?”

“Well, the guy was here to kill you,” Loki points out with a shrug.

“Well, cheers, dude,” I grumble, and he grins, swinging an arm around my shoulders as we follow a still cursing Storm.

“You know I’m only joking,” he replies.

“I know, and it is true, so I can’t really get mad.”

“Where does Poca go when he’s not here?” Rival suddenly asks.

“I don’t actually know. He just shows up when he feels like it and then disappears when he gets bored. He’s always there when I need him though.”

“Huh, that’s interesting. Have you asked him?”

“I used to bug him about it all the time, but he never gave me an answer, so I stopped asking,” I reply as we get to the Headmaster’s office and Storm pushes his way inside without knocking.

“Storm, I’m surprised to see you here. I’m afraid I haven’t had any of my contacts get back to me about breaking the bond yet,” the Headmaster apologises and all of the men surrounding me tense.

When it comes to the others, I’d like to think that it’s because they don’t want the bond broken, at least not

anymore, but I know for sure that Storm's tense shoulders are because he wants me gone as soon as fucking possible.

"You want to break the warrior bond?" Killian growls as he moves from the back of our group and out of sight of the Headmaster to confront his brother, his tail whipping out and smacking Storm.

"Killian?" The Headmaster exclaims, his tone shocked.

Killian completely ignores him as he crosses his arms over his broad chest and stares down at his brother. Who surprisingly looks slightly uncomfortable as he rubs the spot on his stomach where Kill's tail got him, before the sneer I'm used to seeing when he talks about me darkens his features.

"She's a liability," he growls, knowing full well that he can't exactly call me inexperienced anymore.

Not after he's seen me fight and behead someone.

"You are so wrong, brother," Killian shakes his head, looking disappointed, and Storm inflates, getting ready to retort as his horns start to spark with his emotions. Well, the only emotion he shows anyway, anger.

"Enough," Reaper growls, and surprisingly they both back off as the Headmaster just looks on curiously and somewhat shocked.

"We're here to get Killian enrolled," Loki grins happily, flashing fang and completely unaffected by the little showdown the brothers just had.

"Of course," the Headmaster grins, gesturing for us to go into his office. "As requested, we kept his space open."

"Thank you," Killian replies with an easy-going grin on his face, a stark contrast to Storm's scowling one.

"My pleasure. For what it's worth, I do think that your brother is right. She's untrained, spoiled and not worthy of a team such as theirs." The Headmaster warns him.

My heart sinks to the soles of my feet. It's starting to get really fucking hard, hearing that all the damn time. Killian's face turns cold as his eyes flash with deadly intent. His fingers

start to spark, and I know he's seconds away from brutally murdering the Headmaster.

"Kill," Reaper mutters, a warning in his tone.

I dart forward and grasp his arm just as he starts towards the entirely oblivious Headmaster. His dark and penetrating gaze snaps down to me.

"As much as I have fantasised about killing the bastard myself, you really can't. It's okay Kill, we know differently." I try to get him to stand down.

"Fine," he growls, a distinctive darkness to it that has the Headmaster finally glancing up.

As soon as his eyes land on Killian, he pales at his evident anger, which is made more terrifying by the grin Killian gives him. Even the guys start to look wary.

"I would suggest that you refrain from insulting Farren. It would also be in your best interest to put a stop to any of your enquiries regarding severing their bond. They won't be needing it." Killian threatens.

The Headmaster's eyes flash with anger, "Now listen here, boy, your father may be the king, but in this academy, I rule. Don't forget that I am more experienced than you are and could take you out in an instant."

Killian's responding chuckle is low and dark, one I recognise all too well.

"Ah fuck," I mutter, and the others shoot me worried looks.

It takes seconds for Killian to have the Headmaster pinned to the wall, a menacing smile on his face and the sharp point of his tail to the Headmaster's neck.

"How in the hell," Reaper starts.

"Shouldn't someone stop him?" Loki asks although mischievous amusement is still dancing in his eyes.

"Don't worry, he won't kill him; he's just got a point to make," I mutter, my eyes on Killian so that I can intervene the second that changes.

“And you’d know that how?” Storm sneers.

“That’s not his killing smile,” I reply snarkily. I’m done with his fucking attitude.

Storm opens his mouth to retort, but Killian starts to speak, and we all focus on that instead.

“Make no mistake, Sir,” he spits, “I could take you out before you even realised what was happening. I asked nicely, and now I’m telling you, or as Farren said, next time I’ll be wearing my killing smile.”

He waits until the Headmaster nods his agreement, awkwardly since he’s still got Kill’s tail to his throat and the angry demon towering over him, and then Killian unceremoniously lets go, letting the Headmaster fall to the floor in a heap.

Killian stands there, waiting for him to get up. As the other men just watch him cautiously, slightly on edge. I’m guessing Killian wasn’t quite as trigger-happy when they knew him.

When the Headmaster is standing again, Killian’s whole posture switches back to deceptively easy going, and he eyes him warily.

“Right, now that’s sorted, let’s get me enrolled.” He grins, and I smirk as the guy’s mouth drops open at the change in Kill.

“If you think I’m going to enrol you after that, you are deluded.” He croaks, trying to regain some of his composure.

“Huh, well. I’m already enrolled, and as far as a team goes,” he looks back at me and motions to the spelled display case that holds the spear, “Farren, Darlin’, would you mind?”

I sigh heavily and flick my hand, dissipating the spell and unlocking the case. I told the Headteacher only two of my gifts. The other two I decided to keep to myself for obvious reasons, they’re rare, and I shouldn’t have more than two gifts. My Void gift is fairly self-explanatory, but my other gift is even rarer. I’ve only found the term in a few ancient textbooks. I’m what’s known as a weaver. It was my last gift to show up and my most complicated, I have barely scratched the surface

of how it works, but from the textbooks, it seems that I can create and blend my own spells, hence the weaver part. Which probably explains why I can cast spells without the help of words. I haven't explored that side of the gift, but I have explored the reverse. I can also pull the complex threads of a spell apart and dissipate it. Some are too strong for me, like the spell my father used to make my wounds last, but the spell guarding the case was surprisingly easy to dissipate, almost as if it wanted Killian to take the spear. It wouldn't surprise me; the fates are clearly at play here, especially if Kill's been given a vision.

"Thank you," he smiles, knowing full well that he's dropped me in hot water as everyone stares at me in shock, including the Headmaster.

Killian strides over to the case and opens it up, reaching in and grasping a hold of the spear. As it did with me, it instantly glows brightly before it dims as it reveals a name.

"So?" Storm asks, apprehension flashing in his eyes briefly.

"Looks like I'm on your team, brother," Killian replies, turning the spear to show the Headmaster and the rest of us.

I never really doubted that he would be, if I'm honest.

The Headmaster starts to stutter but panics when Killian just grins and throws the spear at him to catch. It's an ancient and priceless artefact, and even I hold my breath as I wait for him to catch it. He smirks as the Headmaster fumbles with the spear and then turns on his heel and leaves, all of us following him, not wanting to stick around for the explosive rant that's likely to come out of the Headmaster's mouth next.

We are soon clear of the room and walking the hallways, passing a few students who study us all curiously until their eyes land on Kill and then the rest of us are promptly forgotten. The son of the king reappearing after an apparently long disappearance is a big deal. At least, I imagine it is for some of the students. For the rest, they're probably just as enthralled by his rugged looks as I am.

“What the hell was that?” Rival asks, his gaze moving to me.

Before I can answer though, Kill interrupts.

“He shouldn’t have insulted her,” he answers with a shrug, deliberately misunderstanding that the question was for him.

“Not that. I was seconds away from doing it myself,” Rival replies, shocking the hell out of me.

It was only yesterday that they all wanted me gone.

“I was talking about what Farren did,” he continues.

“Not here,” Kill replies, seriously looking around at all the other students in the halls and making the others frown.

“Good point,” Rival reluctantly replies as he speeds up, trying to get to our room quicker.

“You know the news of your return will have made it to father by dinner time,” Storm points out, glancing at Killian.

He tenses at the mention of his father, and I fucking hate it. His father may be the king, but he rivals my own in his cruelty. At least there was always some tiny shred of hope that I could get out, Killian and I guess Storm, too, had no fucking chance. No one would be willing to go against the king. Except for me, of course, but I’m biding my time, and that’s just a vague notion at the moment, not even an idea. It’s there though, hovering in the back of my mind, ready to turn into a possibility as soon as I give it enough attention. For now, it can stay where it is.

“I know, but we can do nothing about it.” His face is stern as he looks at Storm, “unlike when I left, he will find me incredibly difficult to control. I have no problem using my unique set of skills to defend those I care about or myself.”

“Careful brother, it only takes one wrong person to hear you speak like that,” Storm cautions, worry coating his every word.

“I am aware,” Kill replies simply.

We unlock the door to our rooms and all spread out around the living room. Rival is practically bouncing in his seat, and I raise my eyebrow at him in curiosity.

“I can’t hold it in any longer. What the hell was that, Farren?”

I grin at his complete lack of patience before deciding to put him out of his misery, “I’m a Weaver.”

“No fucking way!” He exclaims while the others look between us, confused.

“Never heard of it,” Storm grumbles, crossing his tattooed arms over his barrel chest and staring at me unwaveringly.

“Me neither,” Loki adds.

“Why wasn’t it listed as one of your gifts?” Mayhem asks before his eyes widen as he realises something, and he continues without giving me the chance to answer, “wait, you have four gifts?”

“Erm yeah,” I reply somewhat meekly. I’m not used to admitting it out loud.

“I imagine that was one of the reasons she didn’t have it listed,” Rival starts moving to the edge of his seat, as something like excitement dances in his bright orange eyes. “The other reason, of course, is that Weavers are extremely rare. There hasn’t been one for centuries. They died out a few decades before all of the Soulmate Bonds started disappearing.”

“Wow,” Loki mutters, looking at me with something akin to shocked awe, before he wrinkles his nose in confusion, “wait, what’s a Weaver?”

“I actually don’t know much about them,” I admit, “I could only find a few brief mentions of the power in the books that my father had, and he has quite an extensive collection.”

“Did he tell you what your gift was called then?” Loki asks.

“It’s always surprised me that your father knows of your Weaver gift and hasn’t tried to exploit it.” Kill mentions casually, and I frown, “what?”

“He didn’t tell me. He doesn’t know about my Void or Weaver gifts.”

“Well, how did you know what your gift was then?” Mayhem asks.

“The same way I always know, the voice tells me when it emerges.”

“The what?” Rival frowns.

“I told you she was fucking batshit crazy.” Storm grins.

I frown heavily. I don’t get what the problem is here. “I don’t understand?”

They all share a look, and Rival sighs taking the lead, “Just to clarify, every time one of your gifts has emerged, you’ve heard a voice that tells you what your gift is called?” I nod, and he continues, “what does it sound like?”

“A female voice. I have never got a bad feeling from it. Why, what do your voices sound like?”

“We haven’t heard voices, Darlin’. When we got a gift, we had to ask our parents or tutors what they were. As does everyone else,” Kill says carefully, watching me closely.

I pause as I take that in and study their expression to ensure they aren’t just trying to mess with me. They all look deadly serious, and I begin to wish I kept my mouth shut. The problem is that I am very isolated despite my father being a man in power. I didn’t know it wasn’t normal.

Storm’s snigger only makes my sinking feeling grow worse, and I start to contemplate keeping everything to myself in the future, just in case I prove to be even more weird than I know myself to be already. Loki reaches behind Mayhem and smacks Storm on the back of the head, responding to his glare with one of his own.

“Don’t shut down.” Killian orders, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“He’s right. Please don’t pull away from us now. I’m sure there’s a reason for it. I’ve only known you for two days, and I can already see that there’s something special about you.”

Rival replies sweetly, and Loki preemptively smacks Storm before he can say anything to spoil the moment.

I snort out a very unflattering laugh, “There’s nothing special about me, but I appreciate the sentiment. The truth is it’s probably some sort of trauma response.”

A resounding and combined growl echoes throughout the room, the ferocity and inhuman nature of it sending a shot of adrenaline through my veins and making me grin. God, I love that sound. I probably shouldn’t, it should probably scare me, but my flight or fight responses have always been a bit iffy.

Killian smirks, as he recognises my response to their combined growl and shakes his head, amusement dancing in the depths of his burgundy eyes. He knows me too well; I wink at him as the guys get themselves under control and Rival turns the conversation back to me and my weird voice.

Chapter Nine

“Have you heard the voice at any other time?” Rival asks.

“Nope,” I reply quickly, not wanting to sound crazier than I already do.

Killian raises one eyebrow at me in question, “Farren,” he warns lazily.

I grimace; it kind of sucks having someone around who knows me well enough that he can call me out on my bullshit.

“You guys really do know each other well, don’t you?” Storm asks, his ever-present frown deepening even further.

“Yes,” Kill replies simply, smirking when the lack of any other information clearly annoys Storm, which is no doubt what Kill intended to do.

I feel like they are brewing for one hell of a fucking fight, and I decide to intervene before that happens in the dorm room, and we end up with the place destroyed. You don’t have to know them particularly well to know that if they came to blows, no one would be able to stop them. I plan to avoid that or at least make sure they’re in a place that they can’t damage and just hope that they don’t kill each other in the process of working out their hurt.

“Yes, I have heard it since developing my gifts. Only one other time though, a couple of years ago, and it saved my life.” I admit reluctantly.

“What!?” Killian barks, sitting up straight, his eyes flashing. “When was this?”

“A lot happened in those years that I couldn’t fucking get hold of you,” I hiss back.

A flood of emotions fills me as my mind tries to drag me back. All consuming fear, anger, pain, desperation, and finally,

defeat. I was so fucking close to giving in. Killian's face becomes enraged, and he stalks towards me, pulling me off the couch, picking me up and settling back down with me on his lap as he buries his face in my hair and his tail wraps around my waist tightly. His reaction is too strong for him just to be reacting to my words, and I realise that my emotions must have leaked through the connection to him. The others are all watching us curiously, all of them concerned apart from Storm, who looks entirely indifferent to the whole situation as he leans back on the couch and looks, for all intents and purposes, relaxed as fuck.

As my eyes land on Loki, I become confused. He looks absolutely devastated, and a dark rumble starts in his chest, growing with intensity.

“Whoa, what’s wrong with you?” Reaper demands, studying him closely.

Killian tenses beneath me, kisses my neck and then quickly plops me on the lap of a very shocked Rival, I start to scramble to get off, but his arms tighten around me.

“Just let me hold you for a second,” he mutters barely above a whisper, “I can’t explain it.”

I take a second to check in with myself and to see if I’m okay with this. I’m not used to anyone holding me apart from Kill, but surprisingly I feel as safe and comforted in Rival’s arms as I do in Kill’s. It’s a weird feeling, but I relax into his arms.

“Loki, can I have a word?” Kill says firmly, not giving him much of a choice as he strides over to him and pulls him away from the rest of us and into Loki’s room. Before he goes through the door, he looks back at me, “this isn’t over. I want to know what happened.”

I scowl at his demand. Which he, of course, ignores and then drags a still growling Loki through the door.

Killian

I cross my arms over my chest as I block Loki from exiting the door and watch him pace the room, trying to get himself under control. I have a feeling I know what's going on, but I don't want to mention it until I know for sure that's what is happening. I want to know what Farren meant. The flood of emotions she accidentally sent me through the bond almost brought me to my knees. I need to know who I have to kill. Before I can do that though, I need to see if my suspicions are correct about Loki's behaviour, which needs to happen now; it can't wait.

His deep growl continues as he paces, his fangs elongating even further as he threads his fingers through his blood red hair and pulls it harshly, still pacing. I give him the space to calm down. There's no point trying to talk to him when he's like this, and if he felt even a fraction of what I did, then he's going to need to get his vampire side under control. The last thing we need is for him to go feral.

When a vampire goes feral, they lose all reasoning, their minds are completely taken over by their base instincts, they kill indiscriminately, and there's nothing that can bring them back. They become even more deadly because they run purely on animalistic instinct, and they get stuck in their bloodlust. Part of the point of the academy is to train the students to deal with the feral vampires; amongst other things, we are the defence against all threats, feral vampires, rogue fae, any supernatural who's terrifying the population or stepping out of line and going against the laws that were made to try to protect the individual species that reside here and maintain peace, we're the ones that are called to take out the threat. If there's another war, we'll be on the frontlines. The academy trains killers who police the realm. Of course, some high-up officials get away with more than most, Farren's father and my own being two of the worst. The system is broken.

Back to vampires, they cannot be allowed to wander free and are notoriously difficult to contain. Death is their only option. Extreme torture or emotional turmoil can cause the switch, and often when a vampire loses its true mate, that can cause them

to go feral as well. Of course, true mates are supposed to be a myth now, much like Centre Bonds were supposed to be, and yet, I've received good intel that a Centre and her Bonded have just started at the Blood Moon academy and are causing a stir. Things are changing, and I feel like the fates are gearing up for something big. Which is a pretty fucking terrifying thought in itself, but if my precog gift is to be believed, then we play a part in it, and that scares me to my fucking core.

My eyes never leave Loki as he continues to struggle to get a hold of his vampire side and pull himself back from the edge.

I can't believe I'm back here surrounded by my best friends; I knew this was where we were going to end up, but after I lost all contact with Farren a few years ago and couldn't find her, I thought something had gone amiss, that someone had irreparably damaged the strings that fate had woven, I got no warning, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't get even a tiny vision on Farren. Those few years were hell, and not because I thought it meant I wouldn't be back with my family like the fates had shown me all those years ago, but because I had no idea whether she was okay. In fact, I was pretty confident that she wasn't. Farren has never been entirely safe, her father is an abomination, and there is nothing I would like more than to end him in the most imaginative and brutal way that I can come up with and considering my vast experience in all things torture and my very active imagination I could make his death last for weeks.

Unfortunately, there are things at play that mean I cannot follow through on it, not yet. He has forces protecting him at the moment that would make it practically impossible, and he's been dabbling in magic that should never have seen the light of day again. Farren has no idea how deep his evil truly runs, but thanks to my gift, I know she will soon.

Finally, the room quiets. Loki is still pacing, but his growling has stopped, and his fangs have retracted back to their usual length, still much more pronounced than my own teeth, but he's not in attack mode now. Loki in attack mode is a force to reckon with, more so than usual vampires. Farren was correct in her assessment earlier; all of these men are far

more lethal than they should be. Add in their extra talents and, in some cases, their rarity, and that makes them a deadly and formidable group. Which is a good fucking job because if the future I see comes to fruition, she's going need us all. I just hope we're enough.

"Talk to me?" focusing back on Loki, I say the exact words I always used to say to him when he started to spiral or got lost in his head when we were younger.

None of us have had easy lives due to one thing or another, and it's something that instantly bonded us.

At my words, he stops pacing and just stares at me. "What the fuck was that? I swear I could feel all of these dark and devastating emotions. I haven't felt anything like that for years, it was like an echo of how I felt in the past, but they weren't my emotions."

"They were Farren's," I state bluntly, my tail moving behind me agitatedly. There's no point in tip-toeing around it. "It's the start of the Bond forming. It's my guess that when you overcame your fear and healed her that you triggered it." There's no need to tell him just how profound the Bond truly is, now is not the time for that information to be shared.

He sits down heavily on the end of his bed and runs his hand through his hair again. He's done it so much in the last few minutes that it's sticking up all over the place.

"I'm assuming that you aren't talking about the normal Warrior Bond that we get when the spear chooses your team?" he asks.

I raise my eyebrow at him and cross my arms over my chest, "Does it feel like the Warrior Bond?"

He gives me a dry look but replies anyway, "No, it's like a completely separate Bond that sits alongside the Warrior Bond. They're both there, but they feel completely different." He tries to explain, frowning as he focuses on them both.

"Exactly, they are completely separate things."

"So I'm Bonded to Farren like you are?" he asks, with more than a slight glint of hope in his eyes.

“You’re at an earlier stage than we are, but yes. This kind of Bond needs to be nurtured, if it’s not properly taken care of, then it will wither and die, and that’s fucking painful for both parties.” I try to explain as much as possible with the limitations that the Fate’s have put on me.

He watches me shrewdly, looking for answers that he knows I can’t tell him, “Are the Fate’s involved?”

I nod, and he sighs, knowing that he’s not going to get any more information out of me. Even if I wanted to, this kind of vision is clearly important enough that the Fate’s have effectively put a gag order on me; if I open my mouth to tell him what’s going on and what it all means, no sound will come out, and I’ll be punished with shocks of pain until I stop trying. All I’m allowed to do is guide without influencing any decisions.

The room falls silent as he digests the information. A myriad of emotions crosses his face as his mind turns over the revelations of the last few minutes, but through it all, that spark of hope in his eyes never dies. I know he can feel the pull. I know he felt it as soon as he laid eyes on her, as I’m reasonably sure the others did too. When it comes to Farren, we’re all hopelessly drawn to her fire, beauty and strength. We never really had any hope of resisting, not that I imagine any of us would want to, not even Storm, although he’s going to fight it the hardest because he’s a stubborn fucker.

Loki’s voice drags me out of my thoughts, and I focus back on him.

“I’d be lying if I said I was at all disappointed in being Bonded to Farren. There’s just something about her that has pulled me in from the moment I laid eyes on her.” He admits, and the smile I give him is knowing. He continues, “I am so fucking glad you are back, man. Storm’s gotten even worse since you left, any emotion he once showed he shoved behind a wall of indifference, and there was never a crack in the façade. Until now, that is, these past couple of days with Farren, he’s shown more emotion than he has in years, granted it’s all anger, but it’s something, and she seems to like pushing

his buttons. There's no fear in her when she deals with him, even though it makes the rest of us super fucking nervous.

"The others are all acting differently, too. I can't decide if that's a good thing or not. I know Farren's past is dark, and I'm worried about how they're all going to handle that."

"You mean you're worried about them going on a killing spree and hunting every last fucker that hurt her?" I clarify.

He grins, "Yep, that's what I meant. I know I want to."

"It'll all work out how it's supposed to, man," I vow because it will. One way or another, I will fucking ensure it. Even if I have to watch as the world burns around us. I never said I was the hero; I'm not selfless; I will light the fucking match if it ensures that Farren is happy.

"I'm going to hold onto that. I have a feeling the future isn't going to be an easy path for us to walk."

I want to say, oh dear friend, you have no idea how right you are. Instead, I ask, "Are you good now?"

I watch as he rubs his fist against the centre of his chest, his eyebrows dipping low as he looks down as if expecting to see whatever is causing him pain.

"You'll get used to that," I say, nodding to his chest, he looks up at me quizzically, so I explain, "Farren doesn't seem to feel it, at least not like I do. Any sort of distance makes it ache."

"But you haven't seen each other for years?" Loki asks with wide eyes as realisation starts to sink in.

"It was hell. Why do you think I looked like I did when you first found me? I'd been trying to distract myself from the pain by doing continuous missions without taking the necessary break in between. I've never been apart from Farren for longer than a couple of weeks before, so it's never been more than an ache. It was not pleasant to learn that if I spent a month or more away from her, the ache turned into pain. I could still function, but it was always there. Never again."

Loki gets up from the bed and places his hand on my shoulder, gripping it tightly in support, "I'm sorry. I'm not

even going to pretend to understand how much that sucked, and I never want to find out. Come on, let's go and find out what caused our woman to feel like that, unravel one of the many mysteries surrounding her and find out who we need to kill."

I grin as I pull open the door, everyone's attention turning towards us, their shoulders relaxing as they see Loki back to his usual self. Many people underestimate Loki because of his carefree attitude and usual inability to take anything truly seriously. I wouldn't recommend it though; he's deadly.

"Are you guys okay?" Farren asks, biting down on her lip in a nervous gesture that drives me fucking wild.

I'm mildly surprised that she's still sitting on Rival's lap. It looks like I might need to have this talk with someone else soon; judging from the dreamy look on his usually stern face, he's not going to have a problem with the news.

"We're good," Loki replies, taking the seat next to Rival and her and taking her hand.

She frowns and looks at him with a confused little wrinkle on her nose before clearly deciding to just go with it. Following his lead, I take the other side of her and put my hand on her knee so she can keep her free hand on Rival's arm that's wrapped securely around her waist. Of course my tail decides it doesn't want to be left out and strokes the back of her hand with its tip, making her smile.

I can't help my smile as I look over at Reaper, Mayhem and Storm sitting opposite us. Reaper and Mayhem aren't even trying to hide their interest in our seating arrangement, a flash of jealousy darkening their eyes. Fortunately, I sense that it's more from not being involved than wanting to keep her for themselves. Storm, on the other hand, is watching, seemingly unaffected if a little pissed. At least that's what he'd like everyone to think. I know better though. He's just as interested in Farren as the rest of us are, and he hates it. Being interested leaves him vulnerable to feelings, and he won't allow that.

He's going to have to get over it pretty fucking quickly. The Fates have a plan for us all, and it requires that we're all on the

same page. I'm not risking any of them just for my brother's stubbornness.

"Farren, before we got interrupted, what did you mean when you said the voice saved you?" I ask her.

She sighs heavily, "Exactly that. I'm not going into details, I'm not ready to relive it yet, and it's not pertinent information at the moment. What I will say is that I was close to giving up. The voice whispered a spell that allowed me to escape."

Her words pierce my soul, I almost lost her, and I would never have known what truly happened to her. I believe wholeheartedly that I would've felt her death through the bond, but I don't think I would've been made privy to the details. The stillness in the room is telling of the severity of the reaction the others are having to her words.

Fuck.

I am never letting her out of my sight again. I hope she's ready to have an overprotective deadly assassin stalking her every move because that's what I'm about to become.

Chapter Ten

Farren

The guys did not take my confession very well last night, which was honestly kind of surprising. I mean, only a few days ago, they wanted to sever our warrior Bond, and yet last night, they acted like they genuinely cared. Storm didn't, of course; he just looked highly pissed off and yet bored at the same time. I don't know how he manages to pull them both off simultaneously; it's a gift.

Today is my first full day of classes, and I'm cautiously optimistic that no one is going to try to kill me; surely, the fates will grant me at least a day of no one with murderous intent coming for me, right? I haven't seen Poca since yesterday, but that's not unusual. He'll show up when he feels like it or if I'm in trouble, and the only time he hasn't been able to was when he was somehow blocked from coming to my aid during the incident.

Walking the castle pathways with the guys gives me a sense of anonymity that I didn't expect to have on my first full day, and that's all thanks to Kill being the lost prince. That, coupled with his formidable reputation, is keeping all eyes glued to him, and for the moment, they're skipping straight past me. I'm sure it won't last for long, but I'm going to enjoy it while it does.

When we get to the door of my classroom, I turn to say goodbye, and they each reach out to touch me in some way while Storm pushes past us all with a dark glare on his face.

"Erm, bye," I say again when they all start to follow me into the classroom and head towards the back of the room

"This is our class," Loki says grinning on his way past me.

I huff, "Why did we all stop outside then?"

He just shrugs and continues to his seat, making me frown in confusion.

I don't get the chance to mull over their confusing actions like I'd like to because now that they've all left to take their seat, everyone is now staring at me and my usual scowl slams into place. I'm not used to being seen; I spend most of my time in the shadows or locked in my father's castle's cells. The attention puts me on edge, and I practically stomp up to the professor to get my book.

"Farren," I say bluntly when I get to the desk, and the professor looks up with a raised eyebrow. He doesn't say anything as he hands me a thick textbook.

"Find a seat. You're all adults now, so there's no seating plan."

I nod, taking the large textbook entitled *History of Supernaturals and the Realms*. That seems like a pretty broad spectrum of things for one class to discuss, although according to my schedule, this class is double the length of all my others, apart from combat and weapons, which we have every day—that one I can understand. We are supposed to be the protectors of the realms. Lifting my eyes, they immediately land on Killian, who's scowling, his fingers twitching and his tail do the same like he's desperate for one of his blades as a truly stunning fae leans on his desk, giving him a perfect view of her tits as she practically shoves them in his face, her dark hair blowing in a gentle breeze that only seems to be available to her, Air Fae then. It would be amusing to see how utterly bored he is with the entire situation if I didn't know how much he hates people in his personal space. If she touches him, I know he's going to snap. The fact that he doesn't seem to hesitate around the guys shows me just how close he was to them and that there's a level of trust between them that they've earned.

I get to where the guys have chosen to sit at the top of the stadium-like seating just as the fae woman reaches out her hand to place on his arm. Before she can connect and lose her head, my hand strikes out, grabbing her wrist in a tight grip.

“Nope, I wouldn’t suggest doing that,” I warn, manoeuvring myself so that I’m between her and Kill’s desk.

I let go immediately and stare her down, crossing my arms over my chest. I’m not here to make enemies, but I also won’t fade into the background. Unless I’m on a job, my personality simply doesn’t allow that. I may not like having so many eyes on me at once, but I’ve never been afraid to stand up for myself and apparently those I care about; that’s a new development; I’ve never really had anyone in my daily life that I’ve cared to protect. Most of them were involved in my torture and could rot in the fucking underworld for all I care. I am incapable of defending myself against my father though, he could end me far too easily, and with all the remorse he may feel being for the asset he’d lose, not me as his daughter.

The Fae sneers as she looks me up and down, “I don’t think he would’ve complained if I touched him.”

I sigh, glancing over my shoulder at Loki, “Damn, why is it always the hot ones that have the personality of a toad?”

His eyes spark with mirth as he lets out a loud laugh, “Not all hot ones have shit personalities,” his eyes trail over me, leaving heat in their wake, and I fight the blush, trying to pinken my cheeks by turning back around to face the bitchy dark haired beauty to distract myself.

Something flashes in her eyes that almost looks like regret, and I feel my curious nature perk up. Hmm, maybe she’s not what she first appears to be; possibly she’s just prickly and protecting herself?

She glares at me with no real heat, turns on her heel and stalks over to the other side of the room to sit with a group of equally stunning supernaturals. Keeping my eyes on her as I round Kill’s table and sit to his left, I see the fake smile she shows them all as they all start whispering. The look she sends me is icy, and the power I can sense from her is enough that I know I need to stay on my toes around her.

I need to keep an eye on that one. Whether she’s friend or foe is still to be determined, but judging from our interaction so far, I’m leaning towards foe.

“Thank you,” Kill mutters, barely audible over the sound of the other students talking, and I thread my fingers through his and squeeze.

“Alright, everyone, quieten down.” The professor calls the class to attention, “today, we’re going to be discussing the history of the Warrior Games.”

Whispers go around the classroom at his words, and I feel my eyebrows raise. I have never heard of the Warrior Games before, but from the reaction of the rest of the class, I must be the only one who doesn’t know what the professor is talking about.

A shifter in the front row puts her hand up, and the professor’s eyes dart to her as he nods. “Yes, Miss Benner?”

“We haven’t finished learning about the last Fae war. Why are we moving on to something different already?”

Her question brings a murmur of agreement from the rest of the class. The professor seems to tense for only a second before he continues as if the woman never asked the question in the first place, causing her to frown at the dismissal. This is my first lesson with him, so I can’t say for sure that his behaviour is odd; I mean, for all I know, he could refuse to answer student’s questions all the time, but a quick glance around shows the unease on the other student’s faces which quickly squashes that theory. Something else is going on here.

“As I was saying, today we’re going to be talking about the Warrior Games. Do not let the name fool you; they are not fun, nor are they something to be taken lightly. They are brutal and deadly tests of strength, intelligence and strategy. All things that determine the ultimate warrior.”

I lean forward in my seat slightly at his words, excited to learn more about the Warrior games despite his warning. It sounds like fun to me.

“They were a centuries-long tradition that the realm itself used to determine the warriors that were capable of protecting our realm from outside forces. The Fae were always called from this academy, which was the entire purpose of the

academy when it was first founded. The last games were over one hundred years ago, and the Realm hasn't started another Warrior Games since."

Well, that's one hell of a coincidence. The games disappeared around the same time that the war on the Centre's and their Bonded happened. For some reason, I don't think that the games disappeared because the Realm no longer needed protection. I think something happened that blocked Realm from pulling the Fae at the academy into the games. I internally roll my eyes; of course, what the fuck do I know? It is a pretty hefty coincidence, though.

"Did you have a choice whether you participated in the games?" a guy off to the side asks.

The professor eyed him, "No, everyone who was in attendance at the academy got called. However, when they got called it was staggered." At his words, students look around at each other with a mixture of unease and relief that they don't have to go through it anymore. The professor ignores them all and carries on his explanation, "the teams that the spear assigned to you would get pulled into the games together. Those who had incomplete teams would get pulled in and find their other members already in the games."

"What about people who had no other members on their teams? Would they get pulled in, too?" someone asked.

"No, back when the Warrior Games were still active, there were no single-member teams, only incomplete ones. Each round was different for each team and was specifically designed to play on their weaknesses and strengths. It wasn't rigged, so winning was impossible, although, at times, I'm sure it could feel that way. The length of the rounds all depends on the environment they were transported to and their swiftness in identifying the objective and completing it. Sometimes the objective was clear, and sometimes the participants had no idea what it was. No round was ever longer than twenty-four hours though. If the objective wasn't completed in time, then the realm deemed you unworthy."

His already severe face darkens even further.

“What happened if the Realm deemed you unworthy?” I surprisingly hear myself ask.

His eyes land on me, sparking with recognition for a second before he nods slightly in approval, “The Warriors that failed were brought back here and given to the temple, where the gods and goddesses decided their fate, usually death.”

Exclaims of shock surround me, and I sink back into my chair. Failure wasn't an option for the warriors that once trained at Black Onyx academy. It would result in certain death. Looking around at the students now, I see a fair few that still carry the need and drive of our ancestors to be the best warriors, warriors that are capable of protecting our realm and capturing the rogue supernaturals that stalk the many Realms. However, there's more than there should be that have gone pale at the mention of the games and the death that would follow if they didn't succeed, and for me, it's easy to see how the academy that once prided itself on training the strongest warriors has become this.

The warriors of the past fought in wars, which was a grey area to begin with since all warriors trained at Black Onyx, so when a conflict between the different courts of the Fae Realm arose, it all depended on where the loyalties of the individual warrior lay. That's one of the reasons that the academy sits on neutral ground between the Summer Court to the left and the Shift Court to the right. However, there hasn't been a war since the one that exterminated the Centres and the Bonded. The warriors here are now trained as a kind of security force that deals with rogue supernaturals and acts as a mediator between those having boundary disputes as well as all things in between, one of the most sought after jobs is to become a protector in one of the Royal courts or with one of their dignitaries. There are nine courts with multiple dignitaries and high-end officials in each court; therefore plenty of opportunities for the best graduates to get positions but not enough for everyone to have them; the school trains thousands at a time. Not to mention that some of those being trained here wouldn't actually want those positions of safety; they want to join the assassins or be on the front lines helping the people, not in an ivory tower. Although there is still danger involved

in all of these positions, the threat level is significantly lower, especially since the games are no longer a threat to the Warriors, who don't put their all into their training. This means that parents who still have control over their children until they turn twenty-five that previously would have hesitated to send their children here in the past because of the very real threat of death no longer deem it a risk. I know some high-ranking families use it as a form of reform school for their unruly and thoroughly spoiled children.

Money is what gets them in, and it's as simple as that. They, of course, still have to go through the testing, but results can be manipulated when the right price is paid.

There's an evident divide in the classroom between those who have gotten in using family money and connections and those who have put in the effort and hard work to be here. It doesn't escape my notice that everyone would most likely assume I was part of the first group.

"Alright, that's enough," the professor snaps, making everyone quieten down and bringing me out of my own thoughts, "there were worse things than their lives being forfeited for the Realm. The Realm at least would take them within seconds, and they'd feel nothing. But the terrains and situations that the warriors were up against were very real. Some of them are not even in this realm. After all, how can the Realm be sure that the warriors were up to the duty of protecting it if they were only tested against things that they were familiar with?" he pauses to let that sink in before continuing, "anything in these rounds could and would take great pleasure in killing the participants. Some of the beings that they were put up against would simply take them prisoner, instead. Since the failed participants wouldn't be able to be brought back here when their time was up and held in the temple for the gods and goddesses to deliver their punishments, they were simply abandoned to whatever realm and creature they couldn't defeat."

"That's harsh a fuck," someone muttered, and the professors eyes snapped to the speaker in the third row.

“Yes, it was barbaric, but it was the way things were done, and every warrior had a purpose and a goal to strive for. Those that made it through the games were deemed heroes, warriors worthy to serve this Realm and were often given gifts from the gods themselves.”

My eyebrows rose at that. The gods and goddesses are talked about a lot in the Fae Realm, we learn about them and their roles when they were on this plane, but they haven't been seen for a long fucking time, so long in fact that they've become more myth than reality. Especially for those of us that were born after the great war.

Something niggles in the back of my mind, almost like something I've forgotten is trying to push its way forward, but as soon as I acknowledge the strange feeling, it immediately dissipates, and I'm left wondering whether I imagined it.

“Why did the games stop?”

“No one really knows for sure, a lot of things happened around the same time, and there's a lot of theories floating around that someone or a group of someones put it all into motion and that it's all connected, but as no one has come forward to claim it nor has the reasoning behind the attacks on these particular factions been found all we are left with is guesses.” The professor answers as he leans back on his desk. His words confirm some of my own thoughts but also bring a fuck load of questions to the forefront of my mind.

I listen as he answers a couple more questions, but I can't seem to focus on what he's saying. It's only when I take a deep breath trying to centre myself, that I realise why I'm having a problem listening in the first place. My magic which usually resides in the centre of my being, is buzzing just underneath my skin.

I tune in, trying to figure out why it suddenly appeared without me telling it to do so. I feel on edge, almost like I'm in danger, but not quite. The conflicting feeling makes me frown; that makes little sense. Trying to keep my outward appearance calm and unaffected, I stretch my senses around the room, trying to find something, anything that could be out of place

and causing my magic to react this way. Nothing seems to be triggering the reaction though, and as quickly as the feeling comes on, it dissipates.

Loki leans in slightly, “Are you okay?”

Keeping my voice low like his, I try to think of the best way to describe what I was feeling as I reply, “Yeah, I just had a weird feeling for a minute, almost like I was being watched, but I couldn’t find anyone looking at me.”

“It’s probably got something to do with the conversation we were having. It doesn’t exactly bring out happy thoughts, does it.” He tries to reassure me.

I shrug, “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Before he can say anything else, the bell chimes, and the room suddenly becomes a flurry of movement as everyone packs up their shit and gets ready to go to the next class. The guys and I seem to all be on the same page and take our time packing up, in no rush to get to the next lesson. I’m not even sure what it is.

“Strategy next,” Rival mutters as he moves behind me to follow the flow of students out of the door.

“It’s like you read my mind,” I grin, and he chuckles quietly.

“Didn’t read your mind, I just looked at your schedule and I have that class with you.”

“When did you look at my schedule?” I ask curiously.

“We all did,” Loki replies, “you left it on the coffee table in the main room and we wanted to see what classes we shared.”

I smile, but don’t reply as we continue our onward journey. I like that they cared enough to want to know. Eventually the others all split off to their own classes leaving me alone for the first time with Rival.

“So, what’s strategy?” I ask.

His smile is warm as he looks down at me, “It’s pretty much what it sounds like but I personally think it’s a bit outdated now. It’s all about war strategy and things like that so it’s fairly

difficult to transfer that into the modern version of what we do now.”

“You mean enforcement, no wars and dignitary protection detail,” I smirk.

“Well don’t get me wrong, I think it’s an important job we do especially since we’re deployed across the realms, but more and more now the important members of our society seem to be sending their spoilt kids here to be reformed.” He shrugs.

“If that’s what strategy is about then what class do we learn the best strategy to take down the many supernatural creatures we come across?” I ask with a frown.

“Funnily enough that’s in a class that’s simply called supernaturals.”

I raise my eyebrows and he chuckles as he opens the door to the class room.

Chapter Eleven

By the end of the class, I could easily see what Rival was talking about. The lesson seems to be outdated, focusing on strategies that past commanders have used in their wars. Even if we have another war, the strategies that they're teaching in that class wouldn't necessarily be relevant. It seems to me that they're keeping the wrong traditions alive. Lunch is a reasonably smooth affair, and by the time we leave, I'm grateful that we've had a relatively drama-free day.

"Farren, boys, can I speak with you for a moment?" Uncle Magnus asks, approaching us just before we enter the gym for combat class.

"Sure," Storm replies with his signature frown.

The hallways are fairly empty now, but he still keeps his voice low as he talks, "Something big is going on. All of the Kings and Queens of the courts have been summoned to the winter palace. I don't know if you are aware, but the head Seer is currently in attendance there before she moves onto the next court. Your father is attending as well."

"What? Why? He's not royal." I reply, unable to help, stating the obvious thanks to the sinking feeling in my gut.

"No, but he is very well connected, as you know, and is in a couple of their confidences. Whatever is happening is not good, Farren. The last thing we need is for him to decide he needs you back home." His warning makes a shiver of premonition go down my spine.

Ice freezes in my veins; going back there now, even after such a short amount of time, would be incredibly difficult, especially since I've been shown kindness and consideration here, far more than I ever did with him. I also know that as soon as he gets me back there, he'll insist on punishing me despite the fact that he agreed to send me here. At the time, I don't think he realised quite how incompetent his other

enforcers were when it came to dealing with his problems. Of course, they didn't have the threats hanging over them that I did, and any time one of the new hires seemed to question his methods or the things that were asked of them, they mysteriously disappeared. It happened so often that he stopped hiring new people, and his current enforcers have been with him for so long that they're nearly as bad as he is and love to help inflict the punishments that my father demands.

"Farren, Farren!" someone calls, clearly having been trying to get my attention for a while.

My eyes refocus, and I look blankly at Reaper, who's stood in front of me, his knees bent slightly so he can meet my eyes. He's just that freaking tall. All the guys are surrounding me with the same worried looks on their faces, and my eyes drift over them all before catching on to Storm as he leans against the wall, separate from the rest of us and, of course glaring.

"Are you okay?" Reaper asks gently.

"Erm, yeah." I reply awkwardly before deflecting with a question of my own, "where did Magnus go?"

"He said he had a meeting to get to and needed to go. He did say goodbye." Loki replies with a slight frown and then continues changing the subject for me, distracting the others from my momentary lapse into the abysse that is my mind, "something pretty fucking big must be going on because the kings and queens wouldn't all be in the same place otherwise."

"Has your father said anything?" Mayhem asks, looking over to Storm.

His glare deepens as he thinks about the answer and replies shortly, "No."

"If the meeting is as last minute as Magnus made it out to be, then I doubt he had the time to get in contact with you. Hopefully, it'll be a big enough deal that he'll be too occupied to come here or check in." Kill adds, his expression dark. "Does he know I'm here?"

“I sure as shit haven’t told him, but that doesn’t mean the Headmaster hasn’t, or one of the students could have told their parents, and it could’ve gotten back to him that way.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic.” He replies grimly.

I’m not too fond of the looks on either of their faces. They’ve got the same haunted look in their eyes that screams of shared trauma. I hate that he’s still a threat to them even now, and if he does end up here, I might have to see what I can do to deter him from returning or bothering the brothers ever again. I can be pretty fucking persuasive when I need to be.

“Don’t, Farren. It’ll bring far too much trouble for all of us, trouble that we don’t need. He’s not just a random man; he’s a king.” Kill warns me, his face serious but a spark of pride in his eyes.

“What?” Storm barks, his eyes studying my expression closely and then flicking back to his brother. They widen slightly at whatever he sees in our expressions. “You’d go after him? For Killian?” he asks, seemingly somewhat perplexed, and it occurs to me that, of course, no one has ever stuck up for them where their father is concerned. He has even more power than my own, and no one who wants to remain in his good graces would go up against a king.

I turn to look at him fully and meet his eyes. “For both of you.”

Something flashes through his eyes, something other than the usual blankness that sits there, but it’s gone in a second, and his eyes revert back to the cold indifference I’m used to seeing.

“We’re late.” He mutters as he pushes off the wall and pulls the doors to the gym open, disappearing inside.

“Huh, I think you shocked him,” Mayhem mutters, staring after Storm before starting to follow.

“How can you tell?” I ask jokingly.

He smirks, “I’ve known him long enough now that I’ve learned to pick up on the little hints of emotions whenever he deigns to show any at all.”

My reply is cut off by the instructor yelling at us as soon as we step foot through the gym doors.

“You’re late! Get your arses changed now!” the instructor yells, and we instantly separate, rushing to get changed.

As I rush back out, I smack into a hard chest and meet the eyes of a very serious-looking Killian, his tail wrapping around my thigh to keep me where he wants me. Darkness starts to bleed across his eyes as his gifts try to take over.

“Don’t think I didn’t realise that you didn’t answer me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I grin.

“Farren,” he growls, his voice deepening.

Before he can say anything else, I yank his head down to mine and kiss him firmly. His hands tighten on my hips as his tongue parts my lips, and I push myself closer to him; one of my hands goes to the back of his head and pulls on his hair roughly. His chest vibrates with a growl that I feel all the way down to my toes. Fuck, it’s hot when he does that.

When he finally releases me with a chastising bite on my lip, I’m breathing embarrassingly hard, considering it was just a kiss.

He smirks, “That didn’t go quite how you planned it to, did it?”

“Fuck you,” I breathe back, amused despite myself.

He shrugs, “Alright, if you insist.”

He makes a grab for me again, and I bat his hands away with a chuckle. “Not what I meant, and you know it.”

His eyes spark with happiness at my teasing before he falls serious again, “Farren, please promise me you won’t go after my father if he comes here.”

I frown, “How about I promise to keep you informed of all my plans concerning your father?”

“All of them? You’ve already got plans for him?” he asks incredulously.

“Just a vague idea. Come on,” I grab his hand and pull him towards the class.

He lets me pull him forward, but I know he’s going to bring it up again.

The instructor glares at us before separating us and setting us up for sparring. I have to ensure that I hold back, especially now that Loki has healed my back and I’m back up to full strength. I’ve also noticed that my magic is playing up, and I have no idea why. When I come back from the Void, my magic is barely contained, and I normally have to fight it out somehow, but this feels different. It almost feels like when I’m in a dangerous situation, in the middle of an assassination, that buzz of anticipation and excitement. Still, there’s no direct danger right now, and I’m definitely not assassinating anyone. I’m probably safer here than I ever have been; it just doesn’t make sense.

It makes me wonder if maybe there’s a different kind of anticipation that my magic is aware of but hasn’t decided to fill me in on yet. It feels excited. I’ve learned over the years not to dismiss anything, so it’s definitely something I’m going to keep an eye on. I might even check in with the guys to see if their gifts or supernatural sides have been giving them any grief, but for now, I need to focus back on my class.

My third opponent in the class gives me a bit more of a challenge than my previous ones. We were told to use everything at our disposal, stopping just short of death. As we circle each other, I watch him closely, trying to pinpoint what kind of supernatural he is and whether he leans heavily on his supernatural side or the magic he has or whether he can actually fight as well. It’s never a good idea to rely on just your supernatural gifts. It can leave you at a severe disadvantage if, for some reason, you find yourself without the magic or the supernatural side that you’ve been used to relying on in a fight.

It surprises me when I realise that he’s watching me as closely as I’m studying him, so it stands to reason that he’s at least been listening in this class and taking it seriously. He suddenly strikes out with his left fist, and I move just in time

to miss being hit by it. A bubble of excitement fills me at the prospect of a proper fight. I strike back quickly, knocking his head to the side and feeling impressed when he just shakes it off and instead of getting mad that he got hit like so many people tend to do, he just keeps his cool.

We exchange attacks for a while, both of us sticking to using only our fighting skills. For me, it's because if I use one gift in a combat situation, the others tend to want to come out and play too and whereas usually, I can hold them back with my magic behaving oddly at the moment, I don't want to risk it. I'm not entirely sure why my opponent isn't using his magic; either he likes to fight the traditional way, or his magic is not the kind that can be used in a combat situation which is entirely possible, but I'm guessing reasonably rare at the academy since our whole education is pretty much based around combat.

If that's the case, it means he must have some mad fighting skills to get accepted, even if he has his parent's money behind him.

I'm beyond curious, so I step it up, moving quicker and more precisely. He blocks as many hits as he takes and lands a fair few on me, which is pretty fucking impressive. I start to strike out with my right hand before changing my mind and bringing my leg up to kick out at his stomach. I'm distracted momentarily as his previously dark green eyes flash white, signalling him as a seer and a pretty fucking powerful one if he can use his gift with such preciseness. The distraction costs me, and I end up on my ass. He grins down at me, clearly proud of himself, as he holds out his hand to help me back up.

I take it and return his smile as he lets go as soon as I'm standing, "It's pretty impressive that you use your gift to predict your opponent's next moves."

His grin broadens, "Thanks, I'm still working on it. You managed to get quite a few hits through."

"Not as many as I normally would." I reply honestly, "If you ever want to practice and help me learn to defend myself against your particular skill, let me know."

“Sure, that’d be great, actually. Everyone else tends to avoid me.” His smile never leaves his face, and I get the feeling that he’s more amused by that than hurt.

“Why?” I ask bluntly because, other than the guys, he’s the first person I’ve actually been remotely interested in talking to, and I’m curious.

“Because I come from poverty, I used my skills to get in here and not mummy and daddy’s fucking money. I’m here on a scholarship.” He answers defensively, crossing his arms over his chest and staring down at me.

“They’ll all be fucked if we actually have to go to war.” I shrug.

He blinks at me in shock for a moment, clearly expecting a different reply before that broad grin of his settles back on his face, and his posture relaxes again.

“I couldn’t agree, mo ...” he stops midsentence and simply freezes.

I wait for him to finish his sentence, but his eyes cloud over white, and it becomes clear that he’s having a vision. I step back slightly and wait. I’m used to witnessing Kill having his visions. What I’m not used to though, is the sudden breeze that whips around him, lifting his shoulder-length silver hair and tangling it around him. His feet slowly lift from the floor as the wind continues to circle him.

“Whoa,” I mutter in shock.

“Alright, everyone, step back. He’s having a vision!” the instructor yells, moving everyone back to their own spaces again.

“Fucking orphan freak,” someone mutters as they walk past me back to their mats and more people than not laugh at his comment.

Without looking in their direction, I send a thread of my air magic towards the voice and grin as I then hear the satisfying thud and grunt of someone landing hard on the floor.

“I saw that,” Mayhem says quietly as he comes to stand next to me, his arm brushing against mine, something that I shouldn’t be aware of as much as I am.

I simply smirk, choosing not to respond and feel the others move over to us. The instructor glares at us but considering we’re the only ones currently looking out for the guy having a vision, he seems to let it slide. In theory, his magic should protect him if someone tries to attack him while he is vulnerable but in reality, that can get a bit iffy, so it’s best to watch out for him. Although they all do as they’re told and go back to sparring, most of them still shoot curious looks this way. They may hold a certain level of disdain for him and think that he’s beneath them, but they’re still nosy fuckers.

“Is he okay?” I ask, glancing at Kill before my attention goes back to a still floating, white-eyed guy with his hair whipping around him in such a frenzy that he might actually have to shave his head to get the knots out.

“He should be. It looks like he’s having a pretty fucking severe one.”

“I’ve seen him get a vision in class before; usually, his eyes just flash white, maybe a slight breeze, but nothing like this,” Loki adds with a frown.

The guy drops to the floor suddenly, landing hard on his knees, and the guys and I rush over to him to help him back up. He lets us pull him to his feet, his hands shaking, and all of the colour drained from his face. I’m hoping that’s from the toll the vision has taken on him and not because he’s seen something horrendous.

“Are you alright?” Kill asks, “that looked like a big one.”

He brushes his hair back from his face, his hand getting stuck in the tangles, and he gives up with a frown, his eyes darting everywhere like he’s still in the vision. “I, fuck,” he replies and then rushes towards the door.

“You can’t just leave!” the instructor yells after him, not bothering to ask if he’s okay.

“I need to see the Headmaster,” the guy yells back, not even pausing in his stride as he pushes his way through the door.

“Pretty big coincidence that Magnus warns us of the Head Seer calling all the royals to the palace, and then he has a vision like that and rushes to see the Headmaster,” Storm points out grimly.

“We could try and ask him what he saw?” Loki suggests.

“We could, but I doubt we’ll get anything out of him. We all know how secretive Seers are,” Reaper replies, shooting a glance at Kill.

“Speaking of, have you seen anything?” Rival asks Kill.

“You know I wouldn’t be able to tell you specifics even if I had, but no, I haven’t seen anything. Nothing that would mean the need to involve the royals.” He pauses for a second before continuing, “but the fates may have deemed that this vision wasn’t one that was necessary for me to see.”

“Fair enough, I guess we can try to catch up with,” I frown, “shit, what’s his name? Do you guys know?”

Mayhem smirks, I’ve just spent most of the lesson fighting with this guy, and I don’t even know his name. Damn, my people skills are rusty.

“It’s Zev,” he answers me.

I nod like I knew it, and I was just testing them; judging from their amused looks, I don’t fool any of them, “Right, Zev. As I was saying, we could try and catch up with Zev and see if there’s anything he can tell us.”

“There’s no harm in trying. I want to talk to him anyway, he’s fucking strong, and I don’t understand why he’s been put in some of the lower level classes.” Reaper frowns.

“What do you mean? I didn’t realise you knew him?” Storm asks.

“I don’t, not really, but I’ve seen him around, and other than this class, he’s in the bottom set for almost everything. Just from his use of his gift fighting against Farren, I can tell that’s not right.”

“He said the other students have been giving him shit because he’s lowborn,” I sneer at the phrase, “is it possible that the teachers are doing it too?”

“They shouldn’t, but too many of them have forgotten the original purpose of this academy and now take bribes from various nobles, so it wouldn’t surprise me.” Reaper replies.

“Well, add it to the list of shit we need to talk to him about.” Storm grumbles.

Chapter Twelve

“Alright, class is over. Pack up.” The instructor yells, and I realise I completely forgot we were in class.

“What’s next?” I ask as we make our way toward the changing rooms.

“Dinner,” Loki grins with an excited skip in his step.

With a start, I realise that I’m feeling hungry, which is a strange new development that I haven’t actually felt properly for years; thanks to the regular bouts of starvation that my father put me through, my body got so used to being permanently starved that I just didn’t feel hunger like ordinary people would. I think that because I’ve been eating regularly during my stay here so far, it’s starting to bring my body’s natural instincts back online.

Which is great, except it means it’s going to be so much harder and more painful to get my body used to not eating again when my father inevitably summons me back to the estate.

“We’ll wait for you out here, Farren.” Loki smiles gently, and I nod, splitting off from them to go into the female changing room.

“I’ll meet you guys in the dining hall; I’ve got to do something first.” I hear Storm say to the guys.

I can’t help but look over my shoulder at them and see Storm with a purely devilish smirk on his face. It almost knocks the breath out of me. His face completely changes from cold and stoic to distractingly handsome.

“Don’t, Storm,” Rival warns seriously, and Storm’s expression turns into his usual glare.

I know I’m not going to want to deal with whatever comes out of his mouth next, so I carry on through the door to the

changing room, my mind switching back to food. Fortunately, for me at least, there are very few female students in our combat class, and the few that are in our class are as content to ignore me as I am them, which means I don't have to try and make small talk or offend them when I simply ignore their attempts at conversation.

By the time I get back out into the hallway, the guys are all there waiting, minus Storm, but none of them look too happy. Whatever Storm is off doing, they clearly don't approve of; however, I'm not curious enough to ask.

"Let's go eat. I'm fucking starving." Loki wines, grabbing my hand and threading his fingers through mine as he starts to pull me along.

My eyes dart from his hand wrapped around mine and back up to the side of his face repeatedly until the corner of his lips tilt up slightly, and I can tell that he's aware of my confusion. Instead of saying anything though, he just starts to rub his thumb over the back of my hand gently, the gesture is soothing, and I find myself liking it.

The hallways are packed with students and teachers all rushing to the dining hall to get their food, and I don't miss the eyes that land on us, giving us a wide berth. Well, I say us, but really it's them. If I were walking through this hallway by myself, I'd very quickly be swamped and most likely knocked over. There's an air about the guys though, even when they're relaxed like they are now, that people just instinctively avoid.

It's not until we're in the dining hall seated and waiting for the food to arrive that Storm finally waltzes into the room. I want to say that I wasn't acutely aware that he wasn't here, but that would be an outright lie, and the more often I looked towards the door to see if he'd arrived, the deeper the concern etched into the other's faces. I'm probably making it obvious that I have some kind of feelings for him, which makes absolutely no fucking sense because he's an absolute asshole who clearly views me as lower than shit on his bloody boot. I, however, never claimed that it made sense for me to feel something for him. In fact, I'm not even entirely sure what I

feel for him. I do know that I have feelings edging towards like for the others and absolutely lust.

I'd challenge anyone not to have lusty thoughts about these fuckers though they're all power and deliciousness.

Despite myself, I start to smile slightly at Storm until my eyes move away from his face to land on the women he has under each arm, both tall, slim, blond and the complete opposite of me.

Not that it should matter.

A spear of white-hot jealousy rages through me and leaves a sick, bubbling mess in my stomach in its wake. Before Storm can catch me looking at him and decipher the look on my face, I turn back to the table, keeping my eyes down. I'm not willing to look at any of the others in case they can see the irrational jealousy and hurt that I'm currently fighting to push down.

I have no idea why I feel like this. I have no claim over him. He's never even hinted that he likes me in any way. I shouldn't be feeling like this, feeling like I'm watching someone who really means something to me, someone who I've known for years, not just a few days, go out of their way to hurt me. It feels like a betrayal, and it makes no fucking sense.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Kill growls, his voice low and his horns sparking blue.

"I'll join you," Loki adds.

I realise that in my focus on pushing away what I'm feeling, I completely forgot to close down the lines that are connecting me to Killian and Loki, which means they can feel everything I'm feeling and now, on top of all that, I'm fucking mortified too.

There's no fucking way that I'm looking up from this table now. It's okay; it's a lovely table; now even my thoughts are hysterical, awesome.

"I've been working on some new ways to use my air magic, and I could use a test subject." Rival adds to their conversation, his voice Void of any hesitation.

“I could try out that new use for water on him,” Mayhem responds gleefully.

“I’ll eat him.” Reaper’s voice rumbles darkly, and at that my eyes snap up to stare at him to clarify that he’s being deadly serious and then quickly dart back down to my new bestie, the table.

What the fuck kind of supernatural is he that he can so casually mention just eating someone and be fucking serious about it!

One of the others snorts at Reaper’s contribution, but none of them tries to dissuade him, and the hurt is soothed slightly. It’s kind of nice that they all want to protect my feelings. Embarrassing that they can see it’s affected me so much though.

The murderous conversation gets interrupted as the plates of food arrive and are put down in front of us. I immediately pick up my fork and start eating despite the fact that I’m now no longer hungry. I will never waste food. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Storm take his regular seat next to Loki, and one of the women pulls up a chair next to him while the other just plops her ample arse in his lap.

Yey, they’re eating with us, so lovely to have company.

I resolutely focus on eating my food, or at least I try to, but the noises and giggles coming from Storm’s end of the table are distracting, to say the least. I can feel his eyes on me occasionally, almost like he’s waiting to see how I’d react, and I get the sinking feeling that maybe he’s noticed that I’ve started to feel something for him and has decided to show me in no uncertain terms that he’s not interested in me. The louder they get, the more the others try to engage me in conversation, and I start to get annoyed with myself that I’m practically hiding because he’s fucking hurt my feelings, feelings that I shouldn’t have. Yeah, fuck no to that!

So the next time one of the guys tries to engage me, I lift my head with a convincing smile and reply like nothing’s wrong because it shouldn’t be. Maybe I’m just hungry; yeah, I bet that’s where all these emotions have come from; it’s hunger.

If I had any doubt that Storm was trying to get some sort of reaction out of me, it's immediately blown out of the water when he interrupts my conversation with Loki.

"Are you okay, Princess?" he sneers before tightening his arms around the woman sitting on his lap and giving me a vicious smile. "You look like something is bothering you."

The others tense, and I swear I hear one of them growl, but I beam back at Storm, "Aww, Stormy, that's so fucking cute that you care so much that you noticed. I think I was just hungry though. We spent a long afternoon getting all hot and sweaty. I really worked up an appetite." My overly sweet voice ends with a sharp grin as his face turns from smug to calculating within seconds. I swear I see a flash of disappointment darken his eyes before he hides it again.

Loki lets out a bark of laughter at my words and what I'm clearly implying, and Reaper coughs to cover his own laugh while Rival and Mayhem just watch on, amused.

"You were with her this afternoon?" the woman on his lap asks, a disgusted curl to her lip as she looks me over.

"She's ugly," the other one adds in, and I roll my eyes at her unoriginal insult as I continue shovelling food into my mouth. I'm ready to get out of here now.

I watch in fascination as Storm's eyes darken with shadows, and they start to form around his wrists.

Smirking, I say, "Don't worry, it wasn't just him. I got hot and sweaty with all of my team." I take my time to look over Storm, making my perusal evident before I add, "I'm sure he's got some stamina left for you two."

Mayhem chokes on a bit of food as Loki turns his wide eyes to me, and Kill leans back in his chair, smiling smugly.

"I'm more than happy to get all hot and sweaty with you again, Darlin'," Kill offers and receives a dark look from his brother.

"I certainly wouldn't turn down a second round," Loki adds, playing along.

Rival shrugs nonchalantly, “I could work out some more tension.”

Reaper surprises me further as he meets my eyes and winks before saying loudly, “Same, and I can either fight or fuck, so getting hot and sweaty works for me.”

I practically choke on my own spit, and the inferno he’s created in my underwear from the image his words created practically incinerates my underwear. Well, fuck me, yes, please. Wait, actually, no, I’m not going to take that back. There’s no fucking denying I’d love to ride the mysterious supernatural.

Storm’s eyes practically bulge out of his head, as an orange spark lights his horns, “What the fuc ...”

“So she’s a slut too. It makes sense. I mean no one would do her unless she was easy anyway.” The women giggle together, and the teasing air that was surrounding the rest of us sours.

I sigh heavily and shove the last bite of food on my plate into my mouth, “And that’s when I take my leave. Fuck you both.”

I grin as I get up and walk away, hearing the tell-tale scrape of chairs as someone else gets up as well.

“Whoa, wait a minute,” Loki says as he reaches my side, anger simmering in his eyes.

“Yeah, you can’t leave without grabbing something from the dessert table.” Rival grins as he grabs my arm and gently steers me towards the table in question.

I glance around at all of them surrounding me and then back at the table where Storm’s eyes are glued to us despite the wandering hands of the two women who are trying to entertain him.

My heart warms. I grin and thread my arm through Rival’s. “No, how could I forget dessert?”

“Don’t listen to them. Even if we had been doing what you were implying, it’s none of their fucking business, and poly

relationships are or at least were the norm for supernaturals until recently.” Reaper tries to reassure me sweetly.

“Thank you, I know all that, and it didn’t really bother me. I don’t really care what either of them thinks about me.” I reply honestly. I don’t, I do care about what Storm thinks of me though, and I hate it, which is why I add, “can we take the desserts up to the room, though? I don’t fancy sitting back down and being insulted.”

Loki wraps his arm around my shoulders, and his lips brush the top of my head, sending butterflies soaring through my stomach, “Of course, we can even put a movie on.”

“Thanks,” I reply simply, their kindness and consideration is still a shock to me. “Could we watch Notting Hill from the Earth Realm? I love that one and how they use some of our sayings.”

I’m suddenly pulled into a very enthusiastic hug courtesy of Loki, “Yes! That’s one of my favourites, and the fuckers don’t let me watch it very often!”

Mayhem rolls his eyes with a smirk, “You watched it on repeat for a week. We had to limit you.”

Loki’s grin widens, but he stays silent, a happy bounce in his step as he moves over to the dessert table, apparently in a rush now that the film has been chosen. His whole demeanour makes a soft smile tug at the corner of my lips.

“I’ll be back in a minute; grab a dessert for me, Darling?” Killian asks me, and I nod.

He turns on his heel and a fierce look descending across his face as he starts to make his way back to Storm and the women. A quick glance at the others reveals the grim satisfaction contorting them.

“Do I want to know?” I ask, turning to the table and loading up a tray with everything that looks good. Over the past few days, I have learned that I have a major sweet tooth. Besides, in the movies, when people get sad, they eat desserts and comfort food, so I assume it’ll make me feel better.

“He’s just going to have a word, nothing to worry about,” Loki answers with his usual light-heartedness. “Come on, let’s take this up to the room and watch our favourite film.”

As I turn to follow the others, my eyes land on the long table at the front of the hall where the teachers usually eat, and something about it strikes me as odd. I pause in my steps and frown as I realise what strikes me as strange.

“Guys,” I call out, making them all pause and turn back to me. “The Headmaster and half of the teachers are missing, and look at the expressions of those who are here.”

Instead of questioning what I’m talking about, they all turn in the direction of the teacher’s dining table and observe them.

“None of them has touched their food,” Mayhem points out with a frown.

“And they all look on edge. They’ve got the sound-dampening spell around them to stop our noise from bothering them and their conversations being heard like normal. However, they’re still bending their heads together and darting their eyes around like they’re worried about being overheard,” Rival adds, looking over them with a critical and curious eye.

“Do you think it has got something to do with whatever Zev had to see the Headmaster about?” Reaper asks.

“Without a doubt,” Killian replies, joining the conversation and obviously hearing enough that he knows what we’re talking about.

“I have a feeling that shits about to hit the fan,” Loki mutters, and we all hum in agreement.

Killian takes the tray of desserts off of me and holds it with one hand as he reaches out with his other hand and threads his fingers through mine. He gently pulls me away from the dining hall, the others following as he leads me back up to the room.

As soon as we push through the door, Loki makes a mad dash for his room, and I look at the others curiously.

“Where’s he off to in such a hurry? I thought he wanted to watch the film?”

“He’s going to put pyjamas on. You can’t watch a film and eat your weight in desserts in normal clothes.” Rival grins, starting towards his own room.

I realise that they’re all going to get changed, and I feel the familiar rise of anxiety. I pull my hand from Killian’s and start twirling one of my rings in a nervous gesture.

“Are you all going to put pyjamas on?” I ask. My voice is more timid than I like.

Rival pauses in his doorway and turns around, frowning when he catches whatever look is currently on my face, “We normally do, but we don’t have to if it makes you uncomfortable. That’s the last thing we’d want to do.”

My anxiety recedes a small amount at his gentle tone and the easy acceptance to make me feel better.

I can do this. I can tell them what’s really wrong. Despite not knowing them for very long, I trust them, surprisingly. I feel the nudge of Poca’s head against my stomach; he always appears when my anxiety starts to rise. I reach out my hand and run it through the reassuring warmth of his fur.

“It’s not that, not at all. It’s just, I don’t have pyjamas. My father considered them a luxury I didn’t need when I could just sleep in my clothes.” I shrug.

The anger that pulses through the room is not what I was expecting, and I’m immensely grateful when Loki bounds out of his room, interrupting the silence as he stops in front of me and gives me something else to focus on.

He thrusts a bundle of fabric out towards me, and I grasp it quickly to avoid it all falling on the floor, “Here, I thought you could wear something of mine.”

He knew, and he tried to fix it. My heart melts into a gooey puddle as I stare up at him.

Chapter Thirteen

He starts to shift awkwardly in front of me, running his hand through his blood red hair as the room remains silent, and all of the guys look at him with varying expressions of shock and pride. I move closer to him, place my hand on his chest as he remains statue still and then rise up on my tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek, lingering longer than I should.

“Thank you, Loki. That’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever done for me.” I whisper sincerely before I step back, holding the clothes tightly to my chest and looking up at his mesmerising smile. His purple eyes practically glow with happiness at my words and small show of affection, and I don’t care how crazy it may sound, but I’m going to make sure I can put that smile on his face more often, even if it leaves me in a daze.

“You’re welcome, Love. Go and get changed so we can watch Notting Hill. I haven’t watched it for far too long,” smiling softly, he gently nudges me towards my room.

“You watched it last week.” Mayhem exclaims, exasperation colouring his tone.

I shut my door just as I hear Loki reply, “As I said, it’s been ages.”

My smile stays as I change into the grey joggers and huge black t-shirt that smells like Loki; I felt slightly crazy sniffing it, but no one saw me, and I’ll never admit I did. The clothes swamp me, the soft cotton shirt easily reaching my knees, I could probably get away with wearing it without the joggers, but I’m not comfortable enough for that yet, so instead, I roll up the cuffs a few times so that my feet actually appear out of the bottoms and I don’t end up tripping over them and most likely flashing my arse. I then realise that they come with a drawstring around the waist, so at least I don’t have to worry about them falling down if I do trip over them.

I rush to get back out to the sitting room and find the guys already settled down, each of them covered with blankets, what looks like hot chocolates set up on the coffee table and desserts on their laps while the rest of the puddings wait with the mugs on the table. We really did get too many for us to eat feasibly. Mayhem smiles as he points to the space next to him with a blanket already for me, and I practically skip over to it, wriggling in my seat to get comfy.

“Hot chocolate or dessert first?” Kill asks, a knowing glint in his eye.

“Dessert, obviously,” I grin.

He hands me a plate with a little bit of everything on it, and we all settle down to watch Notting Hill. Poca curled up on a pile of blankets one of the guys had obviously set up for him on the floor.

“How are they not setting on fire right now?” I ask the room, “he’s good at lowering his temperature but never enough that he can lay on something for any length of time. I have spells and things that I use to protect anything he wants to lie on.”

“We’re using a combination of our air and water to keep it cool enough and stop him from burning it up, and he seems to approve.” Rival explains.

“Impressive. Can you keep it up for the whole movie, or will it start to wear you both out?” I curiously ask.

“It’ll probably start to wear them out near the end of the movie,” Mayhem interjects.

“Wow, that’s quite a while to be holding your gifts and watching Tv at the same time.” I compliment, making pink spots appear on both of the twin’s cheeks. So freaking cute. Before I get distracted by how cute they are, I remember where I was going with my line of questioning, “If you hold it for a little bit longer, I’ll put his usual spell on the blankets to save you wearing yourselves out unnecessarily.”

“How long will it last?” Mayhem asks curiously, his analytical brain already spinning with possibilities.

I concentrate for a moment thinking of the spell I want, triggering it and then answer Mayhem, “Erm, well, I haven’t had anything I’ve done it to before set on fire yet, and the first time I did it was a good few years ago. You can let go of your elements now, guys. It should be there.”

“That shows an incredible amount of power and control to do that,” Mayhem says.

“It’s as easy as breathing for me,” I admit. “It wasn’t at first, but I’ve done it so often now that it’s easy.”

Once Poca is all sorted, they settle down, getting comfortable to watch the film, and I try my hardest to ignore the fact that I am definitely feeling Storm’s absence and what his absence means. I highly doubt that he’s just talking with those women.

Deciding to distract myself, I focus on the screen; it shocks me how well the TV is working. We can get away with smaller electrical appliances from the Earth realm working over here, but Televisions tend to test that boundary, and they glitch every now and then or even turn off completely for no reason. So far though we’ve had uninterrupted movie viewing pleasure.

It’s halfway through the film when the door to the apartment opens, and Storm walks in, he pauses only a few feet into the room, and his eyes flicker over us and to the screen. The others all stay resolutely watching the screen, not really acknowledging his presence apart from the head nods when he walked in. His eyes cloud with something that I’m almost certain is longing as he stands hesitantly only a few feet into the room, which is the only explanation for why I do what I do next.

Waiting until his eyes land on me again, I raise my eyebrow in challenge as I scoot up closer to Mayhem and lift the edge of my blanket, inviting him without words to join us. I’m aware that the guys are watching us both, although they’re all trying to pretend that they’re still watching the film.

I fight to control my facial expression, stopping it from showing the shock I feel when his face morphs into confusion,

and he takes a step towards me, almost like he's actually going to accept my offer. Instead, he frowns as if his actions have confused him and then veers off, striding towards his room, making me sigh as I lower the blanket back down. I honestly don't know why I'm still trying with Storm when he's made it perfectly clear he doesn't like me. Maybe it's because whether he likes it or not, we are stuck together as a team until we die. There's no other way out, no matter what the Headmaster was trying to convince them of when I first arrived. So one way or another, we're going to have to learn how to get along because otherwise, we're going to make life hell for the others and risk putting everyone at risk if we don't have each other's backs on a mission.

"I have no idea what his problem is," Rival starts, "even if he doesn't like you..."

Kill interrupts with a scoff, "Which seems unlikely."

"True, but even if he didn't, he should still be able to be civil. He fucking hates the arseholes on the Tempre team and managed not to be such a big dick to them." Rival finishes.

"The problem isn't that he doesn't like her." Shoving a bite of chocolate cake in his mouth, Reaper mutters, his eyes still on the TV.

It's silent for a few seconds before Loki caves, "Well are you going to fill us in on what the problem is then? It felt like you were going somewhere with that."

"Oh, right yeah, she makes him feel, and he doesn't know how to handle that, so he gets bitchy." We all just stare at him incredulously after that confession, so he adds, "think about it, he's shown more flashes of brief emotion in the last few days than he has for years."

"You actually may be on to something," Kill muses, looking thoughtful.

"Of course I am," he replies smugly, and I let out a quiet chuckle.

"Even if that is the case, he needs to fucking stop it with how he's treating Farren. She doesn't deserve half the shit he's

fucking doing.” Loki warns.

Storm opens his bedroom door back up, wearing black joggers and a loose white t-shirt before anyone can respond. The room falls silent as the guys all pretend to go back to watching the tv. My attention, however, stays on Storm as he reaches where I’m sitting and shifts from foot to foot awkwardly. There’s a vulnerability about him right now that has my heart softening for him in a way that it shouldn’t be. I lift the corner of the blanket again, and my heart nearly leaps out of my chest when he sits down stiffly next to me, his eyes laser-focused on the tv.

My wide eyes move to the others, who infuriatingly don’t look like they’re shocked at this turn of events. Rival even shrugs at my questioning stare as if to say it is what it is. Reaper looks smug like he knew this was going to happen, and I’m just sitting here staring at the screen, tense as fuck, wondering if we’ve finally crossed over into him tolerating me.

I’m also getting mad at myself because since when was I this freaking girl. I wouldn’t have given a flying monkey fuck what he thought about me that long ago; in fact, I would’ve preferred it, and actually, I still feel like that about every other fucker apart from these guys. It’s probably because of the whole spear team choosing thing, making me a team player and making me actually give a shit about them. While I understand the reasoning behind that, I feel like I need to take just a slight step back before these friendship feelings turn into something that will destroy me and considering they’re already edging towards that, it’s a legitimate concern.

For the rest of the film, I force myself to relax and stuff my face with desserts and eventually, Storm relaxes next to me, although he stays silent the entire time, and when we finally do go to bed, he gets up without a word and softly closes his door behind him. I don’t even bother to comment on it as I say a quick goodnight to the guys, call Poca and fall into bed. It has been a long and emotional day.

While I’m with the guys, I seem to be able to forget that my life is fucked up. My father tortures me for funsies, and my

hands are drenched in the blood of kills, some of whom probably didn't deserve their fate, but I followed orders, or I ended up in even worse condition than I was. In the last two years, I've done my own research into the targets my father sends me out after, and if they're innocent, then I help to hide them. I have a network of trusted people who help me safely get these targets out of my father's path. None of them know my identity, of course. I've developed spells and weapons that look like they kill when in actual fact, it's just an extremely strong illusion. I've been through things that are so horrifying that most people wouldn't be able to dream it in their nightmares, and yet when I'm with the others, I find it easier to push it away.

Now that I'm alone and the dark tentacles of sleep are reaching for me, the demons from my not-so-distant past are salivating with the desire to remind me exactly how much control they have over me. I really fucking hope these rooms are soundproof.

Fortunately for me, I either didn't make any noise despite the horrific nature of my nightmares, the rooms were soundproofed, or none of the guys cared that I was screaming like a banshee. I don't think it would've been the last one.

Over the next few days, we quickly fall into the routine of classes and spending the evenings together either studying or just getting to know each other better. So far, I have been successful in keeping it to a friendly level, and we've had no more incidents of people trying to murder me, which is both a relief and slightly concerning. It's concerning because I don't think it's ever been this long between murder attempts, and that's putting me massively on edge. Because of that, I'm feeling restless. I've lived the same life of violence and fighting to stay alive for so long that the mundane routine I've found myself in over the last few days has been precisely that mundane.

I never thought I'd be wishing for someone to try to take me out, just to assuage my own boredom. Don't get me wrong, the classes are interesting, and I am learning things in most of them, except combat, where I still have to keep my true skills and strength on the down low, which isn't helping with restlessness at all.

Zev was in combat class the day after his vision and, as predicted, wouldn't say anything about what happened. Worryingly though, he's been training extra hard and making sure that on any sparring we have that we are paired together. I first thought it was so I could help him, but I've quickly learned that he's helping me just as much. He's showing me how to get around a fighter that can predict your moves before you make them, and it's an important skill to have. He's stepped it up enough that I'd say that he was preparing for a battle that he knows is going to happen and not just the vague idea of one happening at some point.

We've all taken our cues from him and have, in turn, stepped up our own training. Even so, there's only so much we can do, and I've realised that I'm not the only one who holds back the guys do too. Those moments sparring with Zev are helping to control the restlessness a bit but not enough, and my magic is still acting out. I still have to keep a tight hold on it at all times.

I've tried to catch Zev after class just to talk to him, but he rushes off every time, not even bothering to shower and change. The teachers were all still acting like there was something massive going on, but as of yesterday have started to behave more normally, not that I'm buying it.

Then we have Storm. I naively thought that after the movie night, he would've at least warmed up to me, but it seems to have gone the opposite way. He's finding every opportunity to needle me, and it got annoying enough that any feelings I thought I had for him are thoroughly buried. I'm enjoying winding him up as much as he's enjoying pissing me off. That brief moment of vulnerability that I had in the dining room has definitely passed. Thank fuck. The others have learned just to leave us to it now, and I think they mostly find it amusing

when we get in verbal sparring matches. My walls have officially slid back into place as far as he's concerned, which makes dealing with him a hell of a lot easier.

All in all, I'm enjoying being here, which is surprising. I just wish my nightmares would fuck off already. Poca has been practically glued to my side for the past few days; thanks to the panic attacks I keep waking up with, the lack of sleep is making me stabby.

I might have to see if Kill will take me back to the Crypt with him when he plans to go in a couple of days to check-in. I'm sure I could get me a decent fight there or at least piss someone off enough to want to murder me.

I am aware that is not a healthy line of thinking but fuck it.

"Are we even going to bother trying to catch up with him today?" Reaper's tone is bored as we all stare after a retreating Zev.

"No point. He disappears like a fucking pro, give him a couple of years, and he'll be good enough for the Crypt." Killian compliments.

"High praise, coming from you." Storm replies.

Whereas he's gotten more hostile with me, he

seems to have gone the other way when it comes to the guys, showing them more snippets of emotion other than anger. What the fuck ever, I'm done trying to figure him out.

"Food, I'm starving," I say simply because I'm stabby, and food seems to help.

The guys share an amused look that seems to communicate something else as well, but I really can't be bothered to figure it out. Shrugging, I make my way toward the changing rooms.

"Hang on a minute, Farren. Can you come back here? I need to talk to the whole team." The instructor calls after me, and I let out an annoyed sigh before turning back around and heading back.

Wow, food seriously better help because my stabby-ness has reached a new level today.

The instructor eyes my petulant stomp with a raised eyebrow but wisely chooses not to comment. However, Storm scoffs without humour, and I meet his gaze daring him to say something to me right now because I bet he could give me a proper fucking fight. He opens his mouth, and I feel anticipation spark through me before it quickly gets snuffed out when Mayhem elbows him in the ribs, and Storm snaps his mouth shut, settling on glaring at me instead. Being the mature twenty-one-year-old woman I am, I stick my tongue out at him.

Loki snorts but quickly turns it into a cough when the instructor glares at him.

“How can we help you?” Storm asks formally.

“The Headmaster would like to see you all in his office before dinner. You’re being sent out on your first mission.”

“Already?” Mayhem asks.

“Due to recent developments, everyone will start to be sent out on missions over the next few weeks.” With no further explanation, he turns on his heel and walks off.

What a knob. He is definitely not one of these teachers that has their student’s best interests in mind. He couldn’t care less and that’s not exactly something that you want in a teacher.

Chapter Fourteen

“Well, it’s official, something big is going on, and it affects everyone, not just royalty,” Loki mutters.

“It might not be the same two things. It’s entirely possible that something different is happening with royalty.” Rival suggests.

Storm gives him a dry look, “It’s too big of a coincidence. Come on, team, get changed, and we’ll meet out in the hallway. Let’s get this over with.”

There’s a thrum of excitement that permeates the air around us. We may be going out on a mission earlier than students have done in the past, but we’re ready. At least individually, we are, but as a team, we might have a few hiccups.

My smile widens at the prospect of a proper fucking fight. Storm sees it and, of course, tries to make me lose it.

“You need to hurry up, Farren. No time to make yourself pretty.” He smirks.

“One, that makes no sense. When has Farren ever taken longer than us to get ready, and two, you know as well as I do, Farren doesn’t have to do anything to make herself pretty; she’s beautiful.” Reaper chastises, shaking his head and striding into the locker room while I stare after him.

He just called me beautiful, me!

“Pathetic,” Storm scoffs as he stomps past me.

“Uh oh,” Loki mutters, pure joy in his tone. They’ve witnessed enough of our sparring matches by this point that they know I’m not going to let that slide.

“Hey Stormy,” I call sweetly, knowing the name winds him up, which is why I use it. Despite himself, he stops and looks

back over his shoulder at me. “I’ve met some pricks in my time, but you, sir, are an entire fucking cactus.”

The guys burst out laughing, and Storm turns red, but I swear I see the corner of his lip twitch slightly like he wants to smile. That’s become my new favourite game; trying to see if I can get him to smile a genuine fucking smile at me. Something other than the stoic façade or anger he usually aims in my direction.

Deciding that, for now, my point has been made, I strut past him, trying not to look smug so I don’t start a full sparring match, and we never get to the Headmaster. My mood has definitely improved now there’s a possibility of a good fight. Although now that I’m thinking about it, the chances of our first mission being one that requires us to use any of our combat skills are pretty low. It’s more likely that we’re going to be sent to settle a dispute using words only, which is not my strong suit, and in the mood I’m in, I may very well end up setting someone on fire just to entertain myself.

As I get dressed, I send up a quick plea to whatever god will listen, asking them to please let the job be at least mildly entertaining.

The smug smile I managed to keep at bay earlier returns full force as I realise that I’ve beaten Storm in getting ready. It’s not long until all the others, including Storm, are in the hallway, and I open my mouth to tease Storm as he glares at me, practically daring me to say something.

“Don’t start, you two. We need to get going.” Reaper warns, and I mime, zipping my lips closed as we quickly make our way through the hallways and towards the Headmaster’s office.

“Do you think we’re the first to get a mission?” Loki asks.

“I think we would have heard before now that teams were being sent out before their last year.” Rival replies, “you know what this school is like; anything that is remotely interesting makes its way around the academy within seconds. I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone knows by the time we get out of the meeting.”

“I hope the dining hall is still open when we get out. I’m hangry.” I mutter.

“Don’t worry, Darling; if it’s not, we’ll get something ordered to the room,” Killian reassures me, wrapping a tattooed and muscled arm around my shoulders and pulling me in close.

Storm strides through the door into the reception area with purpose.

“The Headmaster will be ready for you in a minute if you’d like to take a seat.” She says in a bored voice.

The guys seem slightly taken aback that they’ve been asked to wait, and I’m reasonably certain it’s because they’ve usually been seen immediately. Still, we all sit down on the plush velvet chairs lining one wall just outside of the Headmaster’s office. I wouldn’t put it past the Headmaster to be trying to play some sort of mind game with us. Trying to build up the anticipation or psych us out and make us nervous before he tells us what the mission is. Not for any other reason than it seems like it would be something he’d enjoy doing.

Even if that is what he’s doing, I think he’s massively underestimated us. Unlike most teams that have only been together for a week or so, we were lucky enough to click almost immediately and seem to share the same excitement for a fight. I’m also aware that these guys have been through more than they’ve let on and are more capable in real-world scenarios.

The Headmaster makes us wait for at least half an hour, and by the time he finally calls us in, the guys are twitchy. Not from nerves, or at least not that I can tell but from anticipation. On the other hand, I just feel like my stomach is going to eat itself.

He ushers us into his office like we’re on a timeline despite having made us wait for so long to see him. When we’re all positioned around the room because, of course, he doesn’t have enough chairs in the room for all of us, he regally takes a seat behind his desk, steeples his hands and just looks over us all.

Storm, clearly having had enough, steps forward, “You wanted to see us, sir?”

“Yes, of course. There’s been a level one rogue vamp spotted around the edges of the next town over. Due to recent developments, we’ve decided to start sending younger teams out like we used to do, and we’re sending your team in to deal with it. As you are aware, level one is the lowest threat level, so you should have no issues.” The whole time he speaks, his eyes watch Reaper and I closely, and I can’t for the life of me figure out why but it instantly puts my guard up.

“When do we leave?” Storm asks.

“First thing in the morning, we anticipate that you’ll be back by lunch and can resume your usual class schedules assuming none of you has sustained injuries that need seeing to.” This time his eyes stay on me, and there’s an unmistakable glint in them that sends a prickle of warning down my spine.

I am relatively sure that he’s up to something, but I keep my face blank as if I’ve noticed nothing out of the ordinary. I’ll wait until we’re done here and ask the guys to see if they’ve noticed anything. There’s a chance I may be being paranoid.

“We’ll be ready.” Storm replies firmly, his eyes narrowing slightly at the Headmaster.

It looks like it might not just be me who has noticed something off.

“I do not doubt it. Reika, my receptionist, has a file for each of you detailing the location and the target.” The Headmaster informs us.

Storm nods and then turns to leave, the rest of us following his lead, and it’s not until the door shuts behind us that I finally stop feeling the Headmaster’s eyes burning into my back. Storm grabs the files from Reika, not bothering to hand them out yet as we all make our way back to the room. As soon as the door shuts, he hands out the files, and I quickly flick through mine. There really isn’t much information in it. Just the name of the village, the forest it’s been seen in, and the level the vamp is. That’s it, a single piece of paper in a file.

I know I'm new here, but we've had mock case files given to us in lessons to study and familiarise ourselves with them, and every single one had more information in it than this one.

Reaper throws his folder down on the table, a frown to rival Storm's on his face, "Okay, first, that file is completely fucking useless. They've left out a lot of stuff that should be in there, and second what was up with the Headmaster? He kept looking at Farren and me like he knew something that we didn't."

"I thought it was just me that noticed that," I reply.

"No, I did too," Killian adds in.

"He's up to something that much is clear. We need to make sure that we have our guards up." Storm orders.

"I agree, something isn't right, but we don't have any evidence to be able to question it. We're just going to have to do this job and hope that he hasn't left anything vital out." Mayhem suggests.

"Good idea. We can handle almost anything he throws at us." Rival adds. "I'm going to order food. What do you guys want?"

We all put in our orders, and while we are waiting for it to be delivered, we start talking about the plan for the mission.

"It seems fairly straightforward. As the rogue is a level one, we can just behead the fucker, and he'll ash. We'll take the horses rather than a carriage, one because it's less conspicuous and two because it's quicker." Storm lays out the plan efficiently.

Despite all his misgivings, he was born to be a leader, and I have no problem with following him.

"That sounds good. The only thing I'd add is that since we're fairly sure something dodgy is going on, we need to make sure we bring supplies for staying overnight just in case we get caught out for some reason." Killian suggests.

Storm surprises me when he readily agrees with him, proving that he really is a good leader since he listens to his

teammate's suggestions rather than being stubborn and insisting that it's his way only. The guys carry on talking about the supplies they need to take and what the strange behaviour of the Headmaster could mean, but my mind wanders. I've done missions like this probably hundreds of times by now, and with fewer supplies than they are suggesting we take. Not that what they're wanting to take is unnecessary. It's just that I know I can do it with nothing but a weapon and my horse. I also know I can do it without a team too, and that's where my distraction has come from; I am not used to working with other people, and I'm not used to having to make sure that other people are coping well during a fight and don't need back up.

Add in that these people I actually like, and it's giving me massive anxiety. Logically I know they're capable; they fought me just after I came out of the Void and held their own, which is pretty much unheard of when it comes to my experience of coming out of the Void. It's just making me nervous, which is not a feeling I'm used to having.

"Does the princess know how to ride, or is one of us going to have to buddy with you?" Storm asks, bringing me out of my thoughts with his snarky tone.

"I can ride," I reply, letting my voice hint at hesitancy I don't feel. I love it when he underestimates me.

The truth is I've been riding since I was tiny. Father couldn't very well send me out on all of his personal missions if I had no mode of transport, and because of the way I lived, I have far less fear than I should have, and I push myself and my horse to the limits. My horse, Revel, is used to me and thankfully likes taking as many risks as I do. I was insistent that he be brought here as well since I wouldn't have been surprised if my father had him killed just because he knew I had a bond with him. He was sent behind me and arrived a couple of days ago. I haven't managed to find the time to get down to the stables to see him yet, and I know he's going to be pissed at me.

Fae horses aren't like the ones that the Earth realm has. They can communicate with us through feelings and sometimes if

you develop a strong enough bond, pictures as well. They're also stronger, faster and bigger than the Earth realm horses I've seen and come in many different colours. Revel is the same colour as black opal, meaning that although his base colour is black, he has streaks of red, teal, purple and even a pearlescent star in the middle of his broad head. He's stunning.

"Don't worry, Love; they have spare horses. You'll be able to use one of them, and we can take it slow. The only time limit on us is one we've given ourselves." Loki says reassuringly, and I almost feel bad, that is until Storm opens his mouth.

"If you're too slow, we'll just put you on one of our saddles." He says bluntly. "Like the princess you are."

"Shut the fuck up, you spanner. You know full well I'm not a fucking princess." I growl.

A trickle of regret flashes through his eyes ever so briefly, but he keeps his mouth clamped shut, not apologising. Not that I expected him to.

"Did you just call him a spanner?" Loki asks, amused and incredulous all at the same time.

"Well yeah, I think it's funny," I reply with a shrug. "I think I saw it in an old British tv show."

"Alright, I think that's something else we need to talk about," crossing his arms over his broad chest, Killian stares at Storm and me with a severe expression, his tail tapping against his leg.

"What?" Storm, sounding almost petulant, asks.

"You two need to knock off the sexually charged verbal sparring you have going on. At least while we're on the mission." Killian states.

Storm's mouth drops open, and shock rears its head in me at the implication of his words.

Storm fumbles with his words for a second before managing to get out through grinding teeth, "Fine."

Killian looks pleased with himself and then looks at me, “Farren?”

“Sure, I can do that,” I reply casually, hiding my reaction to his words much better than Storm did.

“Great.”

Storm seems to have composed himself as he clears his throat, “We better get an early night. I want to set off at sunrise so we can get back quicker.”

With that, he turns on his heel and makes his way into his room, closing his door slightly harder than necessary.

I say a quick goodnight to the guys and go to my own room, getting changed into the pyjamas that turned up in my room at some point during the day. I lift the shirt to my nose and take a deep inhale; these are Reaper’s. Ever since movie night, I’ve had a new set of pyjamas in my room every day, and each time, they smell of a different one of the guys. I even had a set which I swear smelled like Storm. It makes me melt every damn time.

The next morning I pull on my fighting leathers. They’ve protected me in more fights than I can count and consist of supple black leather trousers that cling to my figure and have spells built into them to not only repel certain attacks but also to hide my weapons well enough that they wouldn’t be found in a search. I never hide all of my weapons because that would make people suspicious. I pull on a tight long-sleeved black cotton shirt and then layer my leather corset-style top over it. It covers my boobs with two straps that cross over the front of my chest and then onto my back, turning into a harness that will hold two of my swords for easy access.

Before I pull on my ankle-length black leather jacket with deep red-purple accents, I pull out my bag of weapons from under my bed. I still haven’t found an adequate hiding place for them, but I have put layer after layer of defensive spells on

them, so if anyone did find them, they wouldn't be able to talk about it afterwards. It may seem a bit extreme, but it's not just ordinary weapons I'm protecting. They're weapons that match those that are known to have been used in assassinations by me, mostly because I've left them behind through necessity. They're distinct enough with their purple inlaid runes and black gemstone blades that they would instantly draw suspicion. I can't have anyone here find out my real identity.

Because of that, I very carefully avoid any of those weapons, settling on arming myself with my other blades and my most favourite weapon that I don't get to use as much as I'd like. It has a soft, supple handle that fits in my hand perfectly and is easily described as a whip with a blade on the end. If used properly, it can easily decapitate an enemy without getting in striking range. It took me a long time to master, but now I rarely go anywhere without it; even if I don't get to use it as much as I like, it gets pride of place on my hip as one of the weapons that won't be concealed along with the swords on my back. However, hidden from sight, I have eight more daggers. Finally, checking that I have everything, I don't bother to grab a bag. One, because even if something goes wrong and we end up staying for a couple of days, my clothes are sufficient, and two, because I never have before. The only thing I do take is spare underwear because gross, and they go into a concealed pocket in my jacket.

Satisfied I have everything I need; I step out of my room to meet the guys.

Chapter Fifteen

The first thing I notice is the pile of small bags by the door. Clearly, they're coming more prepared than I am. The second thing is the smell of coffee and breakfast, which makes me frown.

"I thought we needed to leave?" I ask the others who are already out here doing various things to prepare. My question is met with silence, and I tilt my head to the side questioningly as I look over them, waiting for them to reply. When no one answers me after five minutes, and they're still staring, I ask, "what?"

That finally seems to snap them out of it and, for some reason, has Storm suddenly very focused on whatever he's cooking on the stove, a different kind of spark burning between his horns, it's almost smouldering. Rival and Mayhem's cheeks turn slightly pink, and they busy themselves by readying their empty weapons harnesses. Reaper just looks at me with a hungry look in his eyes, leaving Loki and Killian to share a loaded look and what I can only describe as a downright filthy smirk.

"You look fucking stunning," Loki practically growls.

"I'm half tempted to say fuck it to this bullshit mission and spend my day worshipping you instead," Killian adds.

My thighs clench. I know first hand how well he can make my body fucking sing for him, and the thought of actually having him inside me almost make me take him up on the offer.

"Fucking hell." Storm mutters loud enough to hear from the kitchen area of the room, "the food is ready; we need to get going. Grab your bag from your room and put it by the front door." He says to me surprisingly with no underlying tone.

"I have everything I need," I reply, taking a seat at the table and loading my plate up with food like the others.

He eyes me up and down for longer than strictly necessary and then scoffs. Ah, here comes the insult I was missing in the first instance.

“You’ve only got three weapons Princess, rookie move.”

“Storm, we’ve only got the one each that we store in our rooms. She’s got more than us. Could you give it a rest? She can pick up more in the armoury like we’re going to.” Mayhem snaps, and it’s the first time I’ve heard him even vaguely lose his cool. He’s usually so calm and collected, even in a fight.

I stand up, having finished my breakfast already since I practically inhaled it and didn’t bother to stop eating when Storm started in on me.

Giving Storm a level look, I say, “I am getting really fed up with you fucking underestimating me all the time. I’m used to it from other people, but whether you like me or not, we are still a team, and we cannot afford to question or doubt each other.”

Storm’s eyebrows rise slightly at my words.

Not giving him a chance to reply, I move over to the coffee table and start to take off all my weapons, laying them all on the table and even taking the hairpins out that double as a garrote. By the time I’m done, the table is almost overflowing. Reaper lets out an impressed whistle as I turn back to the guys.

“As you can see, I am more than prepared for any eventuality and will not be needing to go to the armoury.”

“I apologise,” Storm says, shocking me as his eyes don’t leave me, and he misses the reaction his words have on the others. “You are right. Underestimating each other could be dangerous out in the field.”

Despite my shock, I manage to reply, “Thank you.”

“Well fuck me sideways; Storm apologised and said someone else was right. You must be something special, Little Warrior.” Reaper grins.

I decide it might be best to ignore that comment since Storm is being friendly for a change, and I don't want to push it. I quickly put all my weapons back where they belong.

"If you guys have got another backpack, I'm happy to help carry some stuff," I say, gesturing needlessly to the pile of bags by the door.

"Sure, hang on," Rival says, getting up and making his way to his room. He comes back out and hands me a small leather bag that will fit comfortably on my back and not restrict my movement so I can still access my swords with it on, perfect.

"Shall I just take something out of each bag?" I ask.

"Put what you need in it first, and then we can fill up whatever space is left."

"I really do have everything I need." I reply, and then because of the sceptical look he gives me, I add, "I've gone out with less for longer."

"What do you mean?" Reaper asks, joining the conversation and tilting his head to the side in a purely animal gesture.

I realise my mistake immediately. I don't want them to know about how early my father was sending me out on assassinations or how many I've done. Even Killian doesn't know the extent of it, although I'm sure he's guessed. I haven't been as careful with my words around him as I am with everyone else, which is probably why I keep slipping up now I'm used to speaking more freely around him.

"It doesn't matter. Just share out what's already in the bags. At least it'll be less for each of us to carry then." I pray that they both let it go because I absolutely don't want to explain anything right now. My past is bloody, and if I questioned whether Storm hated me before, I do not doubt that he definitely will after he finds out that part of my dark past.

Rival nods and takes the bag back, going over to the door to start sharing the stuff out evenly between them all. Reaper, though continues to stare at me, his eyes narrowed slightly, his nostrils flare as he takes a deep inhale and it's at that moment that I realise that whatever kind of shifter he is, he can smell

emotions and usually only Alpha's can, which solidifies my original theory that he might be one.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him once and for all what he is, but the words catch in my throat as he takes a large step toward me, and I have to tilt my head up to meet his penetrating stare. Surprise flares to life in his yellow eyes as I simply stand there staring up at his massive figure without backing up or looking nervous. He doesn't scare me. In fact, I'm curious about him, and if I'm being completely honest, I find him seriously fucking hot. The fact that he looks like he could lift me easily with one hand is a massive contributing factor, that and his arms are the size of my thighs.

I stay deathly still as he bends down, hooking one giant arm around my waist at the same time his lips graze my ear.

"If you carry on looking at me like that, Little Warrior, I'm going to be tempted take you right fucking here, and I'm not sure you're ready for that." His voice is a gravelly purr in my ear, and I couldn't stop my sharp inhale or the shivers that cascade down my spine if I fucking tried.

My reaction to him is why I speak without a filter, "I think you'd find me more ready than you'd assume, but we do have to get going, and if I ever get the chance to climb you like a fucking tree, I want more than a quickie."

He groans as his arm tightens around me and brings me closer, holding me flush against his taught body and extremely hard dick. Fuck me sideways; it's huge.

"Naughty," he chastises mildly, "you distracted me. I actually wanted to say that I know there are things that you haven't shared," he pauses as I stiffen in his arms, "let me finish, I know there are things that have caused you a great deal of pain, and if you ever want to talk about it I'm here. Whatever you tell me will not go beyond us two. I have a feeling that we may have more in common than you think."

He leans back slightly, searching my eyes. Although his offer terrifies me, I understand the sentiment behind it, and I nod my head.

“I can’t promise I will ever take you up on that, I think some things are better left in the past, but if I’m ever ready, it’s you who I’ll talk to, thank you.”

“I understand.” He replies, and surprisingly he really looks like he means that. In another move that shocks me, I’m sensing a theme today, he leans towards me again and gently kisses my cheek, causing tingles to erupt on my cheek, and I resist the urge to touch it. “I wanted you to know that I’m here for you if you need me.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

“Alright, let’s get going!” Storm barks out, but he seems to be sticking to the request the guys made of us last night and is keeping the snarky comments to himself.

I was so wrapped up in Reaper that everything outside the two of us completely disappeared. He smirks as my cheeks pinken, and I step back from him, not quite able to hide the awkwardness I feel. Rival hands me the backpack, and we all make our way out of the apartment so that the guys can stock up on their weapons. I pretend to ignore the curious looks that dart between Reaper and me as he walks as close to me as possible without actually touching me.

I can’t help but search out Killian, though. For a long time, it was just him and me; even though we only saw each other sporadically, and I’m sure we each had other romantic encounters, it was never in front of one another. Although this wasn’t romantic, at least not obviously, and we haven’t committed to each other, something just urges me to check in with him. I think it’s most likely because of my own confusion. I’m starting to feel things for the others that I have only really felt with him. More than just need, actually feelings, and I have no idea how to deal with that.

I just know that I absolutely can’t lose Killian; he’s my rock, and there is no way that I would’ve survived the last goddess knows how many years without him, even though I couldn’t get to him in the last three, he was still with me in my thoughts urging me not to give up.

When my eyes land on him, he's already looking at me with a soft expression. He reaches for me, his tail as usual wrapping around my thigh as he lets the guys move ahead slightly as he tucks me under his arm and kisses the top of my head.

"It's still you and me forever, Darling. Nothing will change between us even when you choose to add more into your life."

His words reassure me and yet confuse me all at the same time, but before I can question him, we reach the armoury, and I move off to the side as they all add weapons. It confuses me for a second when Killian picks out a few, too, until I remember that I pretty much kidnapped him to bring him here, and he hasn't gone back yet. I can guarantee that he still has more weapons on him than most people would, but he also has a habit of acquiring weapons from other places, too, so I'm reasonably certain he's just adding to his collection now, and the school will never see the weapons he chooses again.

It takes no time at all for them to gather the weapons they want, and I follow them as they take the lead through a side door in the castle and across the gardens towards the stables.

I have a feeling I'm going to regret not coming to see Revel sooner.

"What the fuck is that?" Loki asks as we get near enough to the stables to hear the racket one of them is making. Snorting, whinnying, stomping and from the sounds of it kicking something and winding the other horses up at the same time.

I have a sneaking suspicion that this might be down to Revel, but I'm holding out hope he's behaved until I get confirmation he hasn't.

We get to the door of the stables and are met by a harried looking stable hand.

"What's going on?" Storm asks.

"One of the horses that arrived a few days ago is kicking up a fuss. No one can get near him, he's bitten several people, and even our Fae stable hands that have gifts with horses can't get near him." He explains over the racket, "he's been like this since he arrived, and it's starting to drive us all mad now." He

adds, leading us further into the stables where the noise gets louder, the other horses joining in. “We wanted to move him away from the others, but he’s too dangerous.”

“Fucking hell, he’s proper going for it,” Rival says, shocked as the angry noises continue.

“For fuck sake,” I mutter, earning a questioning look from Reaper and Killian. “Cover your ears.”

Surprisingly they listen to me, and both put their hands over their ears. Loki sees them, looks at me and instantly does the same without question, making me smirk. I raise my fingers to my lips and whistle shrilly, walking forward and towards the stall at the end where the noise is coming from and where I am absolutely certain Revel is housed and being a bugger.

Storm whips around to chastise me before he realises that everything’s gone quiet.

I smirk, “Alright, you big baby, I’m here now. Stop with the damn racket.”

All I get in return in the now silent stables is a snort which brings a smile to my face. I ignore everyone as I get to his stall and reach out to unlatch the door.

“Erm, miss, I don’t know how you got him to settle, but I wouldn’t let him out if I were you.” The stable hand warns, a nervous edge to his voice.

“Don’t worry. He won’t hurt anyone now. He’s pissed at me.” I chuckle.

“You don’t seem as concerned as you should be considering what he’s just told us about that horse.” Storm comments with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s because I’m not.” My answer is simple as Revel, clearly having had enough of waiting for me to open the door, kicks it again, and I rush to unlatch it, so he doesn’t break the damn thing.

The others stay as far back as they can as my giant black horse comes barrelling out of the stall and straight for me. I remain still as he comes for me; despite all his posturing, he

wouldn't hurt me, and now I'm with him; he won't hurt anyone else. He's a giant softy, really, but he's got a massive personality, and if he's pissed, then everyone is going to know about it.

"Farren," Storm warns with an edge to his voice as Revel snaps his sharp pointed teeth in my direction.

I chuckle at his antics, "I missed you too, you grumpy fucker. Do you want to go for a ride?"

He snorts in agreement and then gently nudges my shoulder with his nose. I gently stroke his face in greeting as a sense of utter calm washes through me. He shows me a picture of a rundown shack, holes in the walls, rats in the straw and an empty food bucket.

I burst out laughing, shocking the guys who still haven't gotten their own horses ready, "I know for a fact that's not true, you cheeky fucker. They've been looking after you well even though you've been an arse."

"You can communicate with him?" Mayhem asks, curiosity infusing his voice. He takes a step closer, and Revel whips his head in his direction, causing him to pause in his steps.

As I start to answer him, Reaper strides past, utterly unconcerned as he approaches Revel, and before I can warn him to behave himself since they're my friends, not foe, he's nudging Reaper's arm with his head and completely ignoring me. My mouth drops open as I stare, and Reaper chuckles.

"I've got a way with animals, and he knows I'm no threat to you." He replies simply.

"It's a part of his nature," Loki adds, finally moving into another stall that I'm assuming is housing his horse.

The others are all doing the same, apart from Mayhem, who is still waiting for an answer.

"Erm, sorry that threw me off. Yeah, I can communicate with him, just in feelings and sometimes pictures. He tried to make out they mistreated him in here, but he's a shit liar." I chuckle.

“That’s fascinating. I’d love to hear more about how that works,” he starts excitement thrumming through his tone as his eyes light up at the prospect of more knowledge.

“Not now, mate. We’ve got to get going. We’ve already wasted enough time.” Storm interrupts firmly.

The look of disappointment on his face has me saying, “I’ll answer all questions when we’ve set off. We should have plenty of time.”

“Great, thanks, Farren.” He replies exuberantly as he moves to get his horse.

I quickly tack up Revel, who only gives me a little bit of shit while I do it and then look around, trying to find the stable hand that brought us in here. I spot him standing not too far away, watching Revel and me warily.

“I’m so sorry he was a pain; I promise he’ll behave himself now.” I start. When he still looks wary, I turn to Revel and give him a stern look, “won’t you?”

I swear if he could roll his eyes, he would, but instead, he dips his head in his version of a nod.

“Wow, okay, I’ll take your word for it, but if he gives me any more shit, you’ll have to feed him.”

“That’s fair.”

I swing up easily onto Revel and then walk him to the door to wait for the others who are running behind, thanks to the show that Revel put on. He stands reasonably calmly as we wait, which is a miracle in itself.

Chapter sixteen

Storm is the first to meet me outside the door, and I wait for the snark. I'm not expecting our truce to hold for the whole of this journey. I think that might be just a little bit optimistic. We take every opportunity to poke at each other. I will, however, hold the truce for as long as he does.

"So, I'm assuming you do know how to ride properly then?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Another way of showing me not to underestimate you?"

"Yes," I say simply again because I really don't know what else to say.

He nods, and we sit in surprisingly companionable silence. Finally, the others join us, and we all set off following Storm since he knows where we're going. The ride starts in silence which I enjoy until something occurs to me.

"How far away is the village?" I ask, not having bothered to before.

"About a three-hour ride," Killian replies, having obviously thought to find out that information before we set off.

"Thanks," I reply. I'm glad the village isn't days away, although Revel could probably do with the ride.

After that, the ride is mainly spent with Storm continuing to go over the plan even though we've been over it so many times that by this point, I think I could recite it in my sleep. I think he's more concerned about the way the Headmaster was acting towards Reaper and me, he's almost certain that there's something else going on with this mission, and I have to say I agree.

After three hours, we get to a tiny village that seems far too quiet for the time of the day. Usually, people would be getting

on with their daily tasks, and even in a village this size, the streets should be bustling with activity, but instead, there are only a couple of people out on the cobbled streets, and they look like they'd rather be anywhere else.

"The file didn't say anything about where exactly the Rogue vamp was last seen, did it?" Killian asks.

"No, and there doesn't seem to be anyone about who would be willing to point us in the right direction." Rival answers him.

"It's like a damn ghost town," Loki adds, looking around with concern.

"Well, in my experience the local tavern wouldn't be shut even in an apocalypse and is probably the best place to get some answers." Mayhem grins.

"I didn't realise you'd been here?" Storm questions as we make our way through the streets looking for the tavern.

"I haven't, but taverns are all the same no matter how small the village." He answers with a shrug.

"He's not wrong." Reaper chuckles.

Thanks to the small nature of the village, it only takes five more minutes to find the tavern, and we lead the horses around to the adjoining stables and settle them down, giving them some much needed water.

"People in these small villages can be very close-knit and not that welcoming to outsiders, so let me do the talking." Storm orders, striding towards the door and not letting any of us question whether he's really the wisest choice to get people talking.

He certainly wouldn't have been my first choice; I would've suggested Loki; his bubbly personality and smile are infectious and instantly put you at ease.

Keeping my mouth shut through sheer force of will so no snarky comments come out, I follow after the guys, getting lost in their massive forms as they surround me from all sides.

“Good morning, lads. What can I do for you?” I hear someone greet the guys slightly warily as I push myself through them so I can actually see what’s going on. His eyes widen somewhat as they land on me, “sorry, ma’am, I didn’t see you there.”

“We’re with the Black Onyx academy and have received reports of a Rogue vamp near your village.” Storm starts to explain, and the tavern owner’s face becomes serious, “if you could point us in the direction of the last sighting, we’ll deal with it.”

“Thank fuck. It’s been terrorising us for weeks. We had to evacuate the houses on the west end of the village. If you follow the main road through town, you’ll get to it. It’s in the small wood behind the houses there. You’re welcome to leave your horses here; it’s only a ten-minute walk, and we’ve lost several horses to it so far.”

I frown at his words as Storm thanks him and we all exit the tavern starting off in the direction that he pointed us in.

“That doesn’t seem right. The amount of damage that he was talking about seems far too much for a level one. They usually steer clear of people’s homes attacking stragglers and loners, not going right into the village to attack people in their homes.” I start, voicing my concerns out loud. “We only really take them out, so they don’t turn into any of the higher levels.”

“We knew going into this that something wasn’t right, and we’re prepared.” Storm replies.

The atmosphere is more tense than it was, and the mood darkens even further when we get to the edge of the village. The tavern owner wasn’t lying when he said they had to evacuate some of the houses. We walk through the first row of boarded-up and abandoned houses before we get to another six that back up onto the woods. These ones look like they’ve been invaded. Doors have been ripped off; blood smeared down the pathways, and no intact windows.

“Holy fuck.” Loki curses, his eyes on the destruction surrounding us. “How many do you think survived?”

“I’m not sure I want to know, but I don’t think many.” Rival mutters.

“That information should’ve been in the fucking file. That’s their whole point so that we have all the information possible. All of this we should’ve known.” Storm growls angrily. His wings make an appearance shifting behind him and reacting to his anger as his horns start to spark. He very rarely has them out, so much so that I had almost completely forgotten he had them. In fact I don’t think I’ve seen them since I first arrived. Even when we are in combat class, he keeps them hidden. I try not stare as they fascinate me, they’re beautiful and I force away the uneasy feeling as they remind me of my past. I wonder if there’s a reason behind why he rarely has them out? I suppose I might never know since that would mean having a civil conversation with him.

These poor fucking people, they’ve been terrorised for weeks, and we’ve only just been sent out. They’ve lost family members, homes and animals vital to their survival. Something is not fucking right with the system if they’ve been abandoned this long waiting for help. I do not doubt that they didn’t hold back on the details of what was happening here, so why wasn’t it investigated sooner? And how many more people are in need and reaching out to their enforcement to protect them and receiving nothing in return? It’s unacceptable and something that I intend to look into as soon as I get the opportunity.

“You’re right. Let’s get this dealt with and then we can go and see what the fuck the Headmaster is playing at.” Killian says calmly, the anger in his eyes and the stabbing movements his tail is making is contrasting sharply with his calm tone.

The brothers share a meaningful look, and their murderous intent for the Headmaster seems to lessen slightly as they come to some sort of agreement that only they understand.

Storm draws his sword as we get closer to the forest, and we all follow his lead. Despite the sunlight, the woodland seems to be darker than it should be, and there are none of the usual sounds that you tend to find in the woods, no animals, no rustling of leaves, just eerie silence. There’s definitely a

predator in these woods and one that's more dangerous than we initially thought.

A twig snaps to the left of us, and we all freeze, raising our weapons in preparation. We spread out slightly as we entered the forest, which means none of us was close enough to intercept the Rogue as he barrels out from the trees to the right of us. The fact that the attack came from the right instead of the left, where we heard the noise, also throws us slightly.

Since Mayhem is the one closest to the right, he takes the brunt of the attack, and I now know for sure that he at least has been holding back in our combat class. He infuses his sword with his water element making it glow with a blue tinge as he calls up roots to wrap around the rogue vamp's legs as well. The fucker is stronger than he should be and breaks it with ease, but he does back off slightly, and that gives Mayhem the room to breathe again.

That's not the only thing that is different about this supposed level one rogue vamp. Instead of the usual red iris, this vamp's eyes, pupils, and in fact, the whole damn eye are all entirely black. Which instantly gives away that it's a higher level Rogue. Another giveaway is the yellowed fangs that reach all the way down to his chin, far longer than a regular vamp, and although most of its fingers are transformed into the blood-red tipped claws that are common, not all of them are, some of them are normal fingers. He's fucking fast, too, and if I didn't know that it was the Headmaster's job to protect us, then I'd be tempted to accuse him of setting us up. For what purpose, though? I have no fucking idea.

It's definitely going to take all of us and our skills to take this fucker down.

I find myself pausing in my attack, faced with a problem that I've never had before; I don't know where to start. I'm not used to being in a team; I'm used to fighting on my own, and it's clear that despite Killian's lengthy absence, the guys are all used to fighting together, having trained for years to do so.

All hesitation flies straight out of the window as Loki gets launched through the air and crashes into a tree with such

force that he snaps the thick trunk. I know he's strong, he's a vampire for one and fucking strong one at that, but my heart is in my throat until I see him twitch his fingers and then a red film descends over my eyesight, my sole focus on the fucker that threw him and is giving the others a hard time. While they have it distracted, I sneak around from behind and, drawing one of my daggers; I take a running leap; the idea is to land on his back and sever his head to end this.

However, I underestimated him. I'm flying through the air within landing distance of him when he suddenly spins, so fucking quickly that my eyes can't track the movement; in one smooth motion, he simultaneously knocks the knife out of my hand, grabs me around the throat and speeds me away from the guys. Fortunately for me, he can't seem to run and eat me at the same time, so he only gets a few metres away from the guys before his bloodlust takes control and he stops.

He still has me by the throat with one hand, my feet off the floor, and my hands wrapped around his fingers, trying to pry his iron grip off my throat. He stares at me hungrily as I struggle, clearly enjoying it, as I let go of his fingers with my hands and bring my fists down on his forearm, infusing my magic in the hit in an attempt to break his hold.

My vision is starting to spot around the edges, and I can feel the trickle of blood drip down my neck as his claws dig in deeper. My hit doesn't do anything, and it's clear that he's done playing with his food because he brings me closer to his razor sharp teeth. I strike out with my foot, and he somehow manages to dodge it. Even though I missed, it seems to piss him the fuck off though because I suddenly find myself on the receiving end of a vicious snarl as spittle lands on my face and those teeth aim for my shoulder.

His teeth barely scrape the leather of my armour, thankfully not piercing it, when he suddenly bellows in pain and drops me in a flash. I land hard on the floor, staring up at the vamp whose face is contorted in pain. Five emerald-tipped claws are protruding from his shoulder, and a seriously enraged Reaper stood behind him, a deadly snarl on his face as he lets out a bone-shaking growl. He then tears his hand out of the vamp's

chest and then proceeds to rip the fuckers arm off like he's tearing paper and not ripping apart bone and muscle.

The whole time he's doing it, the rumbling, snarling growl never stops, and his eyes, which are usually yellow with a vertical slit, start to glow, red and orange specks flaring to life in them. More worryingly, though, is that his body starts to waver and flicker like he's fighting desperately against something that's trying to get out as he stands, breathing heavily over the top of the writhing vamp, who is obviously in enough pain to stop in his vendetta against us for the minute. It won't last long though, and he's going to be pissed when his body heals it enough that he can feel it.

"Fuck!" Storm yells, his leathery wings lifting him off the ground slightly, "guys, calm him the fuck down now."

The edge of panic for Reaper and not the vamp lets me know that there is definitely something else going on here that I don't understand. I get to my feet just in time to stop the vamp as he recovers enough to try and lunge for Reaper. One of my knives has left my hand before I've even consciously thought about it. Macabrely enough, it strikes him in the forehead, and unlike losing a limb doesn't hurt him enough to slow him down at all. The only thing I'm concerned with is keeping him away from Reaper so that the others can calm him down. Why that's important right now, I don't know, but I do know enough about them to trust them.

I know they would never let anything bad happen to each other; they're family. I feel a wave of relief as I see Loki rush over to help Reaper. Thank fuck he's okay. I'm not sure why that matters so much to me when I'm used to people dying around me and wouldn't usually care. Actually, that's a lie; somehow, I've come to care about all of these guys, and I will help protect them even if I don't know what I'm protecting them from, which is the case now.

With that in mind, I make sure his focus is solely on me as I dive out of his way when he tries to attack again, thankfully the loss of his arm and the knife still sticking out of his forehead, along with the other wounds he's received so far are starting to slow him down. Drawing my sword, I dart forward,

slashing at him and then moving away, leading him in a different direction away from Reaper and the others. In the peripheral of my vision, I see Storm several feet in the air silently stalking him from the sky as he cloaks himself in his shadows, and I'm pretty sure I shouldn't know that he's there.

The vamp must sense something though because he starts to turn around, his gaze going up, I'm too far away to do much good with my sword, and I know that even if the vamp can't see Storm in the shadows, he will be able to see Reaper and he'll instantly go after him since he's done the most damage so far.

I fling my sword to the side, embedding it in a nearby tree and then grab my whip from its place on my hip. He's already managed to turn around and, like predicted, is heading towards a still enraged Reaper. I need to end this before Reaper realises, or I have a feeling that whatever the guys are trying to prevent happening will happen. I somehow know that Storm is readying himself to intervene, but he's not going to get a good enough angle on the vamp to sever his head. I release my whip, my aim thankfully accurate as the knife on the end slices the back of his ankles deep enough to have him falling to the ground right below Storm.

He glances down at me, still surrounded by shadows and clearly unaware that I can see him; he smiles, not a fake smile, but a genuine smile that reaches his eyes and has me cursing because holy fuck is he gorgeous, a pang in my heart has me worrying that he's broken through a layer of my defences with his smile alone. He doesn't even realise I can see it.

I've had plenty of practice at blanking my expression, which is the only reason I manage not to give anything away.

Only seconds have passed when he says in a voice that contrasts his expression, "Thanks."

He then explodes from the shadows and folding his wings in tightly as he drops down onto the vamp, and makes quick work of severing its head, which in itself is an impressive show of strength. It's bloody hard work getting a sword

through all that muscle and spinal cord, and it needs to be severed entirely, or they have a chance of coming back.

Storm kicks the head away from the body, but when it doesn't turn to ash immediately like an accurate level one Rogue vamp would, he pulls out a vial from his belt, one of the ones that we all carry and are potent ready-made spells that only need a trigger word to activate it. He says the word and then puts half on the body and half on the head, and we watch as it does what it was supposed to do as soon as the head is severed and turns to ash. Stepping over the piles, he makes his way over to me, his expression the careful blank mask I've gotten used to. Now I've seen what his smile is like, what he's like when he's completely unguarded, even if it was just for a fleeting second; there's an ache in my heart now that I'm faced with the expressionless façade staring back at me.

“Come on, let's get back to the horses.” He suggests, moving past me and back the way we came. His wings disappearing once again and making me frown.

I let it go though, pushing all the questions away as I glance over to where I last saw Reaper and the others, only to see they aren't there anymore. “What about the others?”

“They'll catch up when they're ready.” Storm answers with finality.

I receive the message loud and clear, we are not going to be discussing what's going on with Reaper, and that's fine with me. Goddess knows there's plenty of shit that I don't want to share with them.

Chapter Seventeen

“So we work quite well together.” I point out changing the subject.

“Surprisingly, you’re right.” He agrees as we walk past the broken houses and back towards the tavern. “I still don’t like you though.”

His words should hurt me, but it’s the way he says them that makes me smile like a looney. I think I might be growing on the fucker. “Right back at ya.”

“I’m not sure that’s something you should sound so pleased about,” he points out.

“Maybe not, but maybe I know something you don’t,” I sing-song back at him purely to wind him up.

He eyes me out of the corner of his eye, and I try to suppress my grin as he turns his head towards me and narrows his eyes. “What do you know?”

I simply shrug, knowing that it will wind him up more, and that’s absolutely one of my favourite things to do.

He lets out a deep sigh like I’m the most infuriating person he’s ever come across and then changes the subject, “I haven’t seen Poca about recently. Is he staying invisible to us?”

I’m surprised that he’s still wanting to talk to me so much so that he’s starting a new conversation, but I’m not willing to question it and risk missing out on this chance to maybe get to know him a bit better. I’m not stupid enough to think that he’ll carry it on for very long, and I’m sure he’ll piss me off enough at some point to make me insult him.

“No, he hasn’t been around. I’m not sure where he is, but as I said before, it’s not unusual for him to go for periods of time. I’ll only get worried if I summon him and he doesn’t come because that means he’s been blocked from me somehow.” I explain.

He looks at me sharply, “Speaking from personal experience?”

I nod once, not wanting to talk about it in depth. Thankfully he lets it drop, maybe because he doesn’t want to push but more than likely because we can hear the guys behind us.

Storm pauses to wait for them, and we both turn around to watch their approach. They all look tense, but Loki is trying to make up for it by being his usual jovial self and Killian is playing up to it and teasing him as Loki complains that his stomach is eating itself. A lovely image.

While the others are all smiling at their banter, Reaper is stoic, and when I try to catch his eye to see if he’s okay, he studiously ignores me moving to Storm and bending his head close to talk to him. I immediately feel the sting of rejection, and I can practically hear the slamming of the gates between us as he puts his barrier back up.

Before I can dwell on it too much, I’m swung up into Loki’s arms as he buries his head in my neck and squeezes tightly. I allow myself to wrap my arms around him too. I was so damn worried when he hit that tree.

“Are you okay?” I ask, not even bothering to hide the thread of worry in my voice.

“Aw, Love, were you worried about me?” he asks, leaning back slightly so he can see my expression. When he realises I really was, his smile softens, “I’m okay, Love. It’ll take a lot more than that to really hurt me.”

I nod, feeling slightly mortified that I got emotional, well as emotional as I get anyway. All softness fades from his expression as his eyes fall to my neck, anger flaring within them as he lets out a low rumble. I tilt my head slightly.

“How bad is it?” I ask.

“Well, it’s not great. I don’t blame Reaper for ripping his fucking arm off.” He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath; when he opens them again they’re no longer deadly but still not exactly calm.

By now, all others have started walking ahead again. So Loki and I are left behind slightly. Killian looks back at me being held in Loki's arms and gives me a soft smile, one full of meaning. However, that meaning escapes me entirely.

"Let's heal you up before Reaper catches sight of it. We don't want to go through that again so soon." Loki says, placing me gently on the floor and then looking at me for permission as he brings a hand up to my neck.

"Sure, and don't worry, I'm not going to bother asking what you meant with the Reaper comment," I assure him when he immediately looks worried that he's put his foot in it.

"Thank you, Love." He replies as his hand warms on my neck and his eyes start to glow green, which, considering they're usually purple, is a strange thing to see.

"Do your eyes usually glow green when you heal?" I ask since he healed my back last time, so I couldn't really see his face.

"What?"

"From the shock in your voice, I'm guessing no."

"No, they don't. They go red when I feed but otherwise, they stay purple."

"Odd, come on, let's catch up with the others," I say, wondering whether now a good time would be to bring up the fact that my magic has been playing up recently.

"Come on, guys, the tavern guy is so grateful we've dealt with it; we get a free lunch before we head back," Killian calls from the door and all thoughts of letting him know about my magic flee as we both bolt towards the door.

We both rush past a highly amused Killian, "You guys are as bad as each other when it comes to food."

We both decide to ignore him, throwing all sense of propriety out the window as we take our seats at the table.

"You guys alright?" Mayhem asks.

“They’re hungry. They only ate four hours ago but are behaving like it’s been decades.” Killian fills them in as he catches up to us much more sedately.

Everyone around the table chuckles as Loki and I practically dive on the food. I’ll never turn down food, and I have a feeling that Loki and I share something similar in our past that is the reason behind the way that we both approach food. I’m happy to let everyone think it’s amusing though. I jump slightly as a hand gently squeezes my knee and I glance over at him; his eyes meet mine, an understanding in them that confirms my previous thoughts.

Lunch is delicious and consists of a massive bowl of stew filled with meat, vegetables, and the most delicious dumplings I’ve ever had. My favourite part was the freshly baked bread and home-churned butter, which I absolutely had to dip in the gravy. By the time we’re on the way back, I’m so fucking full that I seriously consider taking a nap. I know Revel will look after me; we’ve done it before when we’ve had to keep moving and can’t afford to stop for the night. The only thing that stops me is that after the fight that was far more dangerous than we were told and the fact that it’s more than obvious now that the Headmaster is up to something, it wouldn’t surprise me if something else got thrown at us on the way back just to make sure that whatever he wanted to achieve he did.

I still don’t have the vaguest idea what his motives could be.

“There is no way in all of the realms that rogue was a level one.” Rival mutters, riding next to me. You can practically see the wheels turning in his head as he tries to put all the obscure puzzle pieces together.

“I would’ve said that it was at least a level eight. I’m fairly sure it used magic to throw the sound of the stick-breaking so we wouldn’t know what direction he was coming from.” Mayhem adds, looking like his mind is going just as fast as Rival’s, and I’m willing to bet that as soon as we get back to the castle, we’re going to lose them to research, so they can work out exactly what level it was.

“That fucker had to have known,” Killian growls, his horns sparking much like his brothers. The brothers seem to be mending their relationship slowly, and I know it means a lot to both of them.

“We’ll see what we can find out when we get back. Shadows are good for spying, brother,” Storm’s lips tilt up ever so slightly at the corners into a dangerous grin, as his horns start to glow with the strength of his anger.

That seems to be the end of that conversation, and despite the rush to leave this morning, none of us seems to be in a hurry to get back, as we take it easy. I’m in no rush to get back to the academy and feel strangely free. I don’t have my father’s timeline to stick to; I haven’t just had to do something that I shouldn’t have to do, and I’m not riding back into a situation that I know will cause me physical and emotional pain.

However, the sedate pace is making it extremely evident that Reaper is avoiding me, he’s riding right at the back of our procession, and whenever I turn around to see if I can catch his eye and make sure he’s okay, he studiously avoids looking in my direction. The thing really frustrating about it is that I don’t actually know what I’ve done wrong, and I truly care, which is a new concept for me.

And you had a moment with him before you left, and you don’t know how to deal with feelings; the bitchy voice in my head reminds me, and I vehemently tell her to shut the fuck up.

I’m hoping that he’ll talk to me when he’s ready. I don’t know how to do this.

I’m starting to recognise where we are, so we must only be ten or so minutes away from the academy, and I’m looking forward to a shower and possibly even a nap. Rival has moved up to ride next to Mayhem and Loki, and I’m acutely aware when the horse hooves speed up behind me, I’m expecting Reaper to ride past me and join the others, so I’m surprised when he pulls his horse next to mine and keeps pace. I stay

silent and look ahead, not wanting to spook him and sensing that he has something that he needs to say.

He waits until the gates of the academy come into view before he starts talking.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice far quieter than usual, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see him gazing at my neck, where the vamp held me.

“I am, thanks to you. Loki healed the damage it did to my neck.” I pause and turn to look at him, “are you okay?”

Almost predictably, he stays silent, and now that I’m looking at him, his eyes remain focused on the gates ahead like he can’t wait for this conversation to be over.

I wait him out. If he doesn’t want to tell me, that’s fine.

Finally, he speaks, his voice hesitant, “You’ve probably guessed that I’m a shifter?”

He phrases it like a question, so I answer it like one by simply nodding. I don’t want to scare off his desire to talk to me by saying anything out loud, no matter how illogical that sounds.

Seeing my nod, he continues, “Well, if I shift, I lose control, and people get seriously hurt. Seeing you being held like that angered my beast, so much so that it almost triggered my shift. If the guys didn’t know me so well and knew how to keep me calm, I would’ve transformed, and then there’s a very good chance that you all could’ve died.” His voice lowers so much that I’m not sure I’m supposed to hear the next part, “you make me feel protective, and I’m not sure I can risk it.”

I had to have heard that wrong, but he rides off before I can reply, bypassing all of the others and heading straight through the gate at a canter.

Well fuck. I can see why it was so important to calm him, but I don’t really understand why that meant he wanted to ignore me. I should probably be terrified of his explanation, but in reality, I’m just not. Maybe that’s my absolute lack of normal fear response, but he doesn’t scare me. In fact, the only

emotion I'm feeling is complete frustration, and that's simply because he said all that and still didn't tell me what he was.

When Reaper canters pass, the rest of them all look back at me questioningly, and I shrug, not sure what to say. Mayhem's eyes dart between us, and he stops his horse, letting the others follow Reaper as he waits for me.

"Are you okay?" he asks me gently.

I decide to answer him honestly because I know I'm never going to figure it out, and maybe he'll be able to help me understand. "Yeah, I'm just not sure why he needed to ignore me."

He really thinks about his answer before he replies, which I appreciate, since it means he's not just giving me a generic answer.

"He really cares about you; it's easy to see. He doesn't let anyone get close to him; none of us do. We've been a unit for so long that we don't let anyone else in, and yet here you've come along, barely with us for a week, brought our best friend and brother back and just fit like you've always belonged with us. If he hurt you because he lost control of his beast, it would kill him. It doesn't mean that ignoring you is the right thing to do, but he is probably trying to put some distance between you, so his shifter isn't triggered by any sort of threat to you."

I think I'm in shock. I swallow down the lump of emotion that's stuck in my throat thanks to him saying I belong with them. I've never felt like I belonged anywhere.

"He didn't have the same reaction when the assassin attacked? He doesn't when Storm and I go at it," I ask curiously, despite myself.

"Something has changed between you both since then, he knows you better, and as for Storm, Reaper knows that he would never harm you and that you are never in actual danger no matter how vicious your verbal sparring gets." He pauses, letting me absorb it all for a second before he adds, "can I ask you a question?"

The curiosity burning in his eyes is a dead giveaway that my answer is important, and it makes me infinitely curious.

“Yeah, sure, go for it,” I reply.

“Are you scared of him now?”

“No,” I reply without hesitation, “not even for a second, and maybe I should be. Maybe I will be later when I really think about it, but I’m not.”

He looks contemplative for a moment as we make our way to the stables, “I had a feeling you were going to say that. Just promise me that you will be careful, his beast is something else entirely, and not even we can calm him when he comes out.”

I nod and then add, my voice sad, “Poor Reaper, that has to be so fucking difficult fighting against a part of you all the fucking time, worrying about what could happen if he can’t keep that control over that part. It must be exhausting.”

Mayhem looks at me, astonished, like he’d never really considered it properly, and guilt quickly follows. I leave him to it as I dismount Revel and lead him into his stall. My mind is still stuck on Reaper, so when I come out of the stable block and see him talking to the others, I immediately make my way over to him. He sees me coming, but it still shocks him when I wrap my arms around his waist; I look up at him as he looks down at me curiously, his arms wrapping around me hesitantly.

“I just wanted you to know that I’m not scared of any part of you. I can’t even begin to imagine how exhausting it must be fighting against a part of yourself, and I think you’re truly amazing, both of you.”

He stills at my words, his eyes widening with astonishment at my acknowledgement and a rumbling purr comes from his chest that seems to shock him as his yellow eyes start to glow slightly.

“My beast liked that you acknowledged him. Little Warrior, that’s the first time he’s not tried to force himself forward or acted in anger.”

My smile widens, and after the emotions, I've just shared, I can't help my snarky reply as I step back, "I'm just that fucking amazing, I guess."

Loki's snort of laughter makes me jump as I'd completely forgotten that the others were still near.

"You're certainly amazing, Darling," Killian agrees, pulling me closer as we all start towards the main building, his tail wraps around my thigh as we walk and it's done it enough that it doesn't making walking difficult.

"Where are we off to now?" I ask, ignoring Killian and making him chuckle.

"We need to give our report to the Headmaster. We do it verbally first and then write up a report too." Rival explains.

"Well, this should be interesting." I snark.

We get a lot of looks as we walk the halls, and I hadn't really considered what we looked like until we got here. We're dishevelled, dirty, and no doubt looking tired as hell. Eventually, we get to the Headmaster's office, and this time we're shown right into his private office, although the receptionist gives our attire a disdainful look.

The first thing I notice is the smarmy and proud smile on his face, which immediately falls as his eyes land on Reaper and me. Seriously, what is that all about?

Chapter Eighteen

“We’re here to give you our report, sir.” Storm says in a barely civil tone.

None of us has bothered to sit down, wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible. We’re tired, dirty and pissed off thanks to his misinformation. The Headmaster sighs heavily like we’re an inconvenience to him, his mood significantly soured now he’s laid eyes on Reaper and me.

“Very well. I assume it went well.”

“We handled it. However, it wasn’t a level one like the report stated, and the report also didn’t have any of the information it should’ve had.” Storm states bluntly. It surprises me because when I first arrived, he seemed to have a significant amount of respect for the Headmaster. Apparently, I read that situation wrong. It was less respect he was showing and more the need to use his connections to get rid of the Warrior bond.

The Headmaster, of course, bristles at his tone, “There was nothing wrong with the information you were given. Maybe your inexperience is showing through.”

Storm grits his teeth as a muscle in his jaw ticks at the tone the Headmaster is using, his horns predictably sparking, “With all due respect, sir, even if the others weren’t aware of the levels of rogues, Mayhem is.”

I try not to show my surprise at that statement and the fact that the Headmaster seems slightly chastised as he looks at Mayhem for confirmation. There’s so much that I don’t know about them, and I want to know.

“It was definitely not a level one. I’d say it was more like a level eight.” Mayhem says firmly, with no room for argument in his tone.

Storm then retakes the lead in the conversation and explains what happened in great detail. I'm impressed with the amount of information he's managed to take in whilst fighting. He is only leaving out that Reaper nearly lost control, which considering the Headmaster's interest in him, is a smart idea. The whole time he's talking, I focus on the Headmaster, closely watching his reactions to what Storm is telling him.

He should be shocked, maybe even horrified, that on our first mission together, we were dealing with a level eight and not a level one like we were supposed to. He should maybe, even be angry that someone hasn't done their research correctly and this was allowed to happen. After all, if it was a less experienced team that was sent on this job, then they could've ended up a lot worse off than we are.

His face is pulling all the right expressions, but none of them are sincere, every single one of them is fake, and I'm even more convinced that he had something to do with it.

"Thank you for the rundown. Since it was more challenging than we thought it was going to be, feel free to take the afternoon off to rest. I'll expect the written reports on my desk in the next three days." He says dismissively, and we waste absolutely no time getting out of there.

The hallways are full of students going about their day, and so we stay silent until we get up to our room.

"Storm, let's go," Killian says as soon as we're in the room, already gathering his shadows around him as his tail moves excitedly behind him.

"Where are you two going?" Reaper asks suspiciously, crossing his arms over his chest as he eyes them.

"There was a kid that went into the office immediately after us. I know for a fact that he wouldn't have anything to do with whatever the Headmaster is up to, and I also know that there is very little chance that he is working alone. He looked pissed off enough that the first opportunity he gets, he will contact whoever he's working with, so we need to get back down there quickly." Killian explains almost impatiently.

“Stay safe and no murder,” I reply with a warning, and the others start to smile until they realise I’m serious, and then they start to look a little bit nervous.

“Please don’t murder the Headmaster. I’m assuming that will complicate things.” Rival’s dry tone makes me giggle.

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t.” Storm says, cloaking himself in his own shadows.

“That’s hardly reassuring.” Loki grins sarcastically.

Both of the brothers ignore him entirely, and I watch as they both disappear, becoming a part of the shadows. The way they use them is completely different. I know that Killian can move through the shadows to different locations, whereas Storm doesn’t seem to be able to. Instead, he cloaks himself in them and moves like that, but Storm’s shadows can take on their own personalities, whereas Killian’s can’t. It fascinates me.

“I’m going to clean up, guys,” I tell the room and they all nod and go to do the same.

Once I’m in the shower, I marvel over the fact that I not only get a shower, but I also get a hot one; there was only a brief moment in time that I got to experience hot showers. My thoughts start to drift away from that period in time, and back to Mayhem’s words from earlier play through in my mind. He said I belonged, and that’s probably the nicest thing that anyone could ever have said to me and what’s even more astonishing is that I actually feel like I belong too. Storm and I may have our differences, but I instinctively know he’d have my back in a fight. Regardless of whether he likes me and I’d do the same.

The fact that my getting hurt had such a profound effect on Reaper is almost unfathomable. Usually, people take great joy in hurting me, so having him so affected is an entirely new experience for me. I’m not going to let him distance himself from me though, I don’t think I can, and I’m hoping that my words earlier had some sort of effect, and he won’t still try to avoid me.

Poca still hasn't made an appearance, but I'm not getting concerned enough yet to try and summon him. I'll give it a few more days before I get to the point where I'm worried enough to do that.

Feeling a thousand times better, I pull on the joggers someone left me and a tank top and make my way back out to the front room. Loki's dressed similar to me in lounge clothes and is watching some fae comedy show that I've never seen before, and Rival is in the kitchen, making something. The others must be in their rooms still, taking advantage of the afternoon off.

I make a beeline for the kitchen and, more importantly, the coffee. Rival smiles at me but focuses back on his food, leaving me to it, which I'm grateful for because I'm feeling adventurous and want to try something different with my coffee. As I start the coffee, I open the cupboard to get out a mug and notice several bottles of flavoured syrups.

"Are these for the coffee?" I ask Rival.

"Yeah, you're welcome to try some. Only put a small amount in, or it'll overpower the coffee and won't taste great."

"Thanks," I reply as I start to sift through the bottles to find a flavour I like.

After choosing caramel and hoping that I've made it right, I take my coffee over to the seating area and settle down next to Loki.

"Hey, Love, have a nice shower?"

"Yeah, it's still novel to have hot water and be able to shower whenever I want; I got used to not having that privilege again," I reply without thinking, my focus on the TV and sipping my drink which is delicious.

"What?" Rival barks.

I turn my head to see him standing behind the couch, looking incredulous, while Loki sits in front of him, staring at me in horror.

“What’s wrong?”

“You weren’t allowed to shower?”

“Or have hot water?”

I sigh; that one is on me for answering when I’m distracted and because I’m starting to feel so comfortable around them. “No, not when I was with my father. Not unless I needed to play the good little daughter and be paraded around for father’s dignitaries. Then it was a cold one. I showered when I could at other times,” I just about manage to stop myself from saying when I was on jobs, “to be honest, I could’ve showered more often, but it wasn’t necessarily that safe.”

If I explained that I had to wait until a specific guard was on duty, one that I knew wouldn’t look or try to touch; I have a feeling that their looks of anger would turn murderous.

“I’m so sorry you had to live like that,” Rival says sincerely, and I shrug, unsure what exactly to reply to that.

“It is what it is.” I shrug.

“I’ll kill him,” Loki rumbles.

My smile is vicious, “No, you won’t. After everything that fucker has put me through, I get to watch the life leave his eyes.”

“Why is it so hot when she gets all bloodthirsty?” Loki asks, turning to look at Rival.

“Don’t you mean it’s hot when she lets us see that side of her? I do not doubt that our Farren is bloodthirsty all the time.” Rival replies insightfully.

My grin turns sharp, “Well, you’re not wrong.”

I choose to ignore the ‘our Farren’ part of the sentence for the pure fact that a lot of emotional shit has been thrown my way today, and I’ve reached my limit. I’m not capable of dealing with any more.

Mayhem interrupts the conversation as he walks out of his room, looking freshly showered and shirtless. I’d like to say that I try not to stare, but that would be an outright lie. His

blue-streaked white hair is tucked behind his pointed ears, which he usually has hidden. Unlike the norm for the fae, both he and Rival are bigger, both in height and musculature, and it's his muscles my eyes get unashamedly drawn to; I mean, they're right there! How could I not stare?

His broad shoulders taper down to a slim waist, and the blue tinge to his skin practically glitters under the lights, defining the grooves of his stomach and the V lines leading down temptingly. There are darker patterns etched into the skin, and I'm familiar enough with the fae to know that it's not a part of their usual genetic makeup, but I also don't think that it's magically done or a tattoo. More and more, I'm starting to realise that my first assumption that they were all rare supernaturals or more than they first appeared was accurate. There's still a lot of mystery surrounding them, and I'm getting more curious.

Suddenly Killian appears by the edge of the sofa, stepping out of the shadow created by the lamp and making Loki jump. He grins at Loki and takes a seat next to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. His body stays tense though, and I'm assuming they found something out on their trip to spy on the Headmaster. I'm about to ask where Storm is when black and smoky shadows start to coalesce into a shape in the middle of the room.

"Where's Reaper?" Storm asks immediately, looking around the room. He's not doing quite as good a job at hiding his anger and worry as Killian is trying to do, and I straighten, what the hell is going on now.

"I'm here. What's up?" Reaper asks, appearing from his room and joining the rest of us on the sofas.

"We were right. As soon as the kid left the office, he was on the larimar stone. We're not sure who was on the other end, but his side of the conversation was extremely telling." Storm crosses his arms over his chest as somehow his expression darkens even more.

"So he does have it out for us then?" Loki asks.

"Not for us," Storm replies, looking at me.

“Oh, for fuck sake, me again?” I groan.

“Explain,” Reaper barks, and Storm’s gaze snaps to him with a questioning look and a raised eyebrow. Reaper holds firm and doesn’t try to defend his tone.

“The whole point of it was that Reaper would lose control and take Farren out. He banked on us staying out of the way and not caring enough to warn her.” He’s interrupted by a roar so loud that it shakes the room.

Everyone looks at Reaper, concerned as his fists clench and his eyes glow as the slit in his pupil grows.

“Reaper,” Storm warns.

He doesn’t reply, just shakes his head sharply, and for some unknown fucking reason, I get up from between Loki and Killian and plop my ass down on his lap, sitting sideways so I can wrap my arms around his neck. As soon as my brain catches up with my actions, I start to panic. What the fuck was I thinking? They’ve all told me how volatile he is, fuck, he’s told me he’s deadly, and here I am just casually sitting on his lap whilst he’s growling fiercely enough that he’s shaking the fucking room? What the fuck is wrong with me! As I start to spiral myself into self-hatred and despair, his arms wrap around me, and he looks at me confused, almost completely calm now. Okay, so maybe a part of me knew what it was doing then. That or I’m just extremely fucking lucky this time.

“What the hell, Farren, that was incredibly dangerous!” Storm practically shouts at me, the flames roaring between horns and starting to wrap around them, which is a new development. I glare at him in response.

“He’s fine. Carry on the explanation.” Killian orders.

Storm turns his glare on him, and then seeing whatever look is on his face, he backs down. I want to turn to see what look Killian just gave him, but Reaper is holding me so tightly I can barely move.

“He was going to use me to end her?” he asks, his voice still a rumble, but at least he’s talking instead of growling.

Storm watches him warily but answers anyway, “From what we overheard, yes. But it wasn’t his plan. He was working under someone else’s orders.”

“No idea who it could be?” Mayhem asks, looking at me.

I sigh, “Honestly, it could be a number of people. I need a little bit more information to go on than that.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Storm mutters with no real bite, so I just stick my tongue out in retribution.

“So we need to keep a closer eye on the Headmaster then. If we don’t get anywhere with that, we’ll have to question him ourselves.” Loki suggests.

“That’s probably all we can do for now. As well as stay alert, I highly doubt this is the only time he’s going to try to get to Farren.” Killian replies.

“Yes, especially since he clearly felt threatened by whoever was on the other end of the stone, and it takes a lot for the Headmaster of the Black Onyx academy to feel threatened.” Storm adds.

“Great, now that we’ve got a plan in place for that. I need to go back and check in on the crypt. I also want to do some digging and see if I can find out who sent one of my assassins after Farren when she first arrived. I should be back before classes tomorrow.” Killian gets up to stretch and gently pulls me out of Reaper’s arms, grinning when he reluctantly lets me go.

He pulls me into a tight hug and kisses the top of my hair as I practically sink into his embrace, his tail tapping my leg.

“Stay safe,” I mutter.

“Always. You stay out of trouble.”

“I’ll try,” I chuckle as I step back.

“Do you want some company?” Rival asks.

Killian claps him on the shoulder, “Thanks, man, but it’s probably best I do this alone. They’re not the most trusting bunch of fuckers.”

“Fair enough.” Rival nods, looking slightly disappointed that he doesn’t get to tag along.

“Farren, could you do the honours, please?” he asks me.

I call forward my Void magic, pulling back at the last second when it tries to explode out of me and hoping that they don’t notice that I almost lost control. I grasp hold of Killian’s hand and step in. There’s a feeling of anticipation in the Void different from the usual nothingness that I usually feel when I’m here. For the first time, I’m slightly nervous. Even when this gift first developed, I wasn’t worried. Thankfully I manage to keep my reaction from Killian, and when we arrive in his office, he gives me a lingering kiss on my cheek, close to my lips.

“Fuck it,” he mutters, and suddenly his lips are on mine, and I melt into him as my nerve endings start to fire with pleasure. He runs his tongue across the seam of my lips, and I eagerly open up, moaning when his tongue tangles with mine and his hands flex on my hips, shadows start to caress my neck, I honestly had no idea he could control them like that, and my mind goes wild with possibilities.

Eventually, the kiss slows, and he steps back; his smile is gentle, and his eyes are full of affection as he reaches his hand up and gently strokes his fingers across my cheek.

“Go on; you better get back before I’m tempted to keep you here, and the guys have my head.”

I nod, at a complete loss for words from the pure need in that kiss, as I call the Void forward and step through. It felt like it meant more than it had before.

As soon as I’m alone in the Void, something rushes me.

“Whoops, used a bit too much power then, sorry.”

I suddenly find myself in my room with no idea how I got there; the last thing I remember is kind, deep blue and gold eyes and then nothing. I feel like something important happened; the memory is just on the periphery of my mind but remains out of reach. My magic is calm, which is a good sign. It means that whatever happened wasn’t necessarily a threat to

me. As frustrating as it is, I know I'm not going to be able to force myself to remember what happened, and I have a feeling that when the time is right, I'll remember.

My stomach grumbles, so I head towards the door, feeling slightly shaky and, for some confusing reason, excited.

“Hey, your back? Did Killian get back okay?” Loki asks.

“Yeah, I'm not sure how he's planning to get back to the academy though, he didn't say. I guess he might get one of the guys good with portals to drop him just outside the grounds since this whole place is warded.” I reply, rambling slightly.

He looks at me slightly suspiciously but doesn't comment on my rambling, “Probably. We're just about to order some food, none of us fancied going down to the dining room. Do you want anything?”

“Sure,” I reply, relieved that he's let the subject drop.

It's not until after we've eaten and everyone has gone to bed that I realise that Killian fucking kissed me like I truly meant something to him. After everything that happened in the Void, it slipped my mind. I love it when Killian kisses me, and it doesn't happen as often as I'd like. I go to sleep with a smile on my face.

Chapter Nineteen

A booming bang jolts me from my sleep, and for a split second, I see the cold grey stone walls of my tiny cell and hear the cackling laughter of my father, letting me know he's in a mood today and my torture is going to be particularly brutal.

“Love!” Someone calls, and I frown. That's definitely not my father. There's only one person who calls me Love, and that's Loki.

My eyes snap open, and I breathe a sigh of relief at the sight of my room at the academy before I quickly jump up off the floor, not having any idea how I ended up there in the first place. I rush to the door to open it for Loki.

He takes one look at me and bursts into laughter.

“What?” I ask, reaching up to my hair and realising that it's sticking out in every damn direction. “Why are you banging on my door?”

“Oh shit yeah, we're being sent out on another job.”

“Fuck, now?”

“Yeah, get dressed. It's time-sensitive apparently, so we need to get going immediately.”

Behind him, I can see the others all rushing around to get ready, and without a word I strip out of my pyjamas and call my armour to me. I pull my shirt on, and my magic wraps the rest of my armour around me. Just because I can do it this way doesn't mean that I always do. It promotes laziness, and I can't afford to be lazy.

When I turn back around, ready to go, it's to see Loki leaning against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest, his muscles tense as if he's stopping himself from reaching for me.

“You’re beautiful.” He compliments and, without giving me a chance to reply, adds, “we need to get going.”

I follow him into the lounge in somewhat of a daze until Rival hands me a bag like I used last time, and I pull it on as Mayhem hands me a buttered roll.

“Eat. We won’t have time for anything else.” He practically orders, and instead of bristling, I do as I’m told.

“Shit, is Kill back?” I ask, around a mouthful of food.

Storm pauses on his way to the door, “No, he’s not, and we can’t afford to wait for him. This is time sensitive. We’ll have to read the file properly on the way. All I’ve got so far is a location, which is fortunately only a couple of hours away. I’m not familiar with the route, though, so we’ll use a locator stone to guide us.”

A locator stone is similar to the GPS things that they have in the earth realm, except instead of talking to you like those things seem to, it projects the route ahead and buzzes if you go off track. So, you activate the stone, study the map and then put it in your pocket, and it’ll guide you. It’s similar to looking at a map on parchment, but it’s far less susceptible to the elements. Not as convenient as having someone tell you exactly where to go like the earth ones do, but then again, their voices annoy me, and I have a feeling I’d argue back.

I nod my agreement, not bothering to reply since he’s already left, and the guys are following. I’m worried, not only because we weren’t supposed to be going out so soon, which is highly suspicious after what we’ve learned about the Headmaster, but also because Killian’s not here. I think that may have been a strategic move, although how the Headmaster knew that Killian was gone is concerning.

“Don’t worry, Farren. Hopefully, Kill will use that uncanny timing ability he seems to have and be waiting outside the gates for us.” Rival says with a smile as we practically run through the still quiet corridors of the school and out to the stables.

“Hopefully,” I reply simply. When we step out into the only just starting to lighten night, I add, “what time is it?”

“Four am,” Reaper replies gruffly, clearly not a morning person.

“I guess it’s a good job that we were all so tired last night that we went to sleep early.” I shrug and receive only a grunt in return. “What exactly are we riding into?”

“An unknown Rogue has been terrorising a small village. Judging from the amount of destruction it’s left behind after each attack, we’re assuming it was a similar level to the one yesterday,” Storm answers me, striding ahead; he must’ve managed to read the file before we got out here, most likely when he was looking for the location.

Well, at least it looks like we got a bit more information this time, although it’s unusual that they wouldn’t know the kind of Rogue it is. Any supernatural can go rogue for a number of reasons, and it pretty much means that they give themselves over to their baser and more dangerous instincts or in magic wielder’s cases, they give themselves over to their magic completely, meaning it does whatever it wants. The thing they all have in common is that they want death and destruction. Once a supernatural has gone rogue, there’s no known way to revert the process.

When we get to the stables, all of the horses are already tacked up, even Revel which I’m shocked about since no one would go near him yesterday. There’s no time to question it as we all jump on. Storm activates the stone, looks at it for less than a minute, nods and then takes off at a trot.

“Surely, he doesn’t already know where we’re going. If it’s time-sensitive, we can’t afford to get lost,” I say, looking over at Loki, who is riding next to me.

“The stone is just a precaution, really,” Loki starts as the gates come into view, and I desperately hope that Kill is waiting outside of them, “he has a photographic memory. He only needs to see it once, and that’s it; he’ll remember it.”

“Wow, that’s pretty impressive, handy too,” I reply.

“It is, but it means he remembers everything in great detail. You know how the brothers react when their father is brought up; Killian has told you enough. Storm remembers it all vividly.”

“Holy fuck,” I grimace, my stomach sinking as sadness permeates my heart. That explains why he is like he is.

Some things shouldn't be remembered.

Loki says nothing else as we finally exit the main gates, and I'm not the only one to find myself looking around for Killian. When it's apparent that he's not here, Storm encourages his horse into a gallop, and we all follow, trusting him to lead us. There's no time for conversation on the ride as we push the horses hard, and my mind wanders to what we could be up against. With the amount of sleep we've had and the strain of yesterday, we aren't exactly all at peak form, and I think that may be the reason why we were sent out again so soon.

We need to get to the bottom of who wants me dead and why, but we can't exactly do that if we're constantly distracted with jobs.

“The village should be just over this hill. We can do what we did last time and find someone to get more information from. Hopefully, we can deal with this just as quickly.” Storm yells over the sound of the rushing wind and the horse's hooves.

When we finally crest the hill and look down on the village though, we all bring our horses to a sudden stop. It's a small village, only a row of shops and about thirty houses dotted around in the valley, and in the early morning light, it's easy to see that it's all destroyed, walls are missing, homes are still smoking, blackened and burned. Roofs have collapsed in, and there's debris everywhere.

The worst part though is that even from here, I can see disfigured bodies lying in the street and surrounded by dark patches that can only be blood.

“Fucking hell. Were we too late?” Loki asks, shock and horror evident in the pull of his lips and frown between his eyes.

“Really late, the fires have burned down, and the blood is dried from what I can smell. We had no hope of getting here in time.” Reaper rumbles.

“Another set up,” Rival mutters, “but why? What the fuck does this achieve, and if he knew about this village, then he knew they needed help way before this.”

“Not necessarily. He could’ve gotten word that the village was decimated and decided to send us under false pretences instead of sending the proper people who can make sure that these villagers get the burial and respect they deserve,” Mayhem finishes with an angry growl. His horse moving agitatedly from side to side, picking up on his rider’s upset.

“We can discuss why later. Right now, we need to see if there are any survivors and if whatever did this is still here.” Storm rides off ahead, picking his way carefully down to the village. We all reluctantly follow.

I’m surprised that he doesn’t have his wings out again, but maybe he only likes using them in actual combat situations. Now is hardly the time to ask him; we have bigger things we need to focus on, and he wouldn’t answer anyway.

“Oh goddess, I don’t think it would be lucky to survive this; watch everyone you love die horrifically and then wait it out until help comes,” I whisper.

“Me neither, goddess be with anyone who did survive because this will never leave them.” Loki answers.

The death and destruction are even worse the closer we get. No one has escaped the wrath of the monster that’s done this. Men, women, children, and pets they’re all slaughtered brutally. I force myself to look, it may not be a pleasant thing to do, but one of the easiest ways to determine the monster that killed them is from the victim’s wounds.

“Everyone spread out and see if you can find anyone alive. Check any hidey hole you can think of; Children have a habit of finding the most unlikely places to hide themselves and announce your presence and where you’re from in every place you go. We don’t want to scare anyone further. Keep an eye

out for whatever did this too,” Storm orders, his stoic façade firmly in place as he moves stiffly through the streets, the tell-tale blaze of fire burning between his horns a sure sign of his hidden emotions.

Instead of carrying forward on horseback, I dismount and, pulling my work mask on; I move towards the body of a young man caught between a shift when he died. My emotions get pushed away to the deepest part of me. I need to know what killed them so I can bring the culprit to justice and help these supernaturals rest easy; I can fall apart and grieve for them later.

“What are you doing?” Rival asks me, the only one who’s stayed behind.

“I’m checking the wounds to see if I can identify what kind of creature did this,” I explain.

“Good idea,” he replies, getting off his own horse and walking over to join me.

My nose wrinkles at the smell of the body. He’s been here a while, at least three days. Which either means he was one of the first to die, or we’re three days late to help. I crouch down next to him, trying not to touch him. Some supernaturals can leave traces behind that damage anyone who touches the body after it’s dead, and I’m not risking it. Fortunately, his clothes are torn thanks to his partial shift, and it’s easy to see his wounds.

“Something strong enough to tear an arm off a shifter,” Rival mutters, his voice clinical, which is the only way to deal with this.

“Claw marks covering most of the torso,” I add, and lean closer, ignoring the stench as I study the wounds.

Something isn’t quite right about them, and I can’t put my finger on what. I move around the body to have a look at them from another angle and frown.

“What is it?” Rival asks.

“Well, normal wounds bleed a lot, and you get a level of bruising around them. All of the claw marks on his body don’t

have that, which means they were inflicted after he died and weren't the cause of death. The severing of the arm wasn't either. Shifters can heal that with enough time."

"So what killed him then?" Rival asks, frowning and bending closer to study the body.

"I have no idea; he might be too mangled for us to figure out exactly what it is. Let's have a look at someone else and see if they've got similar wounds." I suggest.

We only have to walk two metres until we get to the next body, this time, it's a woman, and there's no obvious sign to say what supernatural she is. She at least has all her limbs but once again is covered in claw marks.

"It's just like the other guy; the claw marks were made after she died." Rival mutters, studying her carefully.

"Look at this," I say as I spot the wound directly over her heart. It's about two inches wide and has a thin slit, suggesting it's been made by a sword, which would only kill a few supernaturals. We're notoriously complicated to kill. What has me intrigued though, is the dark blue veins spreading out from the wound.

"It's a stab wound, and I'm guessing they used a poisoned blade," Rival says, getting up and going back to the other body, he uses a stick to carefully move the scraps of fabric off the guy's chest, and sure enough the same wound is there.

"Well, this wasn't done by a Rogue. They use their gifts, never weapons, and their minds have deteriorated enough that they wouldn't have the foresight to poison the blades first."

"I'll have a look in some of my books when I get back. Maybe that will give us a clue as to who's behind this."

"Good idea. Let's check some of the other bodies and make sure this wasn't an isolated incident."

He nods grimly, and we walk through the nearest buildings and houses, checking bodies. They all have the same wounds that the previous bodies have.

“Did you find any survivors?” I ask the others as they all ride up to Rival and me.

Judging from their desolate faces, they didn't.

“No,” Loki answers bluntly.

“What about you two?” Storm asks, watching us curiously.

“No survivors, but we don't think that a Rogue caused this. Look,” I start, and all of them dismount and walk over to the latest body, Rival, and I are checking. “See, all of the claw marks were done after they died to cover up the real cause of death.”

“Which is this,” Rival takes over the explanation showing them the stab wounds in the heart and the blue lines coming out from it.

“So they were poisoned, murdered and not by a Rogue.” Reaper sums up before crouching next to the body and bravely taking a large inhale. “I can't smell the poison used, which is strange. Most things leave a trace of a scent behind even if they are supposed to be scentless.”

“I've seen something similar before, but it was dark magic, and the poison lines were dark purple.” Storm frowns as he talks.

“Well fuck. Dark magic users are as dangerous as the rogues, if not more so, because their minds are still intact. They know perfectly well what they're doing and can plan accordingly.” Loki curses.

“We can't do anything else now. Let's get back to the academy. Hopefully, Kill will be back, and we can fill him in.” Storm suggests.

We all get back on our horses and head off.

“I still don't understand the motivation behind sending us here,” Reaper says a few miles into the ride.

“Distraction possibly?” I suggest.

“Or to shake us so that we're not on our game for something else.”

“We’ll stick to the plan and keep a closer eye on the Headmaster when we get back.” Storm says decisively.

“If Poca decides to show back up, I can have him keep an eye on him for us. It’s less risky, and no one knows when Poca is around if he doesn’t want them to.” I suggest.

“Good idea. Until then, though, it’ll have to be Killian and I since we’re the only ones that can adequately mask ourselves.”

After that, we pick up the pace and soon, we reach the gates to the academy and a very pissed off Killian pacing outside, his tail whipping back and forth and his horns blazing with blue fire. As soon as he spots us, he folds his arms over his chest and waits.

“What happened to you?” Loki asks, “I thought you were going to be back sooner?”

“I was, but I got held up. What happened?” he asks, looking over us with concern.

“It was another set-up, but not like last time.” Storm starts, “Come on, I’ll explain while we take the horses back.”

By the time we get to the stables, Killian is filled in and even madder than he was before, especially since he didn’t really manage to find out anything about the assassin that was sent after me as he got caught up in settling a couple of other disputes.

“Alright, I need a shower,” Loki says as we get back to the castle.

We have barely set foot in the academy when the Headmasters magically projected voice sounds through the hallway, and all the surrounding students become quiet as we listen.

“All students are to report to the main hall. An emergency assembly has been called.”

“What now?” Loki groans.

“Maybe we’ll finally get some answers about what’s been happening with the teachers and Zev’s vision.” Mayhem

suggests.

We follow the flow of students into the hall and take our seats, staring up at the stage with the Headmaster front and centre, and all the teachers sat behind him, looking apprehensive.

“I’ll get straight to the point. The realm has started the Warrior games. Every member here will be expected to compete, and classes will be geared towards the need to get you all prepared in time.”

The hall becomes a cacophony of noise, a mixture of excited chatter and outright terror.

Chapter Twenty

The Headmaster just stands there observing us all. I overhear a group of students next to me talking about leaving and being sent home. They all know the severity of the games and that not all of them will survive. I, however, am excited, probably inappropriately so.

“Quiet!” the Headmaster bellows, and everyone shuts up, looking far more nervous than they were when we first arrived. “I know that some of you have probably already had the idea to leave the academy to avoid taking part. Unfortunately, this will not be possible; even if you do go home, the realm will pull you into the games when it sees fit. You are better off training and preparing as much as possible before that happens.

“Some of you will have longer to prepare than others as in the past, the realm has called teams staggered, and we have no reason to think otherwise this time. You will all be going out on your missions still, as real-world experience will be essential in helping you in the games. We promise to prepare you as best as we can. Fortunately, you have a good foundation already. Those of you who don’t have a team will find your members when you get pulled in, you will be at a disadvantage since you have no knowledge of each other, but you must prevail. Despite the deceptive name, this is not a game. If you do not perform well enough, you will die. If you do not complete the task in time in a level, you will be taken to the temple where the gods will decide your fate. There is no point in running or trying to hide the realm will see that fate follows its course.”

“If the realm has decided to call the games again doesn’t that mean that something big is coming, like a war?” someone calls out, sending murmurs around the hall as the implications of that statement sink in.

The Headmaster spears the speaker with a look before answering, “That is how it’s happened in the past.”

He appears to be starting to feel flustered, so it’s no surprise when my professor, from the first day, the one who told us about the games, steps forward and whistles shrilly, quieting the panicking students.

“This is a serious situation, and if you do not treat it as such, you will die. All the money in the world will not get you out of this. From this point forward, those of you with teams will be in every class together, and you will be moving into the shared housing regardless of whether you are a full team or not. We need to promote camaraderie between you.” He pauses, “I will be going more in-depth in my classes. Your new schedules will be in your rooms when you get back. For the rest of the afternoon, you can do as you please. This will be your only break for the foreseeable future, so use it wisely. We will be doing full weeks of classes from now on, so you will have a class all eight days. For those of you who are interested, I will be in my classroom answering questions about the games only in an hour.”

“You are dismissed.” The Headteacher adds, and I swear my history teacher rolls his eyes.

The teachers all leave quickly, trying to avoid the students who understandably have questions they want answers to. The students that are not trying to get to the teachers, however, are rushing to get out of the doors. I do not doubt that those who can afford a communication stone are using them to contact their parents to see if they can get them out of it. I am pleasantly surprised to see a fair few students looking excitedly nervous.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Reaper says drily.

“I don’t feel like I’ve got nearly enough information about the Warrior games.” Loki frowns.

“Well, let’s go and get showered and changed and then get to Professor Fitz’s classroom. He’s probably the only teacher here who has enough information, and also, he’s the only

teacher so far who has actually offered to help the students.” Killian suggests.

“You would’ve thought the combat professors would’ve offered the same thing.” Storm adds.

We all wait until the main push of the crowd has dispersed before we make our exit, only to run into the Headmaster waiting just outside the door, hidden in an alcove to avoid the notice of the other students who have rapidly disappeared.

“Glad to see you all back, okay,” he announces, stepping into our path and not looking happy to see us at all. His smile is sinister as he adds, “did you make it in time?”

Storm stares at him piercingly and surprises me when he doesn’t hold back on his words as much as I was expecting him to, “I get the feeling you already know that we didn’t, Sir,” he says sarcastically and before the bristling Headmaster can reply adds, “no we didn’t, everyone was dead.”

He then goes on to explain stiffly what we witnessed and what we saw, and now that I know he’s got a photographic memory, it makes a lot more sense how easily he can recall all of the details. It also makes me realise that he is going to remember in vivid detail everything that he saw today, and whereas I can say that it will stay with me for the rest of my life, eventually, the sharpness of the memory will start to fade, Storm doesn’t get that privilege.

It doesn’t take Storm long to finish, and as we all start to walk off, now pushed for time to get to Professor Fitz’s classroom, the Headmaster calls out after us.

“No other issues?” he asks, hidden meaning in his tone, which is made evident when he sets his narrowed gaze on Reaper.

“No.” Storm replies bluntly.

“Fucking prick,” Loki mutters as soon as we’re out of his earshot and nearly back to the room.

“We’ll deal with him. For now, everyone needs to go and get showered so we can get to this class. I will not allow him to distract us enough to make us unprepared for the games. I will

not lose one of you. We will survive this, and more than that, we will fucking come out on top.” Storm’s speech is surprisingly inspiring, and I’m starting to think that he’s carrying a hell of a lot of emotions under that stoic shield he always has up. I think it’s not that he doesn’t feel them, just that he doesn’t show them.

Mayhem claps Storm on the shoulder as he walks past, and Killian stops in front of him.

“You won’t lose any of us, brother. We can handle whatever they throw at us.”

I leave them to it feeling like I’m intruding slightly on their moment. When I first brought Killian back here, there was more than just slight tension between them, but now, they seem to be getting back on the right track, and I’m so fucking glad.

My shower and change are quick, and we’re all on our way to Professor Fitz’s classroom with ten minutes to spare.

“When we get back, I want everyone to pack a bag. With a medical kit, and non-perishable food, we should be able to hunt, but we may not be able to. Any spare spell bottles you’ve got lying around that you think might be useful, clothing, waterproof sheeting, and water. Anything else you guys think will be needed too? We have no idea if we’ll be able to grab things or not when we get called, so I want them with us at all times.” Storm orders.

“On it, I’ve got a spare larger bag that Farren can use,” Rival replies.

“Good.”

“Ah, I thought I’d see you lot here, come and sit down.” Fitz greets us decidedly more friendly than he was in our first lesson.

I think now that we’ve, or more like, I’ve proven that I’m here for the right reasons, I want to learn, and I didn’t get in on my father’s money. He’s not so surly with us. As we take our usual seats in this class, I’m surprised how few students are actually here, only around seventy, not including us, and that’s

out of the four hundred or so currently in attendance at the academy. You'd think they'd jump at the chance to get some extra information.

"Zev, you alright, mate. Do you want to sit with us?" Loki asks, spotting Zev a few rows away.

"Sure," he grabs his stuff and makes his way up, taking a seat next to Mayhem.

"In case you were wondering, this is what I saw. I'm sorry I couldn't prewarn you." Zev explains.

"Don't worry about it, mate. We know what it's like with visions." Rival replies easily.

Our conversation is interrupted as Fitz calls the class to order.

"Right, it appears this is all who want to prepare themselves best, so I suppose we should get on with it," Disappointment is evident in his tone, "this will just be a basic information kind of lecture, I will be going more in detail in my actual classes, and at the end, I will take questions."

I pull out a notebook that I actually thought to bring because I have a feeling that we're going to get a lot of information thrown at us very quickly, and I don't want to forget anything vital. I've learned over the short amount of time I've been here that he doesn't repeat himself.

"First of all, when you get called, there will be an invitation in Fae fire, and you'll have minutes to get ready, grab any supplies you think you'll need and arm up. Because of this, I suggest that you always have your weapons on you and nearby while you are sleeping. I would also suggest that you have a bag ready to go full of any supplies you think you may need in an easy to grab location."

I look over to Storm, who has a slight uptick to one of his lips; he totally called it and has every right to feel smug.

"Now I know there's not many of you that are in your completed teams and so, therefore, are living in the single dorms. It will be a challenge now that you'll be sharing space with the members of your team that you do have, but it is

absolutely crucial that you get to know them well. Learn their strengths and weaknesses so that you can help each other out in the levels of the Warrior games. Along that same thought line, I imagine that your combat professors will be having you spar against your teammates before you work as a team against another team of your size. They will be stepping up their training to ensure you are properly prepared.”

“Is there any way to know when we will get called?” Someone asks and shockingly doesn’t get his head bitten off, which is what usually happens in Fitz’s classes.

“Unfortunately not. The first team could get called in the next hour, or they could get called in a week. There’s no way to tell, but the Realm is fair, so I would like to think that she’d let us get at least a little bit of information in you before sending you in unprepared.”

“It seems a bit unfair that some teams are going to have more information than others going in,” a girl in the second row asks.

“It is but that is only because this school has become a farce in recent years. Back when the games were a regular thing and even for a long time after, you were all rigorously taught this. There was a professor specifically for all things to do with the games. Combat classes were harder, and failure wasn’t an option. If you weren’t passing all classes, then you were thrown out. Money,” he looks around seriously at some shrinking postures, which I think is slightly unfair since they’re here, which shows they’re taking it seriously even if they got in using money. “Money got you nowhere. You got in on your own skills, and you stayed so long as you kept up. So when the Head Seer announced the games once the Realm contacted her, everyone was ready. They just trained extra hard in combat to ensure they were on top of their game or to refresh their memory.”

I share a look with Loki sitting next to me. Well, that sure as shit explains why all the royals were called to the winter court by the Head Seer, although not why my father was involved apart from being a nosy fucker. What I am curious about

though, is whether Zev got the warning from the Realm or somewhere else.”

Infinitely curious, I dart my eyes over to him, and he catches my gaze and nods once in confirmation. My own eyes widen. Holy fucking shit balls that means that Zev is going to be the next Head Seer. I suddenly panic, realising that he went to the fucking slimy as shit Headmaster, who would undoubtedly use him.

I scribble out a note, asking whether he told the Head or not and pass it over via Loki and Mayhem, who look at me curiously. Zev reads the note and looks up at me shaking his head no, and I release a worried breath. Thank fuck for that.

He passes the note back, and I read over it, “I had every intention to, but something felt extremely off about him, so instead, I told him that he needed to get in contact with the Head Seer immediately and left.”

I write back, “Good, don’t trust him and don’t tell anyone. Something is going on with the Headmaster, and he can’t be trusted. If you need anything at all, our room number is thirteen-thirteen. Any time.”

He reads, smiles slightly and nods. Which I hope means that he will actually use it if he needs to.

Panic over and getting curious looks from the guys, I tune back in and hope I haven’t missed anything too important.

“Right, as you know, the games are not all about the combat and weapons side of it. It’s also about brain power and strength of character. Your other teachers will be going over all the supernatural species in this realm, and the others, making sure you know how they work, what kills them, what they eat, how their magic and supernatural sides behave, and everything along those lines. They’ll also be going over strategies and trying to familiarise yourselves with as many territories across the Realms as possible. That is particularly important to pay attention to as you could end up absolutely anywhere. The Realm has a plan and knows far more than we could hope.”

Well, shit, that's a hell of a lot of places that we could end up in, and I don't know nearly enough about them or the creatures that occupy them. I need books, lots and lots of books.

"The length for your challenges will vary depending on what task you are set. There will be at least four days between stages so that you can rest and recuperate between each one, and there are ten stages in total. By the end of it, you will either be successful and bestowed a blessing and an extra gift from the Realm to help you protect it, or you won't."

I'm pretty grateful he didn't say, or you'll be dead. I have never heard of the Realm bestowing extra gifts on warriors that have won the games, but then again that would explain some of the crazy stories I've read in the history books about warriors of the past. There's a buzz of excitement around the classroom as everyone chooses to focus on the extra gifts and not the threat of death.

"Now, the last thing I will cover, as it's nearly time for dinner, is that usually, all outside jobs would be stopped and left for those who had already graduated, mainly to give those in the games a chance to train and focus solely on them and also so that they don't get called whilst they are out on the job and risk compromising it," he pauses, frowning and clearly disapproving of what he says next, "for whatever reason, the Headmaster has decided to send you all still out on them. I will carry on trying to convince him why this isn't a good idea, and I hope he will finally concede. Until then, I wish you all the best of luck."

Sensing that as the dismissal it is, everyone starts to pack up and move towards the door. Something occurs to me as I grab my notebook, and I barge past the guys to catch up to Zev. The others following quickly.

"Head Seers don't have teams do they?" I ask.

He doesn't look as worried as I think he should when he replies, "No, they don't, but I promise I'll be fine. I'm tough, and you've been helping train. I'll be okay."

He grins like he knows something, which I guess he probably does and then makes his way out the door.

“Did that mean what I think it did?” Killian asks, his eyes wide.

“Yes, and don’t worry, he didn’t say anything to the Head.”

“Thank fuck for that.” Storm adds.

“We need to keep him safe,” Loki adds in as we walk the halls.

“We can’t keep him safe in the games though, can we?” I mutter, I know I haven’t spent much time with him, but I like him, which is rare and means that he’s one of mine now.

“Shit, Seers aren’t usually at the academy, so they aren’t called which means they don’t have to worry about going through the games alone.” Reaper summarises.

We fall silent at the implications, and I send up a prayer to the fates that he will be okay and protected.

“I hear you, daughter. He will remain safe. Beware, everything is about to change.”

Chapter twenty-one

I stop dead in my fucking tracks in the empty hallway. The only students that were in this part of the school were the ones that were in Fitz's class, and we were the last ones out. I look around, probably looking like a fucking crazy person, but in all honesty, I fucking feel like one.

"Farren, are you okay?" Loki asks cautiously.

"Do you sense something?" Mayhem asks as they all immediately go on guard.

"At the risk of sounding like a fucking looney, please tell me you guys heard that voice?"

They all share a look, and I groan, covering my face with my hands. It was definitely only me that heard that. Fan-fucking-tastic.

"What did it say?" Loki asks, curious and not judging me in the slightest, and I could honestly kiss him because of it.

"Maybe we should discuss this back in our room, just in case we're being listened to?" Storm suggests, and everyone nods.

When I don't move straight away, Loki threads his fingers through one of my hands, and Reaper surprisingly does the same on the other side. When we get up to the room, Rival makes everyone their favourite drinks, and then they all sit there and stare at me expectantly.

"Well?" Storm asks somewhat impatiently.

"Erm, I was worried about Zev. I don't like many people, and those I do, I become protective of, and I don't like that he's going to go through the games alone, so I prayed to the fates to keep him safe and then a woman's voice filled with awe-inspiring power said, *I hear you daughter, he will remain safe. Beware, everything is about to change.* That's when I freaked out."

I lean back and sip my coffee as I watch the array of expressions go across their faces as they stare at me in silence, and I try not to fidget under their scrutiny.

“Let me get this straight you prayed to the Fates, and one fucking answered you?” Loki exclaims.

“Well, I don’t know about it being one of the Fates, but something answered me. For all I know, it could be the god of death or something.”

“I’m not even sure what to fucking reply to that. I mean, that’s nuts.” Mayhem answers.

“At least we know Zev is somehow going to be safe during the games.” Loki shrugs, looking on the bright side of the situation.

“Yes, somehow, even though he’s going to be alone with no backup, and there’s a reason why warriors have teams and don’t go in alone.” Storm says dryly.

In response, I just glare at him because, unsurprisingly, his attitude is starting to dip now. I suppose so long as we remain civil on jobs, it doesn’t really matter the rest of the time, except I’d kind of like to have the same relationship with him as I have with the others. I also feel like most of it is put on, like he’s playing a part and doesn’t want me to get too close to him, so he treats me like this. I like our sparring; it amuses me if I’m honest, but I would like to get to know him better and see the actual expressions on his face.

The conversation is dropped after Storm’s sarcastic reply, and everyone orders food up to the room and then gets on with their own things. I end up snuggling between Loki and Reaper, and I’ve stuffed myself full of food and enjoyed being surrounded by them. I must’ve fallen asleep at some point because I’m vaguely aware of being carried to bed. Halfway through the night, I feel the comforting warmth of Poca getting onto the bed, and I wrap my arms around him.

“Missed you,” I mutter sleepily and receive a scorching hot lick on my cheek in response.

With Poca next to me, my nightmares don't affect me like they usually would, it's almost like there's a layer of protection between them and me, so I'm just witnessing them rather than experiencing them as I normally would.

"Morning, Farren," Mayhem greets far too cheerfully when I emerge from my room the following day.

I grunt my reply, not awake yet and slightly sore from riding so hard yesterday. He smiles at me like he's amused and then holds out a cup of coffee for me.

"Thanks," I mutter.

"Aw, hey Poca, where have you been?" Rival asks the hellhound, who is excitedly jumping up and down and saying hello to everyone. He even gets a slight smile out of Storm.

"He's like a giant puppy," Loki grins, his vampire teeth on full display and doing something to me, which I am going to ignore this early in the morning. More coffee, that's what I need, not to be thinking about sexy vampire bites.

"Did we get our new schedules?" Killian asks, making a beeline for me and kissing me on the forehead as he goes past, his tail stroking my butt.

"Yeah, they're on the coffee table," Storm replies, frowning at Killian and me.

Of course, I ignore him, rather than engage, and grab a schedule, looking over it. I'm glad that we still have Professor Fitz since, out of all of the teachers, he seems to be one of the only ones who is genuinely invested in helping the students. I suppose the other teachers could have still been in shock and trying to get their own heads around the implications before they dealt with students. I hope that is the case and they all step up their game today and actually help us properly. After all, it's our lives on the line, and we're all woefully unprepared. At least I'm fortunate enough to have my training

behind me. As I look over it, trying to memorise the room numbers and incredibly grateful that now all the guys are in my classes, I can follow them to the right one; as I look it over, I notice that they've combined combat and weapons together and made it an hour longer so instead of finishing at five our school day ends at six.

A knock on the door interrupts my study of the classes, and since I'm closest, I put it back down and open the door, surprised to see a harried looking Magnus on the other side.

"Magnus, are you okay?" I ask.

"Yes, yes. Well, is anyone really okay at the moment? Can I come in?"

"Of course," I frown, stepping back and letting him into the room.

"Hey Magnus, how're you?" Rival asks.

"We have a problem," Magnus says in reply.

"Of course we do. What now?" Reaper sighs heavily.

I can't blame him at all. We seem to constantly have problems or things that aren't going quite right; at this point, what's one more problem?

"Coffee?" Kill asks Magnus.

"Yes, please, a bit of something strong mixed in if you have it."

I raise my eyebrow. Exactly what has gone fucking wrong now that means Magnus is drinking in the morning and before classes? Surely it can't be just because of the games?

"Sure, I can do that." Kill grins, seemingly unperturbed, he quickly makes up Magnus's drink and then hands it to him.

"Thanks."

He doesn't say anything else, and Reaper is clearly feeling impatient as he asks again, "What's gone wrong now?"

"I'm sure that you're aware by now that the Headmaster is up to something?" we all nod, "well, he tried to send you out

again this morning. Fortunately, I caught wind of it and managed to convince him to put it off for two days. I have no idea what he's hoping to achieve by sending you out this regularly."

"Do you know where we're being sent to?" Storm asks, arms crossed over his chest.

Magnus's worried look becomes severe, "He's sending you to the Shadowlands."

"What?" Loki yells, shocking me with the sudden outburst. "The Shadowlands are practically a death sentence for anyone who enters them. Only the senior enforcers go in if they have to, and even then, they rarely come back out again."

"They're a barren land, shrouded in darkness and fog permanently, where the worst of us live. Criminals escape there rather than being caught, I know there are a couple of towns further in, but the stories that have come out of them are truly horrific. There's an unspoken rule, they leave us alone, and we leave them alone." Reaper adds.

"Those towns aren't quite as bad as they make out, but they do run on an entirely different and more bloody code of conduct than we do, and there are rules and traditions that, if you don't follow precisely, will end in you being eaten." I decide to add my opinion because the Shadowlands are actually something I feel protective of.

Everyone falls silent and turns to stare at me in horror.

"Farren, you've been to the Shadowlands?" Magnus asks.

I shrug, dropping my hand to run through Poca's fur, "A few times, yeah. I should be able to get us there easily enough, depending on what entrance we've been told to use and what the job is?"

"Why were you in the Shadowlands?" Storm's icy voice snaps out at me.

"That is none of your concern. What is of your concern is that I'm in a position where I have knowledge of the place that could help you."

Anger lights his face. Clearly, he doesn't like that I won't answer him, "I don't trust you. You've already had one assassin after you, and the Headmaster has a problem with you particularly. You are a hazard to have around my team, and I will not have them put in danger because you don't want to share something uncomfortable."

The guys bristle at his words as Magnus raises his eyebrows at his outburst, his eyes on me as he realises that I haven't shared anything about what my father made me do. It surprises me when it's Rival that comes to my defence, not because I didn't think he would but because out of them all, Mayhem and Rival are the ones I'm not quite as close to.

"Hey!" Rival growls, "that was uncalled for, and you know it. There are plenty of things in our own past that we are not comfortable with sharing with Farren yet. Forcing her to do so would not help matters and would build even more tension between you two and possibly us. We can't afford that right now." Storm glowers at his words and clenches his hands by his sides but keeps his mouth shut under the dark stares he's receiving from everyone in the room. Rival turns his attention to me, "Farren, is your connection to the Shadowlands going to put any of us in danger?"

"No, and if it were, I would've told you my connection with it no matter how uncomfortable it was," I reply firmly.

Rival nods and looks back at Storm as if to say, see, I told you. Somehow Storm's face darkens even further, and if looks could kill, I'd most likely be dead.

"Can we refuse?" Loki asks and then adds, "even with Farren's connection which I'm certain the Headmaster doesn't know about, it is still a massive risk, especially since we know he's out to get her."

Magnus sighs heavily, "This is the problem. If you don't go, he has made it perfectly clear that he will send another team. You are the best team currently in residence at the academy. Whereas you all have a chance of being successful or, at the very least, surviving, it's pretty much a certainty that any other team would fail and lose their lives. Yes, you all get taught the

same, but it's more than obvious that some people take it more seriously than others. You all also have a background and skills, which means you are far more qualified to do this job than anyone else. I can guarantee that if you refuse, he will pick the least qualified team so that when they inevitably die, he can put the blame on you."

"Well fuck, I guess we don't have a choice then." Mayhem sighs heavily.

"I'm not having another team's deaths on my conscience." Kill adds, his horns sparking.

"When do we get the files?" Storm asks, his voice sullen with a note of anger, and I have a feeling that he's going to be an absolute arse for the rest of the day.

"I will make sure that you get them by this evening. I have no idea what this job entails and what it could entail; with it being in the Shadowlands, we usually leave them to police their own." Magnus frowns and then stands up, draining his cup, "you better all get to class. If I find out anything else, I'll let you know."

"Thanks," I reply.

We all follow him out of the door to get to our first class on time which is the one focused on different supernaturals, their abilities, weaknesses and everything in between.

I have to say that now the classes are focused just on the games and everything they entail; I'm finding them a lot more interesting. The intensity the teachers are giving off is helping those students who have so far slacked in their classes pay more attention and take it seriously. Storm has been on at me all fucking day, with little digs, sarcastic comments, and generally being an arse. I'm giving as good as I get, but it's starting to wear fucking thin now, and I'm kind of hoping that we get put against each other in sparring because I think we both fucking need it.

As we walk to combat and weapons, we get stuck behind a small group who, just from looking at them and watching how

they look down on everyone around them, I can tell are the rich fuckers.

“Daddy’s going to get me out of it. He said he wouldn’t stand for me to be fighting in some games for the realms,” one of the girls announces proudly and flicks her hair over her shoulder. I roll my eyes.

“This is a combat school; surely he expected this at some point? Anyway, there is no getting out of it.” One of the guy’s replies, not looking too bothered at the prospect.

The rest of them scoff at him as if he’s said something truly stupid, and money is enough to go up against an ancient realm that has the ability to do with us what she pleases.

I’m so amused by the conversation that I don’t realise we’re late, and when I get into the changing rooms, it’s to find them empty. I’m also suddenly aware that someone has followed me into the room. I spin on my heel, ready to defend myself and instantly relax when I see it’s Storm, I cross my arms over my chest leaning back against my locker and tapping my foot because I know it’ll piss him off.

“Go on then, get on with verbal barbs you want to throw at me now. We’re late,” I demand, and I get slightly nervous when he smirks, anger flashing in his eyes as he stalks towards me.

Now logically, I know that he would never truly hurt me. Still, as he stalks towards me, his wings flick out behind him, making an appearance for the first time since the level one fight and, with his aggressive stance, it starts to remind me of an entirely different demon. He places both hands on either side of my head, and that, coupled with his wings, starts to trigger a memory from the past one that I’d rather forget and the focus of most of my nightmares. He’s so much bigger than I am, and thanks to the memories pushing their way forward, I feel completely helpless against him, even though logically, I know I’m not. I feel like I did back then.

The panic attack hits me hard and fast, spearing me with its claws and relentlessly dragging me down into that horrific memory, back to that place of hurt, torment, helplessness and

unimaginable pain. Unable to stop it, I scream at the top of my lungs, and I'm vaguely aware of Storm staring at me in shock as tears start to stream down my face. He's talking to me, his mouth is moving, but I can't hear him, I can't breathe, and I'm in another time and place entirely. A small part of me is aware of him, but most of me is stuck in the torment.

He moves his arm by my head, and I flinch hard, dropping to the floor in a bid to escape what I know happens next. I bury my head in my knees, wrap my arms around them and start rocking back and forth.

"No, no, no, no, no," I beg, "please, no." Sobs are clawing their way from my too tight chest, and I couldn't control any of it if I fucking wanted to. I have well and truly been triggered.

Burying my head may not have been the best idea because now that I'm completely in the dark, the memories seem to gain more purchase. I find myself sitting on the dusty red floor as a grotesque demon towers over me. None of them seems to wear clothes, at least not in this dungeon, but this one is worse. He gets off on my terror, as evidenced by his hard dick. I will not let myself be abused by him like I've seen him do to the others. I know he's strong enough to take what he so clearly wants from me, but for some reason, he doesn't. I'm hoping it's an order, and he just enjoys my prolonged terror, but I can't bank on that. I'm getting tired, my strength is starting to wane, and I know this time it's going to take all I have to fight him off. He pulls me up off the floor by my hair and shakes me, plunging his claws into my stomach and grinning at my scream as he lifts his bloody claws to his mouth and licks them clean, his eyes practically rolling back in his head.

Whilst he's distracted, I try to summon my magic, willing a spark or something to come to my aid, somehow Father has stopped my magic from manifesting, he called it a training exercise, and I highly doubt he expected me to end up here after all I'm his best assassin.

Done with his snack, the demon turns his attention back to me; I strike out, grateful for my enhanced strength. He grins, grabs my arm and snaps it like a twig.

I scream.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Loki

I hear her scream, and I'm gone, following the sound as the others follow behind me. The fact that we're all using our true speed rather than tampering it down like we usually do says a lot about how much we all care about Farren.

What I see when I get to the changing room has me freezing in shock, the guys nearly crashing into me. I step further into the room, allowing them to see what's going on as I study the scene in front of me. Farren is curled up in a ball on the floor, rocking back and forth as sobs wrack her body, and she repeatedly says no. I glance toward the only other person in the room. I thought Storm had decided to apologise for the shit he was pulling today, but clearly, something went very wrong.

The unflappable and stoic Storm is staring at Farren with absolute devastation clouding his features. This looks really bad, and if it were anyone but my bond brother in this situation, then I'd instantly assume the worst, and he'd be dead. There'd be no question about it. But he is my best friend, teammate and brother, and I know for a fact that he wouldn't physically hurt her. With his words, sure, he's got a sharp tongue, and Farren seems to like verbally sparring with him even if he does take it too far sometimes, but he would never physically or sexually hurt her, which is what this looks like.

Before I can react in any way, Reaper charges past the rest of us, who are still frozen in the doorway, a deep and threatening growl echoing around the changing room as he rushes Storm and has him pinned to the lockers behind him by his throat within seconds.

"What the fuck happened?" he growls, his voice part beast.

I share a worried look with the guys. It's a testament to his friendship with Storm that he didn't immediately shift. The good news is that he is talking, so he's not so far gone that we have to worry about him completely losing control. Of course, that depends on what Storm says to him.

"Start talking, brother." He demands, his eyes flashing with anger.

"I-I-I don't know," Storm stutters, which makes us all pause and really take him in. He hasn't stuttered for well over a decade. He continues, "I was just going to give her shit like I have been all day. She usually fights back, and I fucking love it, but this time," he cuts his own sentence off as he clenches his fists by his sides, not even trying to remove Reapers hold on him, "why won't she let me help her? Why was she in the Shadowlands? She shouldn't have been there. She could have been hurt, a-and she can't be hurt, she just can't. I knew she didn't like my wings, b-b-but I was p-p-panicking, and they came out. They aren't used to being bound." His ramblings are extremely telling.

"That's why you've kept your wings hidden? Because you think she doesn't like them?" I ask, he nods, and I add, "I think they remind her of something."

Reaper loosens his hold on his throat. It's easy to see the delicate state he's in right now, "What happened, Storm?"

His eyes haven't left her once as he's been talking, "Her eyes glazed over like she wasn't really here anymore and then she screamed and dropped to the floor."

"You fucking triggered her," Killian growls, not pulling any punches when he tells his brother exactly what he's fucking done to her. His hands clenching at his sides as his tail whips back and forth and stabs the air.

"No n-n-no, I fuck!" his face crumples, showing more emotion than he has done for as long as I can remember.

It's at that point that I realise I was wrong. I thought that Storm was fighting his feelings for her, that because he hadn't given her a chance, not a real one, he was behind the rest of us

in what we feel for her and what she means to us. I was so wrong. He's been pushing her away and acting like an arse because he's already fallen, and it scares the shit out of him.

Fuck.

Mayhem slowly moves further into the room and then stops immediately as Farren's cries increase at the sound of his footsteps, and she makes this horrendous keening sound, then adds softly, "She's having a flashback."

At the sound of the keening, we all stop moving. Holy fuck, how do we fix this? I feel utterly helpless. There is absolutely no hiding that I have feelings for her; we all do. I think the only one who doesn't realise is Farren herself. We're gone for her, and seeing her like this and not knowing how to help or what could make it worse is killing me. Somehow, even though she's in the depths of a panic attack, I'm not getting anything from the bond, like she's automatically closed it off. I glance over at Killian questioningly, and he nods that he's not feeling anything either, a deeply concerned look darkening his features.

Storm drops to his knees, shocking the shit out of all of us as he crawls towards her. When she doesn't make the keening noise again, we all follow his lead and sit our arses down, making ourselves as small as possible. I can't help my shocked stare as Storm is literally brought to his knees.

When he gets just over a metre away, she tenses again, and he immediately stops advancing. The words that come out of his mouth next are almost shocking enough to convince me that we've slipped into an alternate reality, which is entirely possible, although very rare to do so accidentally.

"Shhh, b-b-baby, it's me, I'm not going to hurt you, sweetheart, I promise. I'm so f-f-fucking sorry." He keeps his voice soft as he talks to her, and it seems to be getting through to her because her tense shoulders start to loosen, and her rocking slows down. Seeing this, he painstakingly slowly starts to move forward again, still crawling.

I can't even begin to comprehend the words that just came out of his mouth. Any barrier that was holding his emotions

back and ensuring they remained hidden has been completely obliterated. A quick look around at the others shows the utter bewilderment they're feeling as well, and I'm relieved that it's not just me.

My attention goes back to Storm and Farren just in time to see that he's managed to get within reaching distance of her, and she is calmer than she was, rocking slower and not quite as tense. I watch with bated breath as he slowly reaches out and gently lays his hand on her folded arms. She flinches hard and lets out a whimper as she starts to tense again, and he immediately lets go, but he doesn't back up.

"Baby girl, it's me. Come on, d-d-darling, look at me? Whatever you are seeing right now isn't real. You aren't there now, Baby girl, you're at the academy, with me, Loki, Killian, Rival, Mayhem and Reaper, do you remember? I can prove it to you, Baby. All you've to do is look at me. C—c-come on, look at me," our stoic, unfeeling, and emotionally closed off leader pleads with Farren.

We all hold our breath, not daring to move as she slowly and stiffly unwinds her arms slightly, just enough for her to peek out at him to verify his words. He nods encouragingly, giving her the softest smile I have ever seen from him, even before he shut down his emotions. I thought that as soon as she realised who was in front of her, she would back up. After all, he was the one who inadvertently triggered her but instead, she launches herself at him. We all prepare to intervene. Storm isn't fond of being touched. Although he makes allowances for women, it's always on his terms and very rarely, which is why the rest of us saw through what he was doing in the dining room with those two women so easily, he was trying to get a rise out of Farren, and he hated every second of having their hands on him.

We're not needed, though. Her arms wrap around his neck, her legs wrapping around his waist as best they can since he's on the floor, and she buries her face into the base of his neck, trembling and holding on tightly like he's her lifeline out of the hell she was just in. He manages not to fall backwards from sheer force of will and, as soon as he's stable, wraps his

tattooed arms around her with absolutely no hesitation as he pulls her impossibly closer, the relief on his face profound as he drops his head so he can talk to her quietly for the rest of us to hear. As he holds her, his shadows come out, and I watch in utter fascination as the things used for harm and pain gently stroke over her back and arms, soothing and comforting her. Even more shockingly, she actually does take comfort in it, relaxing even further into Storm.

“What the fuck,” Kill mutters and then goes wide-eyed and panicked that he might’ve scared her again when she tenses ever so slightly.

“I didn’t know shadows could behave like that?” Mayhem asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

“They can. They’re a part of us, but so far as I’m aware, Storm has never used his like that.” Kill answers, looking to the rest of us for confirmation.

“No, he hasn’t,” I reply.

Unsure what else to do, we just stay silent and watch. It’s clear that Storm has this handled. Eventually, her shaking stops, although she doesn’t loosen her hold on Storm.

He looks over at us, his barrier still down, and I hope like fuck it stays that way. I miss my best friend, the one who’d joke around with me, the one who would always try and make me feel better when my home life became unbearable, even though his was much the same as mine. Then he closed himself off completely. The more abuse his father inflicted on him, the more closed off he became until he was the emotionless man we know now, very rarely showing any kind of emotion until Farren came along.

“I think she’s fallen asleep,” he says, quietly enough not to wake her.

“I’m not surprised, that must’ve been exhausting. I know that I’m always super tired after a flashback.” Mayhem admits.

He’s not the only one of us familiar with flashbacks.

“She obviously trusts you though, brother. She never would’ve fallen asleep on you so soon after otherwise.” Killian points out.

“I don’t deserve it.”

“No, you don’t,” Reaper says bluntly, “but you’ve got it, so don’t fuck it up, or I will eat you.” The grin he gives Storm is not pleasant at all and can only be described as a predator looking at his prey.

“I promise.” Storm sincerely replies, before looking back down at Farren, “I’m done pretending like she didn’t walk in and completely turn my world upside down like she hasn’t had me wrapped around her finger since day one.”

“Fucking finally!” Mayhem exclaims, and the quiets as Farren shifts in Storm’s arms. “It took you fucking long enough.”

Storm’s smile is genuine as he starts to get up, managing not to jostle Farren as he does so.

“I think we’re done for classes today. Let’s get Farren back upstairs.”

We all stiffly get to our feet, showing that we’ve been sitting here for a while and we’re lucky that combat class is now a three-hour lesson. I doubt she would want anyone seeing her like this. Actually, now that I think about it, I realise she wouldn’t want anyone to see her being carried, either.

“Storm, I don’t think we should carry her through the halls. Not only will she not like people seeing her like that but also it could get back to the Headmaster, and who knows how he could spin it against her.” I point out.

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll take her in my shadows.” He says casually.

“Are you sure?” Kill asks. At the questioning looks from the rest of us, he adds, “it’s quite an intimate thing to do and leaves you vulnerable. Once you take someone in your shadows, without the intention of harming them, they’ll be able to call to them when they’re in need.”

“Wow,” Rival says, his wide eyes once again focused on Storm.

He shrugs like it's no big deal and starts gathering the shadows around him, “She owns me anyway.”

With that prolific statement and an amused grin at the shocked looks on our faces, he lets the shadows consume him entirely as he disappears, no doubt almost to our room already.

“I'm not sure I know how to process any of this,” Mayhem admits as we all make our way out of the changing rooms as quickly as possible.

We stop at the guys changing rooms quickly to grab our stuff and then practically run to get to our room, ignoring everyone who tries to talk to us on the way. I'm not rushing because I don't trust Storm with her. Nope, I'm rushing because on a typical day, I don't like being away from her, but on a day like today, when I know she's hurting, I fucking hate it. I'm almost certain that the guy's reasons are not dissimilar to mine.

When we get to the room, Farren is still asleep, and Storm is lying her down on the sofa. I quickly grab a blanket as Kill steps forward and takes off her shoes, Mayhem gently moves the hair off her face, Rival strokes her cheek looking both relieved and terrified, and Reaper crouches in front of her, stares at her for a second as if to reassure himself that she's okay and then leans forward gently kissing her on the forehead.

“Thanks, guys,” she mutters, shocking us all since we had no idea she was awake, but her breaths soon even back out, and she's once again fast asleep.

We all settle down around her, putting the tv on low so that we can at least pretend we're watching it and not all stuck in our own heads. It doesn't surprise me in the slightest when Poca appears, although he does make me jump slightly. He whines as he sniffs her and then licks her cheek. I still have to fight myself to stop from freaking out every time he does that because he should burn her with hellfire, but she's never so much as winced. He sniffs her entire body, no doubt searching

for injuries and then, satisfied that she isn't hurt, curls up on the floor beside the sofa.

"I don't think we should ask her what it was about and what happened." Rival suddenly says into the silence.

"No, she can tell us when she's ready." Kill agrees.

After that's settled, we all watch the TV, none of us willing to move away from her. Storm could've put her in her room, but like us he needed to see that she was okay too. So far, his emotionless barrier seems to be staying down, and I'm hoping with everything I am that it stays down. We need a leader that is capable of everything, of feeling alongside the rest of us. With the Headmaster determined to fuck with us at every opportunity and the games quickly approaching, I truly believe that although Storm was a great leader before, with his emotions fully switched on and, more importantly showing, he will be an amazing one. I have never doubted that he cared about us but seeing him be himself again would be amazing.

At some point, the sun goes down, and we decide to order food. We don't bother waking Farren, wanting her to sleep for as long as possible and hoping that the smell will wake her. She's so exhausted though, that she doesn't even stir, so Mayhem wraps her plate and puts it in the cold storage in case she wants it later.

As the evening progresses, I feel my eyes get heavy. I really should go to bed. I'm going to have one hell of a kink in my back by the morning if I stay here, but I can't bring myself to move, and no one else does either. My last thought before I finally succumb to sleep is that Farren has made us stronger. She has quickly become the glue that sticks us together.

Farren

Deja vu hits me when I'm woken up by banging on the fucking door again. I groan as I roll over and realise that I'm not in my bed at all. Suddenly all of the events of yesterday come rushing back, and my eyes immediately search the room for Storm. When I find him, he's already looking at me and smiling, a real honest to goodness fucking smile. As I gape and his eyes become amused, which is not helping my shock because when the hell did he start showing his emotions? He gets up, the banging still sounding in the background.

"Good morning, gorgeous. How're you feeling?" he asks, no snark in his tone and completely ignoring the banging.

"Like I've fallen down the rabbit hole. Like in that famous earth realm book." I ramble.

"You'll get used to it." He grins.

"You mean, you showing your emotions? You're not going to hide from me again?" embarrassingly, there's a thread of panic in my tone by the end of the sentence.

"I'll never hide from you again."

I nod, unable to get any words out, as I sit up and glance around at the rest of the guys, all spread out in the room and starting to wake up thanks to the incessant banging.

"They didn't want to leave you." Storm explains, "I better get that."

Then shocking the shit out of me, he dips and gently kisses my forehead. My eyes don't leave him as he strides towards the door; by the time he gets there, his mask is back in place, but he doesn't seem as tense as he has been since I've known him. I swear if he doesn't drop that bloody thing again, I will make him somehow.

"What!" he barks, pulling open the door and then adds, "Sorry, Magnus, you woke us."

"The Headmaster has managed to go above me and everyone else who disapproved of sending you out again so soon," Magnus rushes out.

Storm sighs heavily, “When?”

“Now.”

“What the fuck, you have to be fucking kidding me!” Loki grumbles.

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do. He was insistent that you went out today.” Magnus’s worry is obvious.

“Okay, don’t worry, we’ll sort it. Thanks,” Storm says, closing the door.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Storm turns back to us; his hand closed around files that I didn't see Magnus hand to him, from the angle I was sitting, "Well fuck. We better get our shit together then."

"The fact that he is so insistent that we go today is suspicious as fuck." Mayhem points out.

"Oh yeah, he's got some sort of trap ready for us. Without a doubt." Loki adds flippantly.

"Then, as always, we keep a lookout and make sure that we are as prepared as we can be," Reaper suggests.

"Agreed, there's no time frame for this one, we just need to leave this morning, so I'm making breakfast, especially since you didn't eat last night," Mayhem says, looking at me.

My stomach chooses that moment to grumble, and I smile, "I guess I could eat."

"Everyone else, go and get showered and changed. Grab your bags as well. We can go over the files while we eat breakfast." Storm orders, and everyone separates to go to their own rooms.

Once in the shower, it occurs to me that none of them asked me any questions about what happened yesterday, and I find myself incredibly grateful. I don't want to explain it. I'm just so incredibly glad that they were there for me, especially Storm, it was his voice I heard calling me back.

Who would've thought it?

I feel strangely energised as I get everything ready, and as I step back out into the main part of the room, I realise it's because I got a whole night's sleep with no nightmares.

I join the others at the table after placing my bag by the front door. I take a huge gulp of much needed coffee, and I grab my

fork in one hand and the file in the other so I can read and eat at the same time; everyone else is doing something similar.

As I read the file though, my interest in the food disappears; it seems like there have been reports of the Rogues becoming intelligent. The higher-level ones are organising the lower levels and causing absolute devastation in the Shadowlands. It's surprising because before now, all Rogues have been working individually, which makes even the higher-level ones easier to take out. If this isn't an isolated incident and the file doesn't make it sound like it is, then that could spell significant issues for the future, even more so if they come out of the Shadowlands and are able to terrorise the rest of the Fae Realm. I'd be willing to bet that they're not only testing their methods in the Shadowlands because it's the most dangerous place in the Fae Realm, so if they can succeed there, then they'll definitely be able to succeed out here but also because there are no laws there, supernaturals who find themselves living there are only out to protect themselves. Some factions rule certain parts which you can ask for protection from but very few can afford to pay the prices they ask. There are some incredibly powerful supernaturals living there, and the lesser known thing is that not all of them are there because they are evil and dangerous and want to live without rules; no, they don't believe in the current monarchy and how things are being run. The Shadowlands are so much more than they are made out to be, and I think it's going to surprise the guys. However, it is deadly, the inhabitants don't take kindly to strangers, and it takes a certain kind of person to survive there. The vague rules they do have are harsh, deadly and don't follow most people's moral compass. So basically, it's easy pickings for the Rogues to test their abilities on and improve their tactics in the Shadowlands because the rules are a guideline that not everyone follows, and there's no one there to enforce them either.

According to the file, there's been talk of an attack planned at one of the outer settlements, Tripdeorc. As soon as I see the name, I frown.

"What's wrong?" Storm asks, his eyes on me.

“What isn’t? This is fucking crazy, and if it’s true could have catastrophic consequences for the Fae Realm,” Mayhem answers.

“Very true, but she read all that and then got to something that made her frown.” Storm explains.

I raise my eyebrow, “You were watching me?”

He grins, unguarded and reaching his eyes, “Yep.”

“Well, alright then,” I mutter, not knowing how to respond to this new version of Storm, so I explain instead, “I was frowning because Tripdeorc is an abandoned town. There isn’t anyone living there, or at least there wasn’t the last time that I was in the Shadowlands. They may have repopulated it, but it’s doubtful it was absolutely ransacked.”

“Well, shit, so we’ve basically got two options. One, they’ve repopulated it since you were there, and now, they’re being attacked again since I assume they’d be a fairly easy target, as they’ve already been attacked once, or there’s no one there, and this is a set up of some kind.” Rival suggests.

“Is there any way that we can pull out?” Loki asks.

“No, the Headmaster would send another team, and even if it is a set-up for us, they would still be sent to the Shadowlands, and they would die.” Storm says.

“So we’ve got no choice. We go.” Killian answers, standing up. “I’ve already notified the stables. Our horses should be ready. Let’s go and get this over with.”

Everyone gets up and dons their backpacks, checking their weapons before we all file out of the door and down to the stables. It takes barely any time at all to get going, and once we’re away from the ears of the academy, Storm goes over the plan.

“Okay, first I can get us to the border of the Shadowlands, but after that, Farren, you’re navigating us. Can you do that?”

“Yes, I know it well enough, and I know where Tripdeorc is.” My reply is sure. It might not be the best time to tell them that I actually have friends in the Shadowlands. People tend

not to take that too well. We share a life debt and an experience I wouldn't wish on anyone.

“Great. When we're there, it's safe to assume that we're going to have to hunker down for a while in order to wait for the attack. We need to stay vigilant always. The file said that it was planned for two days time. It will take us roughly a day to get to the border,” he pauses and looks at me.

“It should take around two hours to get to the village. It's right on the very edge.”

“Right, so we should have a few hours to set up and wait before the attack.”

“Something you need to remember is if there are people there they don't like outsiders, they will strip you of everything valuable, torture and kill you. Weak supernaturals do not live in the Shadowlands; they simply wouldn't survive.” I explain.

“So how do we protect them if they'll just kill us on sight?” Killian asks, his uncertainty causing his tail to wrap around his waist.

I grin, “Fortunately, I know their language, and I have a few other tricks up my sleeves.”

“I'm not even going to bother asking,” Reaper mutters.

“You had to have spent a long time there in order to learn their language.” Kill points out, a frown on his face, no doubt because this is something that he didn't know about me.

I shrug, not bothering to reply because, in order to answer that question, I'd have to explain why I feel at home in the Shadowlands in a way that I have never felt in the rest of the kingdom. Unless they experience the real Shadowlands, they won't understand, so for now, my mouth is staying shut.

Storm looks insanely curious, but the words that come out of his mouth are surprising and convince me that whatever the barrier was between us has been obliterated.

“I'm not going to ask you what happened. If you choose to tell us at some point, great, I learnt my lesson.” Storm starts,

and I nod, eyeing him warily.

“I sense a but?”

He smirks before it falls quickly, and he becomes serious again, “but I want you to promise me that you going back there is not going to put you in more danger.”

The surprise is palpable from the others as they all slow their horses and just stare at him.

“Fucking hell, man, you’ve changed your tune,” Loki exclaims.

Storm ignores him, still looking at me, “Farren?”

“I promise that I will not be in danger going back there,” I vow.

“You mean any more danger than you already would be going into the shadowlands.” Rival scoffs.

“Yeah, that.” I agree, ignoring the narrowed eyed stare from Killian.

He knows me better than the others, and we’ve worked together enough in the past that he knows when I’m being evasive. Thankfully though, he doesn’t say anything.

After that, we speed up a bit, trying to make decent time to the only stop that we’re making on the way to the border, the one to refuel ourselves and our horses. There’s no way we want any of us to be distracted by hunger when we get to the Shadowlands.

It’s a fair ride before we finally stop and find ourselves in a relatively large clearing with a small stream running through it, perfect for the horses to have a drink and eat before we continue. Once we’ve all settled on the floor, and everyone’s munching on the food, which I had no idea we brought who even thought to get, talk turns to how long we have left to go.

“Probably about a two hour ride, and we’ll be at the border. I wanted us to get as much done as possible before we stopped for food.” Storm explains.

“Fair enough.” Kill replies easily.

We've been sat down for fifteen minutes or so, and the conversation is deliberately being kept light since we've gone over the plan multiple times by this point. I'm just enjoying listening to them and seeing the change in Storm when I'm suddenly hit by the feeling that something isn't right. Keeping my food in my hand and trying to make sure I remain casual and keep my body language calm, I lean back on one of my hands and start to look around.

The first thing I become aware of is the signs of agitation in the horses that weren't there before, and then, below the noise of the guys talking, I notice the absolute silence. The surrounding forest is utterly devoid of all the usual noise that was there only moments ago.

Leaning closer to Killian, his tail, which always seeks me out when I'm close, is resting on my thigh, stroking it every now and then. I quietly say, "Do you hear that?"

He tilts his head at me, gauging my expression before listening, "Nothing, and there should be. We're being watched."

The guys start to notice that something is amiss, and I make a motion with my hand for them to keep talking like normal. Storm and Killian seem to do some communication thing with their eyes, and then I see the subtle hint of their shadows flow across the ground, searching the surrounding forest for whoever is watching us.

When both their eyes widen, the rest of us abandon the guise of talking casually and place our hands on our various weapons.

"I'm picking up at least twenty," Kill says, and Storm nods in response, confirming the same number.

As one, we climb to our feet, drawing our weapons and proving how closely we're being watched, when we hear a shout. The horses immediately scatter like they're trained to do in this situation, so they don't get hurt, and we don't lose our escape.

My eyes widen as at least twenty assassins exit the forest surrounding us on all sides and clearly working together.

“At least we know for certain that it was a setup,” Loki says drily, twirling his sword.

There’s no more time for talking as they all rush us, and the clang of metal suddenly surrounds me. I don’t have the chance to keep an eye on the others and make sure they’re okay, as I’m surrounded by at least five of these fuckers. There’s something about them that is almost familiar, but I get no time to really ponder that strange familiarity as they all attack at once.

My double blades practically sing through the air as I slice, spin and dive to avoid attacks. I’m showing them no mercy as my years of training, and all my skills come out to play. A spell comes at me from the left, and I throw my magic at it, unravelling the death spell and reforming it before sending it straight back to the fucker who sent it at me, watching as he drops to the floor paralysed but still awake and seeing a living nightmare I weaved in.

It’s one of my favourite things to do.

The bodies start to pile up around me, and I get a brief reprieve from attackers just long enough to glance around at the others. They’ve all got their own bodies surrounding them and look excited by the fight and being able to use their gifts to their full advantage. They can move fucking fast, faster than they should be able to. Not only that, but they’re each using skills and magic that they shouldn’t be able to. Storm’s shadows are behaving as weapons in their own right, slicing and invading various attackers. Watching the shadows enter through someone’s nose and then explode them from the inside is both fascinating and terrifying at the same time.

Killian’s having a field day moving through the shadows and slitting people’s throats with his tail and his blade. Loki is looking every bit the vampire he is as he uses his speed and fangs to cut through his enemies; blood drips down his chin as his eyes glow. The twins, Mayhem and Rival, are not only using Water and Air to incapacitate their opponents but seem

to be using all the elements that are available to the fae and that they shouldn't have control over. It looks like I'm not the only one who was keeping things to myself. I highly doubt that the Headmaster knows just how strong they are and how many gifts they each have. Reaper is using his strength to take down his opponents and that mysterious fire he used when I had to go into the Void, but there's no sign of his beast. I know that's probably a good thing, but I'm still disappointed I don't know what he is.

Just before I turn away, I see Killian and Storm fighting together back to back. They get surrounded and, after a quick glance at each other, explode into shadows. When they reform, it's in the shape of enormous shadow beasts, their horns still present and wrapped in their flames. I had no fucking idea that was even possible; you're either a shadow weaver or a shifter. I didn't realise it was possible to be both, and it's fucking mesmerising to watch them. I have so many questions.

My magic suddenly rears up, just in time to block a blow coming at me. I was so distracted by the brothers that I'd let myself forget where we were, and I would be dead if it weren't for my magic. There's no time to think about how my magic has never done that before and pretty much acted by itself; I'll worry about it later.

A fresh wave of attackers come storming out of the woods as I fight one after another, bodies littering the floor in my wake as I slice my way through. I am dodging magical attacks at the same time as fighting off physical ones and throwing my own attacks at people as well. There's the smell of burnt flesh, cries of pain, shouts of encouragement, and it never seems to be ending. I start to lose my confidence that I'm going to survive this fight. I have no idea how long we've been fighting with no reprieve. They just keep fucking coming. I do know that I'm starting to tire, and my magic is starting to become harder to pull to the surface and harder to control.

Fighting tired leads to mistakes, but not fighting will obviously mean I die for sure.

I put all my strength and energy into focusing on the fuckers still coming for me. Someone swings a sword at my head as

someone else shoots a spell at me, and I'm so focused on simultaneously unravelling the magic and deflecting the blade that I completely miss the one aiming for my back.

I scream in pain as it pierces my skin, and a wave of unbelievable anger consumes me. My magic lashes out, killing those nearest me in a way that I'm not even sure how. They just disintegrate into what looks like black glitter, which I am familiar with but definitely not in these circumstances.

A deafening roar shakes the clearing and everything freezes. Reaper's glowing eyes are locked on the wound that went all the way through my back and out my stomach. I sway on my feet, falling to my knees despite my best effort to stay standing.

"Get her!" someone bellows.

The roar intensifies, some of the trees around the edge falling from the sheer force of it. I look up from the ground to see the assassins start to back up, none of their attention on me, but all directed to a deadly looking Reaper, his outline starts to waver, and I watch as, in one move that seems choreographed, all of my men rush to me.

"I'm sorry, Love, I'm going to have to move you. He's too far gone, and we can't have you in the path of it." Loki mutters quickly, scooping me up and wincing at my yell of pain.

Reaper roars again. This time it's somehow deeper, more deadly and sends a shiver down my spine. I'm barely aware when I'm placed at the edge of the clearing, far enough away from Reaper but still with a visual.

I'm clearly not the only one watching in shock as his form starts to shake rapidly. There are around thirty of the third wave of fuckers just stood staring.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Right, let’s get you healed,” Loki states, looking down at the wound as the others surround the two of us protectively. “If he smells your blood, fresh like it is now and linked with the pain you’re in when he shifts fully, I have a feeling that all hell is going to break loose.”

I just watch Reaper, completely fascinated and not wanting to take my eyes off him when Loki’s words filter through though I get the instinctual feeling that he’s right and Reaper would lose his shit even more.

“Okay,” I reply simply.

“Good, guys. I’m going to need two of you to help her stand so I can get to both sides at the same time and heal her quicker. Is that okay, Farren?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Is Reaper going to be okay?”

“He’ll be fine. It’s everyone else I’m worried about.” Mayhem replies ominously.

Storm and Rival help me stand up, and I’m only vaguely aware of Loki healing me. The only thing I notice is the pain level dimming. Suddenly, Reaper bursts out of his skin with a growl that can surely be heard for miles and standing in the place where Reaper once was is an absolutely ginormous fucking dragon. He towers above the trees, taking up most of the clearing. The talons on his four giant feet have to be the same length as me and at least as wide as I am. The purple, red, orange and black scales glitter in the light and cover his entire body, all except the enormous leathery wings extending from his back.

Without any hesitation, he lets loose a stream of fire, and I can feel the heat from all the way over here. The purple flames hit the nearest assassins and burn them to ash, the act knocking some sense into the others as they start to scatter. The next stream of fire, he lets loose his red, and this one seems to wrap

around the victim and hold them in a slow, burning and torturous death.

“We better go further back; he’s focused on them at the moment, but he won’t recognise us in this form, and we don’t want to get in his way.” Storm orders grimly, and I find myself gently moved further into the forest and I stay peeking my head around the nearest tree so I can still see.

His dragon is clearly bored of playing with fire and is now swallowing the retreating assassins whole or stomping on them.

“How?” I ask, “the dragons stay in their realm, they don’t mix with the rest of us, and all the information we have on them suggests that they only come in certain solid colours. I have never seen the colours of Reaper’s dragon depicted anywhere.”

Storm sighs, “I suppose I can share this much with you. He’s a hybrid. I’m not sure between which species because he’s never shared that, but I have a good reason to believe that he’s a mix of the stronger and more dangerous dragons. Hybrids are extremely rare and are not only frowned upon but persecuted and treated worse than slaves. Somehow, he escaped, and Killian and I found him.”

“Fucking hell,” I mutter.

“Last time he transformed, we barely got him back, he rampaged for days, and many people died.” Rival sombrely adds.

“And his dragon is angrier this time, he’s protective over Farren, and he’s seen her hurt and collapse,” Loki adds.

My gaze moves from the rampaging dragon for the first time, “So you’re saying we could not get him back?”

They share a look, and then Killian nods once sadness seeps from his end of the bond.

My attention goes back to Reaper like a magnet, something I can’t control, “There’s got to be something that we can do.”

“We won’t leave him. That’s about as much as we can do for now. Hopefully, he’ll just tire himself out, and we can reason with him.” Mayhem suggests, but I can hear the scepticism in his tone.

“That might’ve worked if he had let his dragon out regularly, but it’s been years. He’s got a lot of energy and most likely anger to work out.” Loki grimly answers.

They carry on talking around me, each of them trying to suggest different things that might work and coming to the same conclusion that it will fail every time. I won’t let it; I won’t let him get lost in his beast. So, I carry on watching as his dragon stomps and eats his way through our enemies hoping for something to jump out at me on how I can help.

My magic nudges me, slowly replenishing itself. I follow my instincts and let my magic out to play. It immediately rushes towards Reaper, but instead of coming into contact with him, it pauses and takes him in. Through my magic, I get the feeling of profound sadness coming off of his dragon; I know it’s his dragon and not Reaper because he feels different. I don’t know how I just know that. He’s also angry, and I feel my eyes start to water at the overwhelming loneliness he feels. I call my magic back to me, and it reluctantly leaves him.

I’m going to help him even if it kills me, and he’s capable of that, but considering how angry he is that someone hurt me, I don’t think he will. I glance back at the others, all of whom are in deep conversation. I twist slightly, checking my stomach muscles and back from the wound, finding myself entirely healed. Before any of them can stop me, I race forward, aiming for the rampaging dragon.

“Farren, he’ll kill you!” Storm yells after me, the panic loud in his tone.

“Let her go. I have a feeling he won’t harm her.” Killian replies calmly, and I pause, looking back.

“You know, like a feeling, or you KNOW,” Loki asks, looking like he’s seconds away from grabbing me.

Killian just smiles knowingly, “Trust me.”

“And trust me, I know, I don’t know how but I know he won’t hurt me.”

Storm crosses his arms, frowning deeply, and all of them look the same. They hate this, but I will not lose him, and I will not let his dragon remain so lonely. Knowing that they’re seconds away from stopping me, I rush forward again, trying to avoid the bodies scattered on the ground. Reaper’s Dragon still hasn’t seen me, and I need to get his attention somehow so he doesn’t accidentally stand on me or hit me with his giant tail. I have every faith that he won’t kill me on purpose but accidentally is another thing.

It turns out I don’t need to worry about getting his attention since as I go to step over a body, one that I thought was dead, it reaches out and grabs my ankle, sending me to the floor with a thump and a yell of surprise and Reaper’s head snaps in my direction.

I hear one of the others groan from behind me, and I have to admit that probably could’ve gone smoother than it did. Quickly jumping to my feet and sending my magic into the guy that grabbed me to kill him, I watch as the dragon stops stomping his feet and destroying things and then starts lumbering towards me, his heavy feet shaking the ground.

I quickly raise my hands, trying to show him that I’m okay, “Whoa! Whoa there, handsome, I’m okay, not hurt, see?” I hold my arms out so he can see all of me, “but I won’t be okay if you don’t slow down, you’ll squish me.”

“Did she just call him handsome?” I hear Loki ask incredulously.

“Of course, she did. It’s Farren; when faced with a murderous and out of control dragon, why wouldn’t she call it handsome?” Rival replies drily.

I tune them out, ignoring that they actually have a point, and at the very least, I should be feeling nervous, but I’m just not.

Thanks to my magic that has sent feelers out at the still approaching dragon, I can feel his confusion that I’m not running away and that I don’t seem to be scared of him. He

doesn't quite know how to handle it because he keeps bounding towards me.

"Farren, he's not going to stop!" Mayhem yells, panicking when I don't move.

"For fuck sake, Farren, move your gorgeous arse!" Storm yells.

I ignore them, planting my feet and refusing to move. He comes skidding to a halt just in time. He blows a hot smoke filled breath at me in a single huff, and this time I have to use my magic to stop myself from being blown over by the sheer force of it. When the smoke clears, and I'm still standing there, grinning like a fucking crazy person, he tilts his head, studying me like I'm the rare and unusual creature, not him.

My smile broadens, "Are you done trying to scare me off? I think we both know you won't hurt me." I take a gamble with my words and raise my eyebrow, and I almost laugh out loud when he huffs and glances away. "That's what I thought."

He lifts his lip in a slight snarl, and I chuckle at the entire lack of real anger behind it. When it's clear he's not going to frighten me off, he huffs again like I'm exasperating him and flops down, so he's lying down. He still towers over me, but he puts his head on his massive feet like a dog would and watches me.

"He's laid down. The fucker has laid down." Loki exclaims, utter bewilderment in his tone.

Incredibly slowly, I move closer to him. He doesn't move but watches me cautiously. So he's not surprised by anything I do; I talk to him while I'm moving.

"Is it okay if I touch your nose?" I ask, and when he doesn't do anything, I add, "I'm going to take that as a yes."

I slowly reach my hand out, placing it on his snout right between his huge nostrils; he tenses slightly, and then his eyes widen as I just gently stroke his nose, marvelling at the silk-like texture. It occurs to me that if he's only been free a couple of times in his life, and some of those were while he was still

in captivity, then he won't know what soft touch feels like, and that breaks my heart.

"You're beautiful. You know that?" I say softly, "and so sad, I'm so sorry."

While I speak, my hand has stopped moving, so he nudges it ever so gently, so I start stroking his snout again. I know he heard me; there's intelligence and a level of understanding in his eyes which is more than an ordinary beast.

"Are you Reaper? Or do you have a name?" I ask, knowing he can't use words but hoping that he can nod or something. I'll spend all day listing names to find his.

He watches me cautiously, and I carry on stroking his nose. I know he's trying to suss me out, and I hope he doesn't find me lacking.

I try not to jump out of my skin when I hear an ancient and gravelly voice speaking into my mind; holy fucking shit.

"Not Reaper. I'm Ryu."

"You can talk?" I gasp.

"What the fuck?" I hear Loki mutter from behind me, so it's not common knowledge that they forgot to mention to me.

Instead of replying, Ryu just nods slightly, so he doesn't dislodge my hand.

"Wow, that's fucking amazing. I feel incredibly honoured that you spoke to me. Thank you." I bow my head slightly, showing him the respect he deserves.

"Mate, never bow to me. Equals." He says into my mind, his words are slightly stilted, but I get the feeling that's because he doesn't speak often.

His words sink in, and I tilt my head, "Mate?"

Infuriatingly he just nods, while there are exclams of more surprise coming from behind me.

"You're not going to tell me what that means are you?" I ask.

His eyes fill with amusement, and it's my turn to huff. Movement from behind me has me turning to see the others slowly making their way out of the tree line. Ryu growls menacingly, and without thinking I turn back around to him and tap him on the nose.

"Be nice! They're friends, your family, and they love you! They're my friends too!"

I didn't know dragons could look shocked, but he manages it somehow, and I have to admit it's pretty fucking comical, especially when he huffs again, blowing a tiny amount of smoke in my face but concedes with a roll of his eyes.

"Sassy dragon," I tease and then turn back to the others, "you can come over. He'll behave."

The guys don't utter anything as they all pick their way over the bodies and come to a stop just behind me.

"I can't believe you just tapped him on the nose, and he didn't eat you," Loki comments, shaking his head.

"I can't believe he's so calm. Reaper is never this calm in his dragon form." Mayhem mutters, staring up at the giant dragon.

"Not Reaper," I say.

"What?" Killian asks.

"He's not Reaper, well he is, but he's got his own personality too, if that makes sense. He's called Ryu."

"Fucking hell," Loki says again, and I'm pretty sure it will be a while before he can get out a proper sentence.

"That's not how shifters work," Mayhem points out.

"No, but he's not a normal shifter. So it could make sense," Rival adds.

Storm steps forward, and Ryu shifts his attention slightly to him, "Thank you for saving us. If you hadn't come out, we would've been dead. I know you did it for your mate, but we appreciate it too, and I promise that we'll fix this void between

you and us, but no immediately attacking when you come out.”

Ryu tilts his head slightly as if he’s considering it and nods slowly.

“If didn’t come out fighting, pain, too much pain,” Ryu says; when no one seems to react, I translate as my heart breaks for what they’ve been through.

“He said if he didn’t come out fighting, there’d be pain, too much pain. You said he was treated like a slave, right? I think maybe it became his defence mechanism, and he hasn’t been let out enough to realise that he and Reaper are safe now.” I try to explain, and Ryu nods, “are you aware when you’re Reaper?”

“Can be. Choose to sleep unless needed. Not recently, mate, been awake recently.”

“Can Reaper hear us now?” I ask, ignoring the mate thing because I know what that means, and I’m not entirely sure how to handle it. I mean, this amazing creature couldn’t possibly be my mate, not to mention that although they share the same body and have much the same instincts and personality traits, they do seem to be somewhat separate, so what the dragon feels, Reaper may not.

I’m pulled away from my thoughts as Ryu nods beneath my hand.

“Maybe you guys can work on communicating better with each other so you know it’s safe when you come out?” I suggest.

“Try,” he growls. “Reaper agrees.”

“Thank you, I want to see you more, but we need to know it’s safe.”

Ryu nods.

“What the fuck is going on right now?” Kill asks.

“Is he talking to you?” Rival exclaims.

“Yes, and I’m fairly sure he can communicate directly with Reaper, too,” I reply.

“They’re willing to work together so Ryu can come out more?” Storm asks, hope in his tone.

“Yes.”

“Wow, I never thought I’d see the day. Ever since what you said to him about it being so difficult, constantly suppressing a piece of who he is, it’s been playing on my mind, and I’ve been trying to think of a way to help.” Mayhem admits.

“It might be a long road, Reaper’s been ignoring him for a long time, and Ryu is hurt by that,” I say, and receive a huff Ryu in annoyance that I’ve just shared that with them, “oh hush you. You know they’re family. They want the best for you, and sharing real feelings is a part of that.”

“I still can’t get over how easily you’re talking to him. Were you scared at all?” Loki asks, finally finding some other words than fucking hell.

“No, I probably should have been, but I knew he wouldn’t hurt me.”

Ryu growls at that, like the thought of causing me harm is absolutely abhorrent to him, and I pat his nose gently, silently letting him know that I know he will never harm me.

“Off subject, but we know for sure that the Headmaster set us up, so what do we do?” Mayhem asks.

“We have a conversation with him,” Killian grins.

“I think that’s a good idea, and why waste time? We’ll do it as soon as we get back.” Storm agrees easily.

“We’re not going to the Shadowlands?” Loki questions.

“No, I think we need to get to the bottom of this first and why the Headmaster wants Farren dead.” Storm replies.

“Plus, I’m even more doubtful that there was even a job in the first place,” Mayhem interjects.

“Good point. Alright, then, let’s get going.” Loki says.

I turn back to Ryu, “Do you think you could let Reaper back out for me? I don’t think you’ll fit on a horse, and remaining stealthy wouldn’t be that easy with a dragon.”

He sends me a picture of him flying high in the clouds and then suddenly disappearing.

“Okay, that’s pretty fucking cool.”

“What is?”

“He can camouflage himself when he flies,” I explain, “we still need Reaper out. I promise that you can come out again soon and not just to fight.”

“I’ll second that,” Storm adds, “I promise that we will make sure that Reaper lets you out, so long as you promise not to go straight into fight mode and communicate properly with Reaper, so you know what’s going on and if you do need to come out fighting.”

Ryu takes a deep inhale, no doubt smelling, to see if Storm is telling the truth. Once satisfied, he nods, closes his eyes, and light envelops him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Just like when he first shifted into Ryu, suddenly, a very naked Reaper is standing in front of us. He looks at me in absolute awe. I suddenly find myself pulled into his arms and crushed against his chest as his lips take mine in a fierce and possessive kiss. He lifts me, and my legs wrap around his waist as he holds me up with no effort whatsoever. My legs clench around him as a rumbling growl starts in his chest, sending a delicious vibration through me and straight to my clit, making me groan. His tongue dances with mine and he bites my lip, soothing the sting with his tongue and then delving right back in for more, his hands clenching around me tight enough that I know he's going to leave bruises, but I also know that he's showing a lot of control because he could easily snap me like a fucking twig.

"Guys!" I hear yelled by all of the others at the same time.

Reaper smirks against my lips and gives me one final kiss before he then lets me slide slowly down his body, feeling every hard fucking inch of him. Making my breath hitch, he looks down at me, completely ignoring the others.

"He's calm, content, and he's not trying to fight me to get out. For the first time in forever. He's just watching." He says in wonder.

"Did you hear everything?" I ask.

"Yes, and I promise to communicate with him better. I had no idea that he came out fighting because of what we went through. If I hadn't fought him for so long and actually listened, I could've saved us both years of pain."

"You know now." I smile up at him.

"Er guys," Loki asks, and Reaper turns me around in his arms, holding me to his body, my back to his front.

"Yes?" Reaper questions.

“You’re naked.” Loki helpfully points out, and I grin.

Reaper chuckles, “Yes, I normally can transform back into my clothes, but Ryu is petty and is letting me know he’s pissed.”

I burst out laughing, and the others all look highly amused.

“In that case, let’s call the horses back, get your spare change of clothes and get back to the academy to question the Headmaster.” Storm suggests.

The others agree, all of us wanting to get back to question the Headmaster. There’s no point waiting, I want answers now, and if we wait until after we’ve rested, he’ll probably have already concocted another way to kill me off.

Fae horses are not only trained to scatter when under attack but are also taught a very specific whistle that calls them back. Fae horses have incredible hearing, and so long as they’re okay, then they should be able to hear it miles away.

We all individually call our horses using their unique whistle. They’re complicated enough that someone else wouldn’t be able to replicate it, and even if they did, our horses would know it’s not our voices calling them. Fae horses fascinate me with how intelligent and complex they really are, and I think far too many people take them for granted.

It doesn’t take them long to appear, and while Reaper goes to grab his bag and get changed, which I’m more than slightly disappointed with, Revel rushes to me, circling me and sniffing every inch of me to make sure that I’m okay.

When he gets to my stomach, he sniffs the blood stain repeatedly until I lift up my shirt to prove that I’m okay. Finally, he settles enough that I can climb on, all the while trying not to chuckle at the pictures of him fighting the assassins flood my mind. He could probably handle his own against one or two, but not that many, and we both know it, which is why he followed protocol and ran with the others.

“Everyone ready?” Storm asks. Once everyone’s confirmed they are, he adds, “we’re going to ride hard, so we get back

quicker. I don't want to risk the Headmaster somehow getting a pre-warning that we survived."

"Nothing would surprise anymore when it comes to that dick," Rival says helpfully, and I nod in agreement.

Storm wasn't kidding when he said that we'd be riding hard on the way back, we're pushing our horses to their limits, but thankfully they're all amped up from the fight and having to leave us in danger, so they're enjoying working off the extra energy they have. They needed this.

When we get back to the academy, we leave the horses in the care of the stablemaster to sort out, and all make our way straight to the Headmaster's office. As we walk the halls, everyone gives us a wide berth. While this is relatively normal for the guys, the wary and shocked looks aren't. Frowning, I look over all of us, and it clicks; yeah, I'd be looking at us like that too. We're all filthy, covered in blood and gore and leaving a trail of muddy and, I'm sure, part bloody footprints behind us. Add in our severe faces, and I'd probably be running in the opposite direction if I were witnessing our entrance.

Storm doesn't bother knocking when we get to the door that leads to the reception area of the Headmaster's office and instead walks straight in. The poor receptionist stares at us in shock, that is until she realises that we aren't stopping, and then a panicked and indignant look crosses her face.

"Excuse me!" she calls after us, "you can't go in there!"

We ignore her entirely and force our way through the door, once again, without knocking. The Headmaster immediately stands from his desk, anger clouding his features until he recognises us and his eyes widen. Killian has him by the throat, the sharp point of his tail against his neck as he has him held up against the wall within seconds, and no matter what the Headmaster tries to do, he cannot break the hold.

"Farren, could you secure the door, please, Darling?" Killian asks pleasantly as if he's not hanging someone by their neck with one hand.

I pull on the strings of all my magic and weave it into a spell that not only blocks the door but silences any noise coming out of here and stops the receptionist from calling anyone. I've managed to weave in an illusion that we've come out of the room with the Headmaster, and he's told her everything is okay. The plan was to carry the illusion on when we actually do leave, but my magic is now extremely low, thanks to the fight earlier. My head spins for a second, and it takes all of my willpower to stay upright and not sway on my feet. Thankfully, the dizzy spell quickly passes, and I turn back to the guys.

"All done."

I'll have to warn them before we leave that there's going to be a very confused receptionist out there.

Storm nods, trusting that I've done what Killian asked even though there was no outward proof of what I was doing. He rounds the Headmaster's desk, sits in his ornate chair and kicks his filthy boots up onto the desk, dirtying the surface and making the Headmaster snap his fangs at him in anger.

"Right, now that we're not going to get interrupted, do you want to tell us why you've persistently tried to set us up?" Killian asks. His tone is deceptively calm.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He insists.

"Lie," Reaper growls.

"This is going to go a lot better for you if you just tell us what we want to know."

"You can't do anything to me," he scoffs; his derision gets cut off when Killian tightens his hand around his neck.

"I don't need to. Have you ever wondered what I've been up to all these years? I can promise there are people that can take care of the problem for me." Killian threatens.

"Sh-she saw you come in!" the Headmaster replies, starting to sound less sure of himself and grasping at straws.

"She did, but she also saw us come back out, and you tell her that there was nothing to worry about and to go back to work,"

I reply, my smile smug as even the guys look at me questioningly.

“Th-that’s not possible,” he mutters.

“Sure it is. Now, are you going to tell Kill what we need to know, or do I get to play where does the Headmaster bleed from the best?” my smile turns feral.

It’s silent for a brief moment as my words hover in the room. The threat is clear, and to make the point that I’m not messing around, I pull one of my favourite daggers out of its hidden sheathe and start twirling it through my fingers, the feral grin never leaving my face.

“If that doesn’t convince you ...” Reaper trails off as his eyes glow and his fingers suddenly shift into the deadly claws of his dragon.

All colour drains from the Headmaster’s face as he stares in horror at Reaper, clearly thinking that his dragon is on edge and he’s about to shift. I swear I can hear Ryu’s chuckle in my head though, and I know that Reaper is in perfect control and Ryu isn’t trying to push his way forward.

“Fine.” He concedes eventually, his voice shaky.

Killian lets his feet land more firmly on the floor and loosens his hold around his neck so that he can talk.

“Good, we’re listening,” Storm states firmly.

“You’ve probably gathered that I’ve known about the games for longer than even the other teachers here; as the Head of Black Onyx academy, I’m kept in the loop. However, the other person that knew before many others was your father, Farren.” He starts.

I hold back my groan; I should’ve fucking known that it had something to do with that fucker.

When I don’t outwardly react the Headmaster carries on, “Literally the second I hung up with advisors from the palace, I got another call on the stone from him. I can only describe him as being in a panic-fuelled rage, and because he was panicking, I think he gave me more information than he

intended. He told me that you could not be allowed to compete in the games. When I said that it was completely out of my control, his anger grew, and with it, his control over his words. He told me, well screamed, that Farren could not be in the games. It would be the end of him and kick into motion the events that will lead to war.”

I have no idea if I believe what he’s saying and whether that is the true reason behind my father’s anger, he is a master manipulator, but it’s concerning, to say the least.

“That’s a hell of a lot to put on one person who has no choice in joining in the games,” Rival points out drily.

“Get to your involvement in it.” Storm orders.

The Headmaster gulps slightly, “He offered me a lot of money and, more importantly, some hard to get spells if I tampered with your jobs so that he could have you taken out.”

“He wants her dead?” Loki growls.

“Yes, as far as he’s concerned, that’s the only sure way that she won’t be in the games and start the events that will lead to war and his death.”

Well fuck. Okay, so I’m still not positive about his true motives, but I have always been more valuable to him alive than dead. If that’s suddenly changed, then he definitely thinks something big will happen if I go into the games, which is inevitable, and he will stop at nothing to have me murdered.

“Is that everything?” Storm’s voice is cold, deadly, even as his horns light with blazingly angry fire.

“Yes,” he replies.

Storm looks at Reaper, who nods that he is telling the truth.

“In that case, Rival, could you make the call?” Storm asks.

I think other than the Headmaster; I am the only one who is confused by Storm’s request of Rival.

“What call?” the Headmaster asks, his voice nervous.

“Well, you have proven yourself to be easily brought and not capable of being trusted to be in charge of the many students

here and their safety. Rival is going to see to it that you are dealt with accordingly, and a replacement is found.”

Wow, I am in awe of the power that these guys seem to wield, and as the Headmaster panics, splutters and tries to bribe us to stop Rival from following through, Rival pulls a communication stone from his pocket, whispers a spell that will in case him in a soundproof bubble and then makes the call. I have no idea what is being said, but it seems to be going the way that Rival wants it to; he even chuckles at one point.

The call doesn't last very long, and when Rival drops the soundproof bubble, he starts to explain, “They want him to be detained in his office. They should be here in minutes; they're going to portal in.”

“Impressive,” I mutter.

“Killian, bind him. Mayhem, can you take his voice temporarily, please, so that he cannot keep bitching.” Storm orders.

Suddenly everything falls silent, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Thank fuck for that. It was fucking relentless.

“Farren, you need to take the spell off the room. I assume it's secure enough that they can't get in even if they are going to portal in.” Killian reminds me.

“You assume correctly, one second.” I pull at the string of magic that will unravel everything but the illusion that the receptionist saw. “Done.”

We stay silent as we wait, there's a lot that we need to discuss, but we can't talk about any of it while the Headmaster is still in earshot. Thankfully we don't have to wait long, and we hear the receptionist exclaim and the Headmaster's door swings open. Several uniformed enforcers head straight toward the Headmaster, who starts to fight in earnest but immediately gets subdued. A smartly dressed man ignores the commotion and walks straight up to Rival, having a quiet conversation and then shakes his hand.

As quickly as they come, they're gone, and as we all follow them out of the office, the receptionist spots us and does a

double take.

“Farren, what’s wrong with her?” Loki asks me.

“My magic is pretty tired after today, so I haven’t covered us with an illusion as far as she’s concerned; she’s now watched us leave twice.” I shrug.

He chuckles at my response. We walk quickly back to the dorm room, people whispering around since someone clearly saw us come out behind the Headmaster as he was taken out in magic dampening cuffs.

“So, any idea who the new Headmaster is going to be?” Reaper asks.

“Yeah, actually, I made the suggestion that Magnus would be a good fit. He’s worked here for decades and is well known for putting his students first and his tactical knowledge. Not only that, but the majority of the teachers here have great respect for him.”

“And?” I ask excitedly. Magnus would be amazing at the job. Far better than the current Headteacher. For one, he actually cares about the welfare of his students and two, it would be pretty damn impossible to bribe him in any way.

“They agreed.” Rival grins, and I let out a girly squeal and jump on him, giving him a huge hug and making him chuckle.

When I realise what I’ve just done, I quickly step back, making him grin. Fortunately, we’re not far from the room, so I rush ahead and through the door. As soon as I’m in the main room, I immediately take off my boots, my feet welcoming the relief.

“Everyone go and shower, get changed and then meet in the lounge. We have a lot to discuss.” Storm orders, and everyone immediately does as he says, most likely as desperate as I am to wash off the grime covering me.

Once showered and back out in the main room with everyone else, we sit in silence, no one really knowing where to start.

“You know, I thought, I recognised some of the fuckers,” I mutter.

“So you think that the Headmaster is telling the truth?” Storm asks.

“I believe that my father wants me dead, that I’m certain of, but as for the reason, I have no idea if that’s actually true. He’s very good at making people believe his lies.”

“So what do we do?” Mayhem asks.

“We could do recon, watch him and see if we can get any information?” Loki suggests.

“Good idea, but by now, it’s entirely possible that he’s been tipped off about what’s happened with the Headmaster. He’s powerful enough that he won’t be worried about going down with the Headmaster, but he will become more careful.” Killian adds.

“Not only that, but he might double his efforts to have Farren killed. He’s clearly got a lot of resources at his disposal even if he’s being closely watched.” Rival suggests.

“But he won’t be watched straight away, they have to get the Headmaster talking first, and that could take a while. Farren’s father will be aware of that and take this opportunity to take her out.” Storm expands on Rival’s point.

“So, what you’re saying is that we need to deal with this now?” Loki asks.

Storm nods. “Which brings us back to how, how do we deal with him and protect Farren. We know the authorities can’t do anything with him, so what do we do?”

They all start making different suggestions, and I let them talk as Poca shows up next to me, and I run my fingers through his fur. It’s not unusual that he didn’t show up today; he tends to avoid the fights unless there’s a real chance I will die.

Finally, I decide to interrupt, “It’s simple, we kill him, and we do it now.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

I'm met by stares as they all process what I've said.

"Okay, could you just repeat that, so I know for sure that you said what I think you did?" Mayhem asks.

"Sure, I think we need to kill my father, and I think we should have a nap and do it tonight before he can mobilise any plans. I will not let that man finally succeed in killing me."

"No hesitation?" Storm asks, watching me carefully.

"No."

"Alright, let's do it then. We aren't going to be able to get any information out of him. He's well protected, and we're going to have to get this done quickly so that we aren't caught." Killian starts to plan; as his tail starts tapping on the seat while he thinks it through.

"I only have one request," I start, and they all look at me expectantly, "I get to end his life."

Again, I'm watched cautiously, but they all eventually nod in agreement.

"So, how do we find out where he is?" Storm asks me.

"That's easy enough. I can send Poca to locate him; he has no idea that he exists."

"Good, do that now. We'll see what he comes back with, and then we can plan from there. I suggest that we don't leave until the early hours of the morning." He replies.

"That's a good plan. We've had one hell of a day, and we need to get some sleep at least before we go out on another mission." Reaper points out.

"Poca, go and find out where Father is," I ask him, and he disappears from sight, "it shouldn't take him too long."

“I’m going to order some food. We can plan and eat and then still get a good few hours of sleep before we have to get going again.” Loki says, getting up to order the food and then stopping and turning back to face us, “shit, how are we going to get to wherever he is?”

“Well, hopefully, luck will be on our side, and he’ll be somewhere I’ve been before. If that’s the case, then I’ll be able to use the Void to get us there. I can only do it if I’ve been there before, or it gets a bit iffy, and with me taking all of you through at the same time, I don’t want to risk it.” I explain.

“Right, we can cross that bridge when we get to it,” Storm replies.

Once everyone has given Loki their orders for what they want food-wise, we all sit back down.

“We locate her father, and then what?” Rival asks, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his knees as he looks around at the rest of us.

“I think that depends where he is,” Reaper points out.

“I agree,” I start, “if he’s somewhere we know other people are, we’re going to have to stick to the shadows, literally, and follow him until he’s somewhere I can kill him.”

“Which might complicate our need to get in and out as quickly as possible. The longer we’re there, the more chance we have of being seen or of someone here noticing that we aren’t in our rooms like we should be.” Mayhem muses.

“What about his magic? Is there anything we need to be concerned about?” Storm asks me.

“He is involved with dark magic. That’s how he’s managed to injure me so badly and keep me injured.” Something suddenly clicks, “I think that maybe he was using it to suppress my magic. It’s been playing up recently and feels a hell of a lot stronger than it did, and that’s saying something.”

“Fucking cunt, I’m glad we’re killing him.” Loki callously interjects.

“Me too,” I agree, not caring how it makes me sound that fucker has put me through hell over and over and over again, and I finally have the chance to end his control over me. You bet you’re fucking arse that I’m going to take it. “The point I was trying to make was that we need to be especially cautious. If he gets any idea of what is about to happen, then he’ll throw dark magic at us, and I refuse to lose any of you to that.”

“I know you want to kill him yourself, but Ryu wants me to make the suggestion that if shit hits the fan, you just let him eat your father,” Reaper suggests.

I burst out laughing, “Why do I get the feeling that you’re both on board with that idea?”

He shrugs but doesn’t deny it.

“We can call that plan B.” Storm reasons, and Reaper nods.

“I want to be the one to take him out but not at the risk of any of you or of him escaping, so if you get the opportunity, take it.” I try to clarify. I’m not pig-headed or vengeful enough that I’m losing sight of what’s really important. At the end of the day, he’s not only trying to kill me but is also putting all of the guys at risk, and I’m not okay with that. Despite the odds, I care about these fuckers, and I will protect them with my last dying breath.

The plan we have is relatively simple, and that’s purely because we don’t have the information that we need. Hopefully, Poca will come back with good news, and this will be simple enough. As if I summoned him, Poca suddenly appears in the middle of the room.

“Hey!” I greet him happily, rubbing behind his ears, “that was quick. Did you find him?”

Poca starts sending me images rapidly, clearly excited that he’s done a good job.

“Whoa, buddy, slow them down a bit. I can’t see.” The guys look at me curiously, so I explain, “he’s sending me images but too quickly, so I can’t actually make them out.”

“That’s so cool. Do you think he’d be able to send them to the rest of us too?” Mayhem asks.

“Whoa, I take that as a yes. Thank you, Poca,” Loki exclaims.

“If you close your eyes, it’s less disorientating,” I warn them, remembering how weird it was seeing a double image when he first sent a picture to me. “Okay, Poca, where is he?”

The first image he sends is of the giant castle where I grew up, well, in the basement dungeons unless I was needed to keep his image up. Next, he does something he’s never done before and sends us a memory of what he’s seen, complete with sound. In it, I see my father talking to one of his guards; he tells him that he has business to attend to and will be in his office for the rest of the night. Not to let anyone interrupt him and stay on guard outside of the door before he closes it and goes to sit at his desk.

“That was incredible,” Rival compliments as the images fade, and Poca sits looking at me expectantly. I, of course, give him more ear rubs.

“Yeah, that memory with sound was a new thing. He’s never done that before.” The guys look at me with understandably impressed looks while I compliment Poca, “you did so well.”

“Could it be possible that because your magic was being dampened, his was too?” Storm asks, his sparking horns giving away his anger.

“I suppose it would make sense; he is connected to me.”

“And because he is your familiar, he would’ve been feeding you as much of his magic as possible in order to top up yours and make sure that you were protected.” Mayhem adds.

“Seriously?” I ask. It had never occurred to me that he would be doing that.

“Absolutely, it’s one of the main functions of a familiar.” He replies.

“I actually don’t know much about familiars other than what I’ve learned from him. It wasn’t like I could ask questions and look it up, not with the threat of my father hanging over me.”

“I can help with that, but first, we need to get rid of your father,” Mayhem replies.

“I’d really appreciate that. As far as my father goes, I can get us into his office easily. If Killian and Storm could cover us in shadows as much as possible, it will help conceal us, so he’s unaware of our presence for as long as is feasible.”

“We can do that easily enough.” Storm says, and Killian nods along.

There’s a knock on the door, and Loki gets up to answer it, “That’ll be the food. Let’s eat and then nap.”

“Sounds good. We’ll set off at about two am and should be back before anyone notices that we’re gone.” Storm finalises the plan.

I didn’t get nearly enough sleep, but I’m ready to get this over with; we need my father out of the picture. He poses too big a threat to us all. I’ve just finished getting dressed, and I’m contemplating which weapons to take when I suddenly remember the last time I went into the Void. I couldn’t remember how I got back, and until this moment, I had completely forgotten it even happened. Before I start to panic, a wave of calm washes through me, and I know without a doubt that whatever happened was not a threat to me. I still don’t know what it was, but I feel like I’m not meant to know yet, as frustrating as that is. I also don’t know if it’s going to happen again, but I guess we’re going to find out very shortly.

With that somewhat put to rest in my mind, I turn my attention back to the weapons. I know that it might not be the brightest idea to take one of my custom-made, black blade weapons, but they have certain spells embedded in the purple gems that have magic dampening properties. If I can get to him without him noticing me and move quickly enough to dispatch him, then I should be able to end him easily. It’s that thought that cements my decision, and I place it in the

concealed weapon holder on my hip and make my way out of my room to find everyone ready to go and looking sombre.

“Ready to go?” Storm asks.

“Yep, let’s do this,” I reply with confidence.

I call my magic forward, relieved when it comes when I call and has been replenished while I napped. My father is a powerful man, and if this doesn’t go as we planned, then I’m going to need my magic to be at full strength.

“Everyone needs to be touching,” I explain, and they all grasp each other’s shoulders, and Loki and Reaper thread their fingers through my hands. “When we get near to the exit, I’ll pause, and if Killian and Storm could then cloak us in shadows, we can move forward. Poca, could you go ahead and alert us if there’s anyone else in there? If I don’t hear from you, I’ll assume it’s safe to proceed.”

Poca immediately disappears to do as I’ve asked.

“He can get a hold of you in the Void?” Rival asks.

“He can, but he doesn’t like being there. That’s why I won’t make him come just to tell me that everything is okay.” I explain and then add, “ready?”

Once everyone’s confirmed, I pull us all into the Void with surprising ease. I’ve never travelled with this many people before and wasn’t sure if I could manage it. I knew no one was going to be willing to stay behind, so rather than make an issue where there may not be one, I decided to bring it up if it became a problem.

“Whoa, how do you even know where you’re going?” Mayhem asks as we walk through the Void to the point where I know the exit will be.

“What do you see?” I ask curiously.

“The same as you, I assume.” Storm answers.

I grin, “Humour me.”

“Nothing, just all-encompassing blackness. I can’t even tell what we’re walking on, and I can’t see any of you.” Storm

answers.

“That’s not what I see. It’s dark, but I can see shapes, and I’m aware that things and creatures are around us. Right now, there are two walking next to us. I couldn’t tell you what they are; I can only see vague shapes, they’re cloaking themselves, but I can tell you that they have no intention of harming us. At least these ones don’t.”

“That’s, wow, that’s just fucking crazy,” Killian mutters.

“What do you mean these ones don’t?” Mayhem asks, picking up on the last thing I said.

“There are plenty of things here that will kill you happily if you stray too far away from me. They don’t wish to harm me, and I’m not entirely sure why. Maybe it’s because of my gift, I don’t know, but they won’t hesitate to consume others.”

“Well, now I’m thoroughly freaked out,” Loki admits, his hand gripping mine tightly.

“Just don’t let go.”

“Never,” he replies fiercely.

“You smooth fucker.” Mayhem chuckles.

“Do you guys see the light, just up ahead?” I ask.

“Nope,” Storm replies.

“Okay, ten more steps and then I’ll stop, and I need you two to conceal us in shadows.”

“Got it,” Killian replies.

It takes mere moments for us to be at the doorway, or what I consider a doorway, and the guys have us concealed quickly enough. With one last check to see if everyone is ready, I take us through the door.

I tense when we see my father sitting behind his desk, a single light on in the vast room casting shadows up the walls, perfect for everyone to stay hidden. When my father doesn’t even pause in writing as he quickly scribbles in one of his many notebooks, I breathe a slight breath of relief. I motion for the others to stay put and motion to Killian, silently asking

if he can keep me concealed and hoping that he can understand me.

He seems to, and I move forward on silent feet. Stepping over the boards that I know make a noise and being temporarily thrown back in time to when I used to do this when my father let me out for functions, I was determined to find something I could use against him, but I never found anything of relevance in the short time I had to explore before I'd be noticed as being missing. Killian follows in my footsteps, his tail wrapping around his leg, so it doesn't accidentally knock anything. I move behind my father's chair so I have easy access to his throat; he tenses slightly but soon relaxes, no doubt thinking it has something to do with the slightly cracked window.

I pull out my blade, the ones I've used for my assassinations and move quickly to place it against his throat. It's a good fucking job that I moved swiftly because Killian was so shocked by the weapon that I felt the magic of the shadows drop from my skin. I can feel my father trying to ready a spell, but without my instruction, my magic has strengthened the magic dampening spells on the blade and is holding my father completely immobile. I'm not sure how long it will last, so, wasting no time, I lean forward, putting my mouth near my frozen father's ear. I have a few things I want to say to him before he descends down to the Realm he truly deserves.

Making sure my voice is low enough that the guard stationed outside can't hear, I say, my voice deadly, "Hello, father, since you've decided to end my life, I decided to return the favour. I thought it poetic that the weapon I used in the many assassinations you've sent me on since I turned fifteen be the one to end your miserable life. I have more blood on my hands than in my body, and that's thanks to you."

With nothing left to say, I swipe the wickedly sharp blade across his neck savagely, listening as he gurgles and chokes on his own blood. My magic holds him still and tells me when his heart has stopped. Wasting no time, I activate the spell that lengthens the blade and then sever his head; it thumps onto his desk. The sound echoing in the silent room, I throw a very

powerful ashing spell on both the head and the body and watch as they disappear into black ash. I then command the air to take all traces out of the crack in the window.

Without looking at Killian, I ask, “Can you clear all of our magical signatures and any DNA from the room, please?”

I see him nod slightly from the corner of my eye and walk away from the area and back to the others, still not looking at any of them and keeping my face blank. I know they all saw the blade, and I know that they’ve all heard the stories of the assassin who uses black blades embedded with purple gems. They’ve also just listened to what I’ve said to my father. They’re going to have questions, and if they don’t decide to abandon me, I will answer them. It’s time that they knew that part of my life. No matter how nervous it makes me. I’m preparing myself for rejection and mistrust. How that will play into the fact that we’re stuck together for life as a team, I don’t know. Not to mention the Warrior games.

I jump when I feel a hand rest on my back. I have no idea who it is but my hope soars. They wouldn’t touch me if they were about to abandon me, right? Poca appears at my side, and I bury my hand into the fur on his back, needing his unending and unconditional support.

“It’s all done. All traces of us are removed. We need to head back.” Killian says, barely above a whisper.

I nod and pull my magic forward, feeling two of them thread their fingers through mine as I pull us into the Void, and we start forward along the path that only I can see in silence. I can practically feel the questions hanging in the air.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Alright, no. Stop.” Loki suddenly says into the silence, pulling me to a stop. “Farren, please explain.”

“Now?” I ask.

“Yes, I don’t want something to distract us when we get back, and I think we all want to know what we just saw.”

I take a deep breath, “Okay, I owe you that much. Just remember that whatever I say next, you can’t let go of me, or you’ll be lost in here.”

“Alright,” Storm is the one to reply, and it shocks me when I feel a squeeze on my other hand and look up to find him holding it.

“The weapon is mine; I have several, and they’re made specifically for me.”

“So, no one else could possibly own one of these?” Mayhem clarifies.

“No, and I’m sure you know what that means. You all know my father was an absolute bastard, but it goes a bit deeper. He trained me from when I could walk to be the ultimate killing machine for him. He’s always had his own agendas and people he wants dealt with without going through the proper channels. I guess he assumed what better way to ensure obedience than to train and torture your own daughter into compliance. No one would believe that such a kind and generous man could ever treat his beloved daughter that way, and he had enough guards and staff that would vow on their deathbeds that he was an amazing father that I couldn’t tell anyone even if he hadn’t tortured me into compliance due to fear of worse.” I pause, studying their horrified faces. “When I was fifteen, he sent me out on my first kill job. I succeeded barely; after that, it was more training and more assassinations. I’ve lost count of the people I’ve killed, and I know that

sounds callous. I can tell you the number of all the innocents I saved from him though, new identities, locations, and he still, to this day, he thought they were dead.”

“How many?” Rival asks gently.

“One-hundred and fifty-nine.”

“Holy fuck.” Killian exclaims, his tail for once dead still as if he’s in shock.

“Something happened three years ago, something that I can’t talk about yet. I’m sorry. But when I was finally found, a few months before I came here, it did something to my father, and he finally allowed my uncle to enrol me at the academy.”

“Farren, look at me,” Killian asks, his voice soft.

“Look at us, please?” Storm adds his tone the same as his brothers.

I look around at them all, and my heart stops. There’s no judgement, no hatred, nothing but understanding.

“Love,” Loki starts gaining my attention, and my eyes drift to him, “we’ve all been fucked over by our families. We’ve all been made to do things we shouldn’t have had to do. There will be no judgement from us.”

“Even though I’m insanely curious, I’m not going to ask how you managed to save that many people on such a large scale. It’s fucking impressive.” Mayhem adds, surprising me when he leans forward and kisses my forehead. “We’ve got you, and we aren’t going anywhere. You fit, remember? The last piece of the puzzle.”

“Well said, mate,” Rival agrees, slapping him on the back and looking at me meaningfully.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Loki adds.

Reaper just nods firmly once and looks like he’s trying to stop himself from reaching for me, Killian and Storm just stare at me, and when I raise my eyebrow in question, they roll their eyes and give me the same duh look, making them look more like the brothers they are than they ever have.

“Thank you,” I whisper and then turn to look at Mayhem, “I’ll tell you all about it one day, but for now I can tell you that I’m very good at illusions.”

They look confused, so with the Void fuelling my magic, I create an illusion of a dead body on the floor by our feet.

“Whoa, that almost looks real,” Rival mutters, creeping closer.

“Touch him,” I suggest.

“What?”

“Touch him. There’s no point having an illusion to hide the fact that someone is actually alive unless it can be verified by officials,” I explain.

Somewhat sceptically, Mayhem reaches forward and then almost immediately jerks his hand back and looks up at me in awe, which prompts the rest of them to reach down and touch it, too, being careful not to let go of each other and subsequently me.

“Holy fucking shit balls, batman,” Loki exclaims as he keeps prodding the body.

“Farren, that is truly amazing. How much scrutiny can it withstand?” Mayhem asks curiously.

I’m well aware that we’re completely off track from the original conversation, but it feels good to share, and there’s nothing particularly pressing we have to get back to. It took much less time than I thought it would.

“Almost all, but if something gets someone curious, then it will dissipate with absolutely no magical trace, and by that point, the original is alive, and everyone assumes it was a delayed ashing.”

“Wow,” Rival mutters as they all stare at me like I’ve done something truly remarkable.

Mayhem clears his throat and nods down to the body. “That isn’t an illusion. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s far too complex and real to be an illusion. Even a strong one wouldn’t

be able to be touched without the magical strands breaking down and revealing it to be an illusion.”

“What?” I ask, dumbfounded and trying to process what he’s telling me.

“It’s most likely something to do with your Weaver abilities. There hasn’t been one for such a long time that we don’t really know what your abilities are.” Rival adds, making Mayhem nod along.

“We can help you find out when we get a chance back at the academy if you’d like?” Mayhem asks.

“Yes, please, any information would be helpful. I’m flying blind when it comes to that gift.”

“How do you get rid of it if it doesn’t dissipate by itself?” Rival asks the others listening to the conversation intently.

“I thank it,” I reply.

“You what?” Loki asks, his nose wrinkling in the cutest way.

“Like this,” I gesture to the body, “thank you for your service. You may depart, friend.”

The body disappears in a fog of black glitter, like always, and I look up to grin at the guys. I’ve never shown anyone that trick, and I’m pretty damn proud of it. I met with white faces, silence and pure shock.

“What?”

“You can take this one, brother,” Storm mutters, slapping Killian on the shoulder.

“You weren’t speaking Fae, you weren’t speaking any language I’ve ever heard, and your eyes were completely black, your pupils glowing gold,” he tells me bluntly.

I stare and stare and try to comprehend what they’re telling me. I was speaking English.

“I said, thank you for your service. You may depart, friend,” I repeat.

“Still not any language we know, Love,” Loki says, looking part fascinated and also slightly freaked.

“Well, fuck.” I curse and then add, “please tell me that was Fae?”

“Yes, Darling, it was. Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.” Killian reassures me.

“Come on, let’s get back. I want my bed,” Storm says, effectively ending the conversation, and I start forward, my mind spinning.

My thoughts should probably be on the fact that I just murdered my father, but I’m unaffected by that. The man made my life and countless others hell. He is a murderer of so many that he deserves his fate. No, my thoughts are on the revelations that have just occurred and the fact that the guys are staying and treating me the same so far. As we approach the doorway back to our room, I can’t help but think that things are starting to look up. The main threat to my life is gone, the Headmaster is going to be replaced by Uncle Magnus, and I’ve got the guys.

As we step through the door though, I curse myself for being so optimistic; I should’ve known better.

“Is that what I think it is?” Loki asks, staring at the purple flames hanging in the middle of the lounge and spelling out the words; *Your first trial starts now.*

“Grab your bags now!” Storm orders.

We all rush to grab our go bags, and I’m grateful that we’re already in our fighting gear, thanks to our middle of the night excursion. At least that’s going to cut down on the time it takes to grab everything. I pull my bag on and grab a couple more weapons just in case. Just as I turn back to the door to meet the others, I feel a sucking sensation take over my whole body and find a portal, the edges glowing green, just behind me. It pulls me towards it, and I go willingly, not bothering to fight it since, from what we were told, we will all get pulled into the same place anyway. As I move over the threshold, there’s a flash of green that completely takes over my vision, and I can

feel that the ground beneath my feet has some give in it, which makes me think I must be standing on grass.

I keep my other senses alert as I wait for the green to fade from my eyes so that I can see again. Hearing a thump next to me, I tense, preparing to fight without my sight, but thankfully the green quickly starts to recede from the edges of my vision, and I can just make out a crouching Loki. I instantly relax but stay ready just in case something decides to attack while we're vulnerable from the portal. We're going to have to be careful about that. It wouldn't surprise me if one of the levels were based on something like that. After all the Fae Realm is testing our skills, I wonder how well the others can fight with one of their senses taken. Something to think about when we get back.

We seem to be on the edge of a forest with a dirt track set out in front of us, and nothing looks particularly unusual, so I assume that we're still in the Fae Realm. After I've checked the surrounding area is safe, I turn back to Loki.

"You okay?" I ask, walking over to him.

"Yeah, fuck, that first step is a doozy." He replies, his eyes scanning the area like mine just did. "Where are the others?"

I open my mouth to say how the hell should I know when five green-edged portals appear. "There, I guess."

"Wait five?" Loki asks, "surely there should only be four?"

Out of the portals lands, Killian, Storm, Rival, Reaper and Zev!

"What the fuck?" I ask.

"What's wrong?" Storm demands clearly still blinded by the green.

"Don't worry; the green will fade in a few seconds," Loki tells the others, and within seconds they all start looking around.

When their eyes land on Zev, they all just stare at him.

He rubs his hand against the back of his neck like he's nervous, and to be fair, I would be too, with all of us staring at

him.

“Erm, hi guys,” he says, giving us a little wave.

“Don’t take this the wrong way because I’m happy to see you, but how?” I ask.

“I’m not entirely sure as far as I’m aware because I don’t have a team and won’t have one because I’m the next Head Seer I was going to be pulled in by myself, so I have no idea how I’ve been pulled in with you guys, but I’m incredibly grateful because at least I have a pretty decent chance of survival now.”

The guys look at me.

“Well, the voice you heard did say that he’d be safe,” Rival points out.

As I go to reply, tinkling laughter fills sounds all around us, and I freeze.

“Please, for the love of just about everything tell me that you guys heard that?” I practically beg.

“Yep, I heard it.” Zev replies, looking to the others, who all nod, “what voice?”

“After I realised that you were the next Head Seer, I asked the fates to make sure that you’d stay safe in the games, and the voice of a woman replied saying you would be, but only I heard it,” I explain quickly.

Zev’s eyes widen, “In that case, I guess that thanks are in order.”

I nod and then look around again, “So how do we know what we’re supposed to do?”

With a zap of purple light, a scroll appears and hovers in the air, waiting to be read, almost like the Fae Realm was listening to our conversation and waiting until we had gotten over the surprise of Zev being here before it gave us the information we needed to do the mission.

“I guess that’s how,” Loki grins, looking over at Storm, “you’re the boss. You get the honours.”

“Alright,” Storm says, plucking it out of the air and unravelling it.

Scrolls aren't really used much anymore, people sticking to heavy paper and envelopes instead, so I can appreciate the Fae Realm's flair for the dramatics.

Storm clears his throat and starts to read, “A hybrid beast from the Void Realm,” his eyes snap up to mine.

“The Void is a Realm?” I ask, shocked.

“I just assumed it was magic, not an actual place,” Mayhem agrees with me, and if he didn't know, then I don't feel quite so bad that I had no idea.

“We can come back to that. What else does it say?” Reaper asks Storm.

“The beast has escaped into the Crimson court,” he starts and gets interrupted again.

“That must be where we are,” Killian says and then, when Storm gives him an exasperated look, adds, “sorry, please continue, brother.”

“Thanks,” Storm replies drily. “It's causing terror and havoc. We need to subdue it and stop it from continuing its attack on the crimson court. They have tried everything and have had no success. We only have two days to complete this task, and then the green portal will come to take us back to the castle. Once back at the academy, we will have four days' rest before the next level if we successfully complete this one. Then it goes on to say, “use everything at your disposal, or you die.”

We're silent as we run the words over in our minds and make sure we remember them.

“It's interesting that it tells us how many days rest we get in between levels. I knew that there is always a break between each level to recover and study for the next one, but I didn't realise that we were actually given a set time of how long we'd have.” Zev comments.

“It'll certainly help us manage time better. So what do we do about the beast then?” Killian asks, his tail still wrapped

around his waist.

“Kill it?” Loki suggests, looking around at the rest of us.

A sick churning starts in my stomach at his words, and I clamp my mouth shut, not sure where my reaction is coming from; I want to know what the others think we should do before I weigh in my opinion.

“Not necessarily,” Rival replies, and I lose some of my tension. “It says subdue, not kill.”

“I’ll give you that, but what do we do with it if we actually manage to subdue it?” Reaper argues.

“Not only that, but they’ve been trying to get rid of it for goddess knows how long now and haven’t succeeded, and they’ve had a chance to study it. We aren’t going to get that, especially in the time frame we have. I mean, we don’t even know where it is. The scroll didn’t say that, which means that we’re going to have to find a village or something so that we can get some information on where we need to go.” Mayhem explains.

I can’t keep my mouth shut any longer, my gut instincts are going crazy, and I have to say something, “We will not kill it.”

“What?” Storm asks me since I almost exploded with the statement.

“I didn’t mean for it to come out quite so forcefully as it did,” I apologise and then take a breath and try to explain where I’m coming from more clearly, “We cannot kill it. Think about it for a second from its point of view. The beast has found itself in a new and unfamiliar place, a place that is full of light that it is not used to; you’ve all travelled with me through the Void; you know what the light levels are there,” I start to explain when Zev interrupts me.

“You travel through the Void?” he asks. There’s an urgency to his question that I don’t quite understand, and where I would typically question whether to tell him about my Void gift or not, there is clearly something bigger going on here. Whoever that voice was, has put him in our path to keep safe, so I have to believe that I can trust him.

“Yes, it’s my main gift.”

“That’s why you never used your gift when we sparred?” he asks, but I think he already knows the answer and just asks the question because that’s what’s expected of him.

I tilt my head slightly, studying him. “Vision?”

He nods, “I can’t tell you. I would if I could, but I can’t risk it.”

“Don’t worry, mate, we know how it works. We won’t ask.” Loki reassures him, and Zev’s shoulders droop as the tension leaves him.

“Farren, you were saying?” Storm asks me, trying to get our conversation back on track.

“Right, it’s arrived and immediately been attacked because it’s different and doesn’t fit in here. It’s scared and acting out of fear. We need to take it home. If we can subdue it, then I can take it back through the Void with me.”

Storm studies me and then asks, “It’s that important that we don’t kill it?”

“Yes,” I reply firmly.

“Alright, then, we won’t kill it.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“That’s great and all, but we still have to find it and then convince it that we aren’t going to harm it like everything else in this Realm has tried to do,” Reaper says.

“Has anyone ever been to the Crimson Court?” Killian asks, looking around.

When everyone answers no, it’s pretty clear that the lack of information is starting to frustrate us.

“Farren, Love, I have to ask, how do we know that this is the right thing to do? We only have a certain amount of time to get the job done, or we fail the level.” Loki asks, genuinely curious and not harsh at all.

“Because we don’t just kill things. Granted, a lot of our job is killing. It has to be because of what we do, but we also save things, and I truly believe that this time the thing that needs to be saved is the one that is being perceived as a threat.” I explain.

“She’s right,” Zev says into the silence.

“I agree, I hadn’t thought about it like that, and that’s narrow-minded. We all know that not everything is as it appears, and it would be foolhardy to assume that this is just because it’s been causing some trouble. Farren makes some good points.” Storm replies sincerely.

“Well, holy fuck, I never thought I’d see the day that you admit I have good points,” I tease him, and to my utter shock, he sticks his tongue out at me like I usually do to him.

He smirks, “If I knew all I had to do to stop you talking was use my tongue, I would’ve done it a long time ago.”

There is no doubting the double meaning of that sentence, and while I remain staring at him in bemused shock, the others, including Zev, burst out laughing.

The laughter is abruptly cut off when eight horses appear in a flash of purple, and a satchel is dropped at Storm's feet, appearing in the same flash of magic.

"Revel!" I exclaim once I get a good look at the horses. He immediately moves over to me and starts inspecting me. "We're on a level of the Warrior games. What are you doing here?"

All of the guys go to their horses, happy to see them, and I watch as Zev walks up to the pearlescent mare that must belong to him because I don't recognise it and starts stroking her nose. Despite having been transported here via portal, they all seem extremely calm, even Revel, which is practically unheard of for him, but then again, he's a Fae horse, and he was brought here by the Fae Realm. They have no reason to be afraid of the thing that created them. As far as we know, it could be able to communicate with the Fae horses. I have a feeling that if I asked Revel though, he wouldn't answer. Just like some of the questions I ask Poca, he doesn't answer.

"I think," he starts, looking over at all of us just in time for us to see his eyes flash white briefly, "that if we make the right decision while we are on a level that the Fae Realm gives us rewards, things to help us along the way."

Killian watches him closely, "You think? Or you know?"

Zev's lips tick up into a grin, "I know."

"Having the horses here is going to make travelling to the next village a hell of a lot easier, and it means we're on the right track with not killing the Void beast. Good call Farren." Reaper compliments.

"Thanks," I reply. "What's in the bag?"

Storm walks back to the bag, having left it to say hello to his horse first and crouches next to it, lifting the flap and peering inside.

He pulls out a piece of parchment, and a pouch of what looks like coin, "Coin and the parchment is a map with one of the villages marked. I'm assuming that's where we need to go."

“What’s the coin for?” Loki asks with a frown.

“To pay for something,” Zev replies with a sarcastic grin.

“Thanks, fucker,” Loki chuckles.

“I guess we’ll find out when we get there,” Killian adds sensibly.

“Good point. I’ve got the map memorised. Let’s go.” Storm instructs, and we all load up on our horses and set off following Storm.

“Do we have any idea how long it’s going to take to get to the village?” Rival asks and then adds, “and are we assuming that someone in the village will have the information we need to locate the Void beast?”

“I’m assuming it’s going to take a few hours, and we can either cross through a village on the way or go around the outside. If we go around the outside, it will take longer though.” He explains before answering Rival’s second question, “as for the village, I think that’s a fair assumption.”

“So, tavern again then?” Killian asks.

“Probably the best bet. It worked well enough on the last mission.” Storm replies.

“How many hours left of daylight have we got?” Reaper asks.

“We’ll probably get to the village as the sun sets. That’s if we go through the first village and not around.” Storm replies.

“I say we go through; we might hear some information we need, and I’m not familiar enough with the area to know the threats that surround the villages,” Killian suggests, and everyone quickly agrees.

“Hopefully, the tavern in the last village will have rooms too. We’re going to need to eat and rest by the time we get there.” Mayhem adds as we slowly progress along the dirt road, the sound of the thud of the horse’s hooves on the packed dirt strangely calming.

“That will only give us a day to reach the location of the Void beast and try to convince it we want to help, not harm before we run out of time and we fail the level.” Killian frowns.

“We don’t have much choice; we’ve been on the go for hours, and I don’t want any of us to make a silly mistake because we’re tired. We’ll get it done, and we won’t fail. On that note, though, I think we should pick up the pace so we can make it to the first village in good time.”

He doesn’t wait for an answer as he orders his horse to pick up the pace, and all of our horses automatically follow his lead.

The ride to the first village passes quickly, and what Storm described as a village is actually a bustling town. It’s just past midday, so the cobbled streets are busy and lined with merchants but thankfully because it’s such a big town, no one pays us any mind.

“Keep your ears peeled as we go through the town. We might be able to find out some information here without directly asking anyone.” Storm orders.

I don’t really hear much as we walk through the town and then the houses on the outskirts, at least nothing that’s relevant to the Void beast. Eventually, we get to the part of the town where houses become more spread out, and it turns into farmland, and we get stuck behind a cart. There’s a steep bank on either side of this part of the road, so we just stay behind until we can pass. I tune into the conversation as soon as one of them mentions something about a beast.

“Have you heard about all the trouble, Triunea are having?” one of the guys driving the cart of vegetables asks.

“Oh aye, something to do with a giant beast if the stories are to be believed.”

“I doubt it’s true. They’ve been trying to get some extra funding for years now. Besides, they’re known for their tall tales.”

“True that, boy. I wouldn’t believe it unless I saw it.”

Their conversation starts to fade away as they take a turn and finally free up the rest of the road.

“Well, that was interesting. Is Triunea where we’re headed?” Killian asks.

“Yeah, it is. Let’s kick it up a notch again. The sun is already starting to set.” Storm suggests.

“Yeah, and I’m hungry,” Loki groans.

“You’re always hungry,” Reaper replies, rolling his eyes.

“I could eat,” Zev adds in.

Loki reaches over, and fist bumps him. “I knew I liked you.”

Zev just chuckles in response, and then his eyes flash white again, “We should probably pick up the pace now.”

“Doesn’t that ever get too much; Killian doesn’t get them nearly as often as you do?” I ask him.

“Don’t forget, it’s not my main gift,” Kill points out.

“It’s been the same my whole life, and I don’t know any other way,” Zev explains and then nudges his horse to speed up.

Taking the hint, we all do the same. If the future Head Seer gives you advice, then it’s probably best to take it.

We’ve only been riding for an hour or so when the clouds decide that they’re going to grace us with a drenching of rain. Within seconds I’m so wet that the water is practically streaming off my nose, and I’m relying on Revel’s extra senses to guide me because I can’t see shit. We don’t slow down and try to find cover; there’s not much point; judging from the blackness of the overhead clouds, it’s not stopping any time soon.

When lights start to appear, signalling that we’ve got to the edge of the tiny village, I’m wet, cold, miserable and starving. We don’t bother stopping; no one is about to ask questions anyway. Everyone smart enough to be tucked up in their nice

warm homes and most likely eating hot meals right now, my stomach grumbles.

Because it's such a small village, the tavern seems to double as an inn as well and is set right on the edge of the village, almost separate from it. I keep everything crossed that they have room for us all; we aren't a small group. We follow the path around to an area by the stables that are covered, and a stable boy runs out to meet us.

"For the night?" he asks.

"Yes, please, so long as there are rooms inside." Storm answers.

The boy giggles, "No one comes to our village, sir. There'll be space!"

He then immediately starts to lead the horses away, and I wonder how a small boy barely over fifteen is going to convince Revel especially to do as he asks, but instead of going to Storm's horse and grabbing the reins to lead him, he just turns back towards the stables and starts talking asking the horses to follow him, and he'll get them fed and warm. They simply follow after him eagerly.

"I don't think I will ever get used to seeing a fae with the true gift of animals communicating with them," Rival says from beside me, and I nod in agreement.

It doesn't take long for the novelty to wear off though, and I practically run to the tavern to get warm. I really hope the kid was right; I think as I follow the guys through the door.

The place is small, cosy and warm. I instantly let out a breath of relief. There are only a couple of patrons in here who pay us absolutely no mind as they try to find the answers at the bottom of their pints.

"Oh my, you must be freezing!" a plump woman with a kind face suddenly exclaims.

"Yes, ma'am, we were wondering if you had some rooms spare and if the cook is still about?" Storm asks pleasantly.

“Yes, of course,” she grabs some keys from under the bar and then calls over the shoulder, “Ted, I need eight bowls of soup, bread and cheese!”

“Thank you,” I reply.

“Let’s get you up to the rooms so you can change into some dry clothes. Your food should be done by then.” She smiles and leads us further into the building and then up a set of stairs, “now, this is only a small place, so you’re all going to have to double up.”

“That’s fine, anything to not sleep in the rain,” Loki grins.

She nods and then hands over the keys. I don’t bother asking who’s going to room with me because I wouldn’t mind if any of them did.

“You guys pick who’s in my room. I’m going to get changed, so give me five minutes.” I say, turning around and opening the closest door.

As soon as it shuts behind me, I strip. I grab one of the towels in the room and dry off quickly. Even my underwear is wet. I change that and then pull on some thick fur-lined leggings and a long-sleeve top as I wish I had brought a jumper. Highly aware that someone is waiting to get changed, I quickly lay my fighting leathers out to get dry and then nearly curse myself when my brain kicks back on, and I realise I could’ve avoided that and dried everything with my magic. I use it to dry my leathers so they’re ready for tomorrow and then pull the door to the room back open; shaking my head; I open it to a very bemused looking Loki.

“Ah, so you remembered that you had magic then,” he teases, bone dry and then looking past me to see the room.

I turn back around since I was so concerned about getting dry that I didn’t even really acknowledge the room. It’s a decent size and well decorated, although things are slightly worn. You can tell that it’s well taken care of, someone clearly taking pride in the space. There’s a washbasin in the corner; the fire is already blazing and warming the room nicely. Off to

the right is a dark wood chest of drawers, and the bed has matching side tables on either side.

One bed.

I turn to Loki, “Did you draw the short straw and get to share a room with me?”

His smile turns from innocent to decadent in a blink of an eye, “I don’t think I’d call it drawing the short straw. We had to play for it, and I won.”

“You look very pleased with yourself,” I chuckle.

“I am. I’ll sleep in the chair though, don’t worry.” He finishes on a serious note, and there’s no hint of a hidden agenda, and I can’t decide if I’m pleased or disappointed by that.

“Don’t be silly. The beds big enough for both of us,” I scoff and then start to walk out of the room, the smell of food calling to me. I pause as I go to brush past him and pat his chest, “don’t worry, I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

I giggle as he sputters and quickly catches me up in the hall. None of the guys are out here, but I figure they either realised they could all use the magic or at least those that could helped those that couldn’t and are already downstairs, or they can meet us down there. I’m too hungry.

“Hey now, Love, who’s to say that I want you to keep your hands to yourself?” he asks just as we get to the table of the others.

“Loki!” Rival snaps, looking at me to make sure he hasn’t offended me.

I burst out laughing. “He’s fine. I was messing with him.”

The conversation is quickly forgotten as the food and drinks arrive in a flurry of movement, and it smells divine. Storm must’ve already used the coin that we got out of the Fae Realm delivered bag. When the last bowl is laid down in front of Storm, the cook also hands him an envelope, a knowing glint in his eye.

“Thank you.” Storm’s confused voice rings out in the now empty tavern as the previous people must’ve decided to get home before the weather worsens even more.

“No, thank you, all. We’re closing up since it’s unlikely we’ll get any more visitors tonight. If you leave your plates on the table, one of my boys will clear it.” He replies and then moves back around the bar and into the kitchen.

“Read it then,” Loki urges, already tearing into his bread.

Storm sighs as Loki practically inhales his food and gestures to everyone else, “Why don’t you all start eating while I read?”

Everyone is obviously hungry because they don’t even make a single sound of protest.

Storm clears his throat as he opens the envelope and pulls out the parchment inside, “The Void beast is about an hour away, and it gives us another map.”

“Is that it?” Killian asks.

“Well, it’s written in fancier words, but yeah, look?” he hands the parchment to Killian.

As soon as his fingers touch the parchment, it goes up in purple Fae flames.

“Fuck,” he curses as he curls in his fingers, and his tail whips up and starts smacking the piece of paper that’s still alight to put it out.

“Shit, please tell me you already memorised the map?” Reaper asks Storm.

“I got a glance at it. It should be enough for me to get us there.”

“Are you alright, mate?” Zev asks Killian.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I think it just caught the end of my fingers.” Killian answers with a wary smile.

“So, I guess it’s safe to say that if something gets given to one of us specifically that the rest of us can’t touch it, we risk

it disintegrating and could potentially lose important information.” Zev summarises.

“It could just have been that particular piece, but I think you’re right. We shouldn’t risk it.” Mayhem agrees.

“The cook touched it, though?” I point out.

“He probably had permission and wouldn’t have been able to open it anyway. He was literally just the delivery system for the Fae Realm.” Mayhem tries to explain.

“That makes sense, I guess,” I reply.

“First thing in the morning, we’ll set off, I don’t think it’s too far from here, but I would’ve needed a longer look to be sure.”

“It’s really impressive that you have that skill,” I compliment him.

Shadows flash through his eyes, and not the shadows of his magic, “It can be a curse.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I don't have the words to reply to that; at least, nothing that I feel would be enough. I know he's seen some shit in his life, and I know he can remember it all vividly. He doesn't get to view things through the hazy lens of time that the rest of us take for granted. So instead, I reach across the table and grasp his hand, surprised when he flips it over and threads his fingers through mine, squeezing tightly, and the fire that sparks between his horns does that slow smoulder thing that I have no idea what it means. After that, we finish the food quickly, all feeling tired thanks to the long journey and the excursion to kill my father. Not to mention that we were already running on empty before that, thanks to the assassination attempt and meeting Ryu.

By the time I get up to the room, any awkwardness that I felt at sharing a room with Loki and how it was going to work is completely dissipated, and I fall into bed. Lifting the covers when Loki stands there looking awkward and like he's going to fall asleep at any moment as he sways on his feet. The bed bounces as he falls in and settles. I don't even think of pretending to protest as he pulls me to his side, and I lay my head on his chest, falling asleep to the sound of his heartbeat below my ear. It fleetingly occurs to me that I should probably warn him that I have very loud nightmares, but I'm fast asleep before I can even get the words out.

We start off early the next morning, early enough that the sun is only just starting to peak over the horizon, and although I slept well last night, I'm still yawning and wishing I had a second cup of coffee. I'm riding at the back of the procession today and turn around in my saddle to look back at the tavern longingly.

“What the fuck,” I loudly exclaim, causing Revel to shift underneath me thanks to the loud outburst.

“What’s happened? Are you alright?” Rival barks, turning his horse around and scanning the area for threats.

“The tavern’s gone,” I point to where the tavern we literally just left was and the empty field that now stands there.

“Erm, what the flying fuck?” Loki states eloquently.

“Where’s it gone?” Zev asks, looking around like he might find it.

“Maybe it was another one of those gifts from the Fae Realm?” Mayhem suggests sceptically.

“But wouldn’t that mean the people, the building, and everything that was in there weren’t actually real?” Rival asks.

“Well, they were but not in the same sense that we know them to be. It would explain why the cook could touch the envelope and why the horses so easily followed the stable boy. They recognised the place for what it was.” Mayhem suggests.

“That’s just ... I don’t think I can wrap my head around that this early in the morning.” I reply, facing forward again.

“I think we might just have to get used to the Fae Realm doing strange things while we’re doing the games,” Mayhem theorises.

“Let’s set off and see if we can help this Void beast,” Storm suggests, and we start off again, my mind whirling with the possibilities and how real everything felt at the tavern. I suppose it was, just not in the way that we’re used to things being real. Now my brain hurts; I think I’ll just leave that as one of the things that simply is and not try to work out the how behind it. We travel for a while in silence, all of us lost in our own thoughts. I enjoy taking in the scenery as we travel past a vast river, following Storm as he leads us down the dirt tracks, seemingly taking turns at random. We come across a couple of merchants travelling in the opposite direction, but they ignore us, and we ignore them. Eventually, we come to a barely-there

path leading into the dense forest. It's tight enough that we can only just fit the horses down it and have to slow to a walk so that it's safe.

“What if we can't subdue it?” Killian asks. “It's beyond scared by this point, and we have no idea how long it's been out here. We do know that since it's arrived, it's pretty much been attacked continuously. The likelihood of it stopping and listening to us is pretty slim.”

“We need it to come willingly.” Rival answers in agreement, “We don't even know how big it is or what it looks like; it could have any number of defensive mechanisms that we've never seen before. I don't like the lack of information we have about it.”

“I think that's the point, though. In our jobs, we aren't always going to have all the information, and we're going to have to work out with all the information we do have. The Warrior games are a test after all, and the Fae Realm wants the best of the best to help protect it, and the other Realm's as well.” Loki suggests.

“You're right. I just don't like not having all the information, especially when it comes to unknown creatures,” Rival replies.

“We know, mate,” Reaper grins.

“We need to make sure that we try everything we can without harming it,” I start to explain, “as soon as one of us hurts it, we become as bad as all the other people who have done the same, and we have absolutely no chance of getting it to trust us.”

“That's an excellent point. Everyone needs to be using as many of their evasive skills as possible.” He turns to look at Zev, “Don't take this wrong, but I don't know you well enough to know your strengths and weaknesses. How're your evasive skills?”

Zev smiles, unbothered by the question, “They're one of my biggest strengths. I'm sure Farren has told you how I use my sight in a fight to predict my opponent's next move? Well,

along the same lines, I use the same method but to avoid attacks rather than plan my own.”

“That’s seriously impressive,” Killian compliments.

“It’s even more so when you’re actually in a fight with him, I can change my mind halfway through a move, and he’ll mostly still catch it,” I add.

“I can see how you got into the academy,” Reaper says, looking impressed.

“It’s going to be interesting to see how having a Head Seer trained as an Enforcer is going to work out. I don’t think there has ever been one before.” Mayhem ponders.

“I have a feeling that there’s a reason why there is one now,” Killian interjects, in a way that lets us know that he has seen something.

“We got off track. Farren, am I right to assume that you need the Void beast compliant in order to take it back to the Void?” Storm asks, steering the conversation back on track as we take a turn and end up walking through a wide cavern cut straight into the base of what I’m assuming is a mountain.

Up until this point, we’ve been walking through dense forests hence why we’ve been able to talk because we can’t have the horses go any faster than a walk. The trees are packed so closely together that I can’t see the tell-tale sign of the mountain, just the vegetation all around us and the opening to the cavern. It doesn’t look like it leads anywhere, but I’ve followed Storm enough times now that I trust his judgement. He throws a couple of witch lights into the air, the glowing orbs helping to guide our way through the dark cavern and casting a soft glow around us.

As we follow him into the wide opening, I answer, “Obviously, I’d prefer that it came willingly. It would make it a hell of a lot easier, but I think I should be able to pull it into the Void with me so long as I’m touching it. As Rival said before though, it could have defensive mechanisms that we know nothing about, including ones on its skin, so it would be

easier if we can get it to listen and follow me willingly back into the Void.”

“We’ll consider that the last resort then. We also don’t know how it will react to being forced to travel somewhere. If it doesn’t recognise where it is straight away, then it will most likely attack, and I’m not willing to risk you.” Killian replies firmly.

“Sounds good to me,” I reply.

I have absolutely no issue in not getting eaten by a Void beast. I’m kind of hoping that because the creatures I encounter leave me alone when I’m in the Void, it will somehow recognise me and not attack, but that’s a really big what if, and we aren’t going to know how it will react until we actually come to face to face with it.

“How long until we get to the other side?” Loki asks.

The cavern and tunnels leading off it are wide enough that two of us can ride side by side down it. The walls are rough grey and white stone with veins of black and red running through them. Storm is picking the tunnels with a precision that only he seems to understand, and I wonder if maybe it was depicted on the map that only he got to see before it burned up in Killian’s hand.

“We’re not going out the other side,” Storm answers distractedly as we get to an intersection of tunnels, and he looks either way before deciding, pulling gently on the reins and guiding his horse down the left one, which slopes down.

“What?” Loki asks.

“According to the map we got at the tavern last night, the Void beast is in these tunnels somewhere.”

“That makes sense. These tunnels probably remind it of home,” I mutter.

“Any idea how much further we’ve got to go?” Zev asks.

“No, but I’m guessing it’s not too far,” Storm says grimly as he guides his horse around something on the floor, and we all follow single file.

“Oh, gross. Are those bodies?” Loki asks.

I look down as I pass the pile of licked-clean bones on the floor with fairly large teeth marks in them.

“Looks like it. From the teeth marks, I think it’s safe to assume the Void beast is fairly large.” I reply.

“I know it might’ve been unlikely, but I was kind of hoping it would be the size of a cat or something,” Loki replies wistfully, and I chuckle.

The tunnel is still sloping downwards slightly and beginning to get narrower.

“Maybe we should’ve left the horses at the entrance?” Mayhem mutters into the silence.

“It’s too late now, they won’t be able to turn around in this tunnel, and we all know they aren’t great at walking backwards.” Rival points out.

“Hopefully, it’ll open up into a cavern or something, and they can turn around and escape back out before the Void beast decides to snack on them,” Reaper adds.

“Silence from now on; I think we’re getting close.” Storm orders before turning to look at Reaper, “does Ryu understand that he’s not to interfere unless given a direct order?”

“Yes, he’s not happy about it, but he’s been listening. He understands the reasons why.” Reaper replies with surety.

“Good,” Storm nods.

“I think we should dismount while we can and leave the horses here. We can come back for them and turn them around after we’ve dealt with the Void beast. I don’t want to risk it eating Revel.” I suggest. “I also don’t think we should throw up any more of the witch lights than we have now when we’re with the Void beast unless we really have to. Remember it’s used to living in the dark, and too much light could aggravate it even more.”

Storm nods his agreement, and we all dismount, giving the orders to our horses to stay put.

We stay silent as we move forward. Our weapons are drawn. I jump slightly when I feel something touch my leg but quickly realise that it's just Kill's tail taking advantage of my proximity to touch me. He likes to make out like his tail is an entirely different entity when it does things like this, but I think he uses that as an excuse just so he can touch me at every opportunity, and I think it's cute as fuck, so I've never bothered to call him out on it. I don't plan to.

My nose wrinkles as we get near the end of the tunnel, and I can just about make out an enormous cavern beyond the end. It smells rancid down here, like rotting meat, faeces and something sweet that is turning my stomach. I have a feeling it's going to be even more challenging than we thought to get this creature to believe that we're not here to harm it.

We slowly approach the cavern at the end of the tunnel and send the witches' lights ahead to light up the space just a tiny amount. We stay silent as we look around. I don't see anything, no movement, just black shadows. Intuition sparks, and I call my magic forward to give me the same sight that I have when I'm in the Void. It automatically switches on when I'm in the Void, but maybe it needs to be activated when I'm outside of it. It wouldn't surprise me at all if the Void beast had magic of its own.

I feel my magic move to my eyes just in time to see something rush towards us from the other end of the cavern.

"Fuck guys, scatter!" I yell and then fling my magic at them all in the hopes that they'll be able to see what I can.

"Thanks, Love!" Loki yells, diving out of the way as a giant paw, the size of his torso, swings towards him.

I'm guessing that means that it worked.

As it tries to figure out which one of us it wants to follow, I study it as best I can while not staying still. Thanks to my Void sight, I can see it well enough. It's bigger than a carriage and kind of canine shaped, except it's got six legs and not four, with enormous paws. It also has two heads and four eyes on each one; its snout is long and filled the teeth that have jagged edges. It certainly looks terrifying, and I can understand why

people were wary of it, but I still think it deserves to be taken home and not killed.

We're all dodging the attacks that it's trying to get us with, but everyone is also throwing distraction spells around and trying not to harm it still.

"We're not here to hurt you!" I hear Storm yell, and it's completely unheard by the beast.

It swings around and swipes a paw at Loki, who gets pushed back several feet from the force of it. He winces in pain and looks at the claw mark slicing his side. Appearing to shake off as the others continue to distract the beast, he quickly jumps back into the fray. I dart around it, watching it and the others and throwing rapid-fire distraction spells when it gets too close to hurting one of them. We won't be able to get it to listen until it calms down, and I'm hoping it's going to realise that we aren't actually hurting it soon and start to listen.

"We want to help!" Storm yells again, and the beast turns its attention to him.

It starts barrelling towards him, and there's nowhere for Storm to go. He's somehow managed to get himself blocked into a corner. At the last minute, he slides through the Void beast's legs and comes out the other side. Why didn't he use his wings? It would've been far quicker for him to escape and a hell of a lot less risky. The beast immediately turns on him again, batting him with its spiked tail that Storm barely manages to dodge in time.

The rest of us continue trying to distract it, but nothing seems to be working. It seems to have become singularly focused on Storm. Maybe it thought he was shouting insults at it or something. We have no idea if it can actually understand us. This is falling apart quickly, and I can see the plan of us getting through this without hurting the beast fading just as fast.

Storm darts around the cavern, the beast hot on his heels and gaining quickly.

“For fuck sake, Storm, fly!!” Killian screams at his brother, a desperation in his voice.

Storm ignores him though, and pushes himself harder, gaining only a few precious feet. He’s tiring, I can see it, and I’m starting to panic. Why the fuck won’t he use his wings? It’s practically his only chance now.

“Farren, tell him it’s okay to use his wings!” Mayhem yells at me from across the cavern.

“What?” I ask, knowing it’s not the time to be confused, but that’s thrown me.

“He won’t fucking use them because he knows they scare you!” Reaper yells.

My heart sinks and swells all at the same time as I start to feel sick. He’s risking his life, so he doesn’t fucking frighten me.

“Storm, use your wings! I promise I’ll be fine!” I practically scream.

He hesitates for a mere second before his wings snap open behind him, and he catapults himself up into the air with one powerful leap.

My breath leaves me in a relieved whoosh. He’s safe now he’s flying. The Void beast can’t get him, and we might actually have a chance of switching his attention away from Storm.

My heart hits my boots, and I let out a scream as the Void beast jumps higher than it should be able to, and Storm starts to plummet towards the floor.

Chapter Thirty

Before any of us can get to him, he's crashing into the stone base of the cavern with a groan, and the Void beast stands over him, mouths open, ready to take a bite.

No, he is MINE! I will not fucking lose him! I feel the wind whip around me as my magic fills the air, and my eyesight sharpens even further to the point where I can see better than if it were daylight.

"Stop!" I yell, "do not harm him. He is mine!"

To my utter amazement, the beast stops just short of taking a bite out of him and lifts its massive heads up to me; its eyes meet mine, and there's an intelligence in them that is far more than a mere beast. It completely ignores Storm as it steps over him and makes its way toward me with slow and careful steps.

Storm groans as he moves his head, his face scratched and bloody thanks to the fall and yet he still tries to pull himself up as he sees it approach me.

"Farren," his painfilled voice comes out as a croak as he reaches a hand out for me, still trying to move his broken and battered body in my direction.

"It's okay. I promise," I tell him and then search for Loki, who looks like he's seconds away from coming for me. "Fix him."

"It's okay," Zev says firmly.

"She'll be okay," Killian adds.

I watch as they all reluctantly start to head towards Storm, their eyes moving back to me every few seconds.

My gaze moves back to the beast. It stops only a few feet from me, curls its two front legs and kneels, lowering its head

like it's bowing to me. I feel shock hit me from Killian and Loki and realise I've opened up the bond lines. I'm kind of glad that I have though because at least I know that I really am seeing what I am.

Still kneeling, the beast's eight eyes, on both heads, flick up to me, and it whines, regret filling its eyes. I have no idea what's happening right now, but I'm going with it.

"Can you understand me?" I ask.

It nods slightly.

"Please rise. We aren't here to hurt you. We want to take you home; I can take you back to the Void Realm if you will allow me to," I explain, hoping that I don't have to use short sentences for it to understand me.

"What's she saying?" I hear Storm ask, and I'm not sure why he can't hear me, but I am incredibly relieved that he sounds stronger. I desperately want to go to him, but I have to do this first.

The beast nods his heads, and I'm taking that to mean that he wants me to take him home.

"I need to touch you to take you back to the Void Realm. Will you hurt me?" I ask.

It immediately starts shaking its heads back and forth in quick succession, an almost horrified look in its eyes. Well, okay then.

I glance over at the others to find Storm propped up and looking a lot better than he did, thank god. They're all staring at me in utter shock, apart from Zev and Killian, who have that knowing glint in their eyes.

"I'm going to take him home now. I'll be back." I say and then reach forward, to touch the surprisingly soft fur of the Void beast and call my magic forward at the same time to take us into the Void.

I don't bother waiting for the guys to respond because I don't want any of them to try and come with me. For now, the beast is being compliant and even apologetic to a certain

degree with me, but I have no idea how he would react if any of the others come near us, and I am not risking any of them. The beast may be a victim of circumstance and have suffered abuse in our realm, but if he kills one of mine, then I will not hesitate to kill him, and I do not want that to become an option.

“Wait!” I hear Loki yell, but it’s too late. My magic wraps around the Void beast and me and pulls us into the familiar embrace of the Void.

My Void vision, as I’m now calling it, activates, and I’m surprised when I can see the Void better than I have ever been able to. Maybe it’s because I now know that it is actually a Realm and not just something I can travel through, and now I have that knowledge, I’ve been granted the gift to see it more thoroughly.

The landscape is truly unique, I thought everything would just be black and grey, but I couldn’t be more wrong. The plants and trees that we’re surrounded by are burgundies, mustard yellow, deep purple and navy, all dark and rich colours that paint a stunning landscape.

“I cannot thank you enough,” a booming voice makes me jump, and I turn to look at the Void beast, the only creature it could’ve come from, sure my face is showing my shock.

“Was that you?” I ask.

“Yes. I can talk here. I can’t talk in the Fae Realm.” He explains and then bows his head, his eyes sad. “I am so very sorry for what I did to your mate, and I thank you not only for bringing me here but also for granting me the lenience that I do not deserve.”

I decide not to correct him in regard to the mate thing. I did, after all, call Storm mine. “You’re welcome. Everyone deserves a second chance, and I can’t imagine how frightening it must’ve been to find yourself in the Fae Realm.”

He nods again, and howls start sounding through the surrounding forest. Suddenly I find myself surrounded by similar beasts, I remain ready in case they decide to attack, but

a small bundle comes charging towards the beast I brought back.

“Daddy!” I hear him call out just before it crashes into his father, and my lips stretch into a broad smile. It’s the cutest fucking thing.

I’m now even more glad that we brought him home instead of killing him; he didn’t deserve that.

“Thank you for bringing him home safe,” a female voice sounds in my head, and I nod.

Watching as they all start to walk away, I’m surprised when there’s a sound of shock before all eight of them, even the pups, turn back to me and drop to their front legs, all bowing their heads. I have no idea how to react and stand in shock until they rise again and all disappear through the forest so that only the beast I brought back is left.

“My name is, Laikynn. I have a feeling we will meet again very soon, Bellator Regina,” he says, with a knowing glint in his eye before he disappears completely.

Why do things keep saying mysterious shit and then disappearing on me before I can ask any of the questions that I’m clearly going to have? I allow my magic to surround me and then step back out of the Void, I need to know they’re all okay, but Storm especially, I nearly lost him.

As soon as I step back into the cavern, I slam my eyes shut, blinking rapidly as my eyes tear up from the sharp sting of the light. I feel magic wash away from my eyes, and I cautiously open them again, grateful when the light doesn’t burn them anymore. Surprisingly there’s only one more witch light in here than there was before, just enough to light the cavern up better.

The horses seem to have made their way down into the cavern, clearly having realised that the fight is over and most likely fed up with being stuck in the tight tunnel leading here. My eyes skip past them and land on the guys, they are all relatively okay, and Storm is even standing up, which means that Loki has worked his magic on him. Relief colours their

features as they realise that I'm back, but I have a singular focus on Storm.

My steps are purposeful as I walk straight up to him. At the last second, I change my mind and decide that he needs to be on the same level as me for the conversation, so I jump. His eyes go wide, but he doesn't hesitate to catch me. My legs go around his waist as his hands go under my arse to keep me up. Surprisingly the others stay absolutely silent.

"Let your wings out," I demand.

"Farren, I know they remind you of something bad, and I never want to be the reason that you are triggered again. I will regret that for the rest of my life." He says roughly.

I grit my teeth. My emotions are running pretty fucking high, thanks to the absolute fear of nearly losing him and the fact that it was my fucking fault; I was almost the reason he died, and I am not fucking okay with that.

"Open. Your. Wings." I growl.

The muscle in his jaw ticks at my tone, "No."

"Oh shit," I hear someone mutter.

Irrational anger starts to grow, "Fucking open them."

"Fuck you," Storm growls back, his eyes flashing along with his horns.

"Bitch," I hiss back.

"Erm Farren," someone tries to interrupt, and I completely blank them. This is fucking important.

His wings suddenly shoot from his back, arching wide, and I wait for the fear that would usually come at the sight of them, especially since he's angry, but there's nothing, just awe and an overwhelming need to touch them.

"There!" He yells, "Are you fucking happy now! I didn't want to fucking trigger you!"

I slam my lips on his, shutting him up before he can continue his rant. He growls, tightening his arms around me as I feel his magic brush against mine in the most delicious way. I loosen

the hold on my magic and watch, fascinated as our magics slam into one another, and the Bond I share with Loki and Killian snaps into place with Storm. His tongue dips into my mouth as he kisses me hungrily, and I return it with just as much passion. I've been thinking about kissing him since I first laid eyes on him, and it far exceeds my expectations. My heart is practically exploding in my chest with just how right this feels.

His hands grip my arse tightly, pulling me closer to his stiff cock and making me moan. I want to carry on, I don't want to stop, but I have something important that he needs to know. I start to pull back and then weave my hands and pull his head back as his lips try to follow; my cheeks hurt from the size of my smile, but I reign it in.

"I am not scared of you." I say firmly, and the feral look that was in his eyes flees, "you pulled me out of that panic attack. I trust you. Please don't ever hide who you really are from me, Storm. I fucking hate it."

He studies my face, and I let all my emotions show and hope he can fucking see them. Finally, he nods, "Are you sure?"

"Fuck yes, I'm sure. I love your wings. You're right. The first time I saw them, they reminded me of something, and when you approached me angrily in the locker room and your wings came out, it did trigger me. But I know you. I know you are a good person, and I know you would never hurt me." I glance over his shoulder at his wings, watching them move lazily behind him. "They don't scare me, and now that I can see them properly, they couldn't be further from the ones that do trigger me."

I'm not lying. Storm's wings are perfectly formed, they're black, but they have very subtle dark red designs on them, and they're beautiful.

"Fine," Storm starts and then his voice gets firm, "but you need to promise me that if they ever do start to give you flashbacks, you tell me before it gets to the point that you can't."

"I promise."

“Are you guys going to come down now?” Rival calls up to us.

I frown and look down, sure enough, we’re at least ten feet up in the air, and I hadn’t even realised, especially since Storm is keeping us steady with such ease. He looks at me cautiously, probably waiting for me to freak out.

My grin is full of dirty intent, “So, do you think you could keep us flying if we were naked?”

He chokes, and we drop slightly as the shock makes his wings stutter. I hear the guys groan beneath us, clearly having heard my words.

I tap Storm’s chest, “Maybe we’ll build up to that.”

He growls and pulls me closer.

“Guys, come on. I want to make sure Farren’s okay myself!” Killian calls up, interrupting, and Storm sighs heavily, lowering us to the floor.

As soon as I’ve stepped out of Storm’s arms, Killian’s tail whips out, wrapping around my thigh and making me stumble into his chest. He pulls me close, burying his head in my neck.

“You scared me,” he whispers, “did you just bond with Storm?”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper back and then add, “and yeah, I’m pretty sure I did.”

“Good,” he replies, letting me go, and I find myself pulled into everyone’s arms. Even Zev pulls me in.

“That was fucking insane,” he mutters.

“Welcome to the team.” I tease.

Storm’s eyes suddenly widen, and I realise that my bonds are open. He glances over at Kill, who doesn’t say anything but just nods, confirming what Storm’s asking him. His eyes collide with mine, and a breathtakingly beautiful smile crosses his face. I guess I don’t have to worry that he will be mad at me for the bond.

My eyes catch on Loki, who immediately started pacing as soon as he let me go. I open my mouth to ask if he's okay, but he starts talking before I can get anything out.

"What the hell was that?" he asks but carries on before anyone can clarify what he's talking about; he points at me, "Her eyes were doing that all black and gold thing that happened last time we were in the Void, the wind was blowing around her like she was the eye of a freaking storm, and she said a whole bunch of stuff to the Void beast that I couldn't understand, but it seemed to and it fucking bowed to her, it bowed to her right?"

"Yes, it bowed to her," Killian replies, much calmer than Loki.

"I was speaking the same language I did in the Void?" I ask, and everyone nods, "huh."

"What the fuck was that?" Loki asks again, throwing his hands up into the air.

Killian and Zev share a loaded and knowing look.

"That was the beginning of destiny," Zev states, and there's no mistaking the truth in his voice.

No one speaks. Loki's mouth drops open as he finally stops pacing and just stares, his gaze ping-ponging between Zev, Killian and me.

He scrubs a hand through his hair, "Fantastic, that answer was super mysterious and gave absolutely no answers whatsoever."

I can't help but chuckle at the exasperation in his voice. "It'll all work out, and we'll know what it means eventually when the time is right."

"That was very insightful of you." Reaper compliments, and I grin.

"Alright, we'll leave that for now." Storm agrees.

"What now?" Mayhem asks, "what did the scroll say again?"

“The same portal that brought us here should appear and take us back,” Storm replies.

“Thank fuck. I want my bed.” Zev grumbles.

“Whoa, guys, look!” Rival suddenly exclaims, and we all turn to see the green portal finish materialising and the horses calmly walking through it.

We all start to walk towards the portal, and I’m slightly surprised that it hasn’t pulled us in like it did when it brought us here. I suppose that could be because no one will want to try and escape going back to the academy, but some people are likely to try and get out of being pulled into the Warrior games.

I don’t know about the others, but I am more than ready to get back to the academy. I have several things that I want to look into, and I have the fallout from the death of my father to deal with as well. That I’m not looking forward to at all. I highly doubt that he’s left anything to me, which is more annoying than anything else because he has many books that he shouldn’t have, books that were banned or supposedly lost in the wars and ones that, with him gone I could’ve had full access to and maybe even find out some real answers about my gifts.

I’m walking between Rival and Storm, and I try to hold in my reaction when Rival reaches out his hand and threads his fingers through mine, holding them tightly. He and Mayhem are the quieter ones in the group and the ones that I know the least about; I’m going to change that as soon as we get back to the academy, I may not know them as well as I’m getting to know the others, but they are just as important to me. We all need to get to know Zev better, too, especially since he’s going to be coming into the games with us, and I know with certainty that this wasn’t a one-off.

Storm’s wing reaches out and wraps around my shoulder, seeming to be similar to Killian’s tail in their need to touch me whenever I’m near. I’m not complaining in the slightest.

We’re a couple of feet away from the portal, Rival’s horse having just walked through when it snaps shut.

“What the fuck?” Reaper exclaims.

“Did we fail?” Zev asks, looking just as confused, which is not a good sign.

“No, we can’t have. We did it in the time frame, and the Fae Realm gave us gifts to show we were on the right track,” Mayhem frowns.

“That was only our interpretation of it though,” Rival replies.

Before anything else is said, a second portal appears, and everyone breathes a sigh of relief.

“Everyone back up!” Storm suddenly yells, and we immediately stop our approach. “It’s the wrong fucking colour. It’s purple. That doesn’t lead back to the academy.”

My eyes widen, and I find myself being pulled away from the portal by Storm and Rival. Our efforts prove useless though, as we all start to be dragged back towards the purple portal, there’s nothing we can do to stop it, and I feel Storm’s wing tighten around me as my hand grips Rival’s tighter as we finally breach the portal, and I’m blinded by purple light.

We better all still be together when we come out the other side, or heads are going to fucking roll. Fuck.

*Twisted Shadows (Black Onyx
Academy) Book 2*

By Nikita Parmenter

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty

Chapter One

“Fuck!” I hear Storm curse as we make it through the other side of the portal. Of course, I can’t see anything thanks to the purple haze impairing our vision, but at least it seems to be fading quicker than last time when we went through the green portal that brought us into the Warrior games.

Reassuringly enough, I still have hold of Rival’s hand, and Storm’s wing is still wrapped around me, so I know that they are safe at least.

“Guys, are you alright?” Storm asks, “Can anyone see yet?”

One by one the guys all say that they are okay and that, like us, the purple is starting to fade from their vision. I should probably point out that it’s not necessarily a good idea to be speaking so loudly when we don’t know where we are, but I can’t hear anything to be concerned about, and I’m as worried about them as Storm is. I also know that my magic would’ve warned me by now if there was something I needed to be concerned about.

Finally, the purple fades from my eyes, and I get the first good look at our surroundings.

Fuck, we are unmistakably in the Shadowlands. I should probably be worried, maybe even scared. I know the guys will most likely be concerned when they realise where we are, but I’m not; I’m excited. I fucking love it here; after all it was two years before my father upped his search for me and made himself a deadly nuisance, and those two years were spent here.

The guys are in for one hell of a shock, not just because of my connection to this place but because the stories don’t give it justice, and the harsh reality of the place is actually kind of comforting, or at least it is to me.

“Where are we?” Reaper asks, looking around at the others who are all doing the same and studying our surroundings until realisation dawns on them.

“We’re in the Shadowlands,” I reply, trying to keep my smile at bay. I fucking love this place.

“This is not good,” Storm mutters, his body tense and his gaze moving around the area.

We’ve ended up in the barren lands that separate the rest of the Shadowlands from the border, it’s patrolled regularly both by magic and by people, so I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re visited very soon.

They all move closer to me as if to protect me, which is cute because until they really understand how the Shadowlands work, I’m going to be protecting them. Before anyone can say anything else, there’s a flash of purple light, and the scroll drops straight into Zev’s hands.

He shrugs, “I guess I’m the one who gets to read it out this time.”

Kill looks around at the others, “Remember, no one else is to touch it. We don’t want it to disintegrate again. The other scroll could’ve had more information on it that might’ve helped.”

“Good point,” Mayhem murmurs in agreement, keeping his voice low and his eyes on the wasteland around us.

I clear my throat, “You won’t see them coming.”

Rival’s head snaps around to look at me as he narrows his eyes slightly, “What?”

“There’s no point keeping an eye on your surroundings. Stay alert, yes, but you won’t see them. One minute you’ll be surrounded by nothing but desert, and the next, you’ll find yourself in the middle of about twenty Shadowlaidians.”

“Shadowlaidians?” Loki questions.

“Yeah, that’s what they call themselves here.”

“I’m getting more and more curious about your connection to this place,” Killian adds, raising his eyebrow as his tail moves languidly behind him.

I roll my eyes, “We’re getting distracted, Zev; what does the scroll say?”

Zev clears his throat dramatically as he unrolls the scroll, “It says that there’s unrest in the Shadowlands, that dark magic has become a threat. Someone is trying to set a great evil onto the fae world, and they’re using the Shadowlands as a gateway. We are to find the culprit and prevent it from happening.”

Everyone is silent for a few moments as we think over what the scroll has just told us.

“What about a time limit?” Rival asks, his orange eyes sparking with intensity.

Zev looks over the scroll again before frowning, “It doesn’t have one.”

“That’s concerning,” I mutter thoughtfully.

“I read as much as I possibly could about the Warrior Games, and nowhere in anything that I’ve read has there been any mention of a time limit not being given.” Rival replies, his eyebrows furrowed as he scrubs his hand through his blue hair. Rival loves knowledge, and I think the current lack of it is driving him mad.

“Did it say anywhere how long the longest level lasted for?” Storm asks.

Rival nods, “Yeah, two weeks, I think. Everyone thought that they’d failed because it took so long for them to get back.”

“Okay, well hopefully, it will be two weeks for us as well.” Storm replies.

“They were still told how long it was going to take them. It was one of the questions everyone asked them and the only question they answered.” Rival points out with a concerned frown.

I interrupt, “Also, from what the scroll said, there’s a huge issue here, one that’s going to take longer than two weeks to solve. Regardless of that though, the Fae realm clearly wants us here, and we’re just going to have to trust that she knows what she’s doing.”

“I’m starting to think that the Shadowlands is not what we’ve been made to think it is,” Reaper muses, his eyes on me. Almost as if he’s trying to pluck the knowledge from my head.

“I agree. The Fae Realm wants us to protect it, to keep it safe, and just that in itself means that the Shadowlands are important, or the Fae Realm would leave it to its fate.” Mayhem adds.

“That doesn’t surprise you, does it, Love?” Loki asks me.

My lips tilt up into a smile, “You’ll see.”

Before any of them can question me any more, we suddenly find ourselves surrounded by multiple different supernaturals. We all move into a circle formation so that we’re covered on all sides. Whereas the guys draw their weapons and Kill and Storm call forth their shadows, I stay deceptively relaxed. I can get to my weapon within seconds if I need to, but I have a feeling I won’t, not unless these supernaturals are bandits, which there is a good possibility that they could be.

They don’t immediately move to attack us, most likely sensing our strength, they start to talk in the language that they’ve developed here, and the guys side-eye each other questioningly as they keep an eye on the threat.

Loki starts to talk out of the side of his mouth like they won’t realise that he’s saying something, and I have to suppress my chuckle as he says, “Maybe they want to welcome us?”

I can practically hear Storm roll his eyes as he replies, “Dude, you see the weapons pointed at us, the magic sparking in their hands? I’m fairly certain that means they aren’t feeling too welcoming right now.”

The supe in front of me smiles slightly at Storm's words, clearly amused. Something that not many outsiders realise is that although they have their own language they speak fluent Fae as well and can understand us.

Reaper is standing next to me and I catch his eyes switch to those of his dragon before he mutters, "Ryu wants to know if we can eat them?"

Of course, his words make the Shadowlandians surrounding us tense and start shouting as they begin to advance.

For fuck sake.

Rolling my eyes I call out over the sounds of their shouting and in their own language, "We're not here to cause trouble."

I'm not about to give them any information about who we are, especially Killian and Storm. There are quite a few people who are here because of their hatred for the king, and if they ever figured out that Kill and Storm are the king's sons then that really wouldn't go well for anyone involved.

As soon as they hear me speak, they stop yelling. No outsider knows their language, and the fact that I have just used it is enough to make them listen. They move so that they aren't surrounding us anymore and are instead standing in front of us; they no longer think that we are a threat, and the guys all cautiously move as well so that they can see them properly.

I step forward, making both sides tense before I lift my shirt and mutter a spell under my breath that will lift the concealment I have on my mark. The change of seeing the Shadowland mark on my skin is instantaneous as their weapons disappear and the sparks of magic fizzle out. The guys are still tense though, and I can't say that I blame them. They've been told their entire lives that the Shadowlands are full of dangerous and deadly supernaturals, that if they step foot inside the barrier, they will be killed immediately, and while to an extent, that is true, and there are creatures here that are incredibly dangerous, it's also not, and it's going to take them a while to get used to it.

“Sorry, we had no idea that you were one of us. Are they, too?” one of them asks.

I shake my head with a smile, “Don’t worry about it, and no, they’re not. Would you mind if we switched to Fae so that they can understand what we’re saying?”

“Sure,” he replies in Fae, and the guys jolt slightly.

“So, what are you guys doing this far out?” a woman with dark red skin and cat-shaped eyes asks us curiously.

“We’ve heard about some unrest, and we’re here to investigate,” I reply, keeping it as vague as possible while still giving them enough information to satiate their curiosity.

A man with bright purple cat eyes frowns slightly, “You just arrived?”

We share a look before Storm replies, crossing his arms over his chest, as he replies bluntly, “Yes.”

I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes at his prickly attitude; he’s not going to get us any information that way. My curiosity peaks as the crowd shares raised eyebrows and confused looks.

“What’s going on?” Killian asks, only mildly more polite than Storm was.

“Excuse our confusion,” the original speaker starts, “but the borders have been locked down for a month now. No one can get in or out, and people are starting to panic.”

Well that wasn’t what I was expecting to hear, but I’m guessing that it has something to do with what the realm said in the scroll.

The woman with cat eyes shakes his head, “Tensions are running higher than usual. It’s not safe for outsiders to be here at the moment.”

With that warning, they all pop out of existence again, leaving us to absorb that information in silence.

“We’re stuck here?” Rival clarifies.

Zev frowns, “It looks like it.” His eyes briefly turn white as he gets a glimpse of the future, and then he says, “I think we’re going to be stuck here until we fix everything.”

“Fuck,” Reaper growls.

Storm turns to look at me and narrows his eyes, “Farren, can you see if you can use the Void to get out?”

I shrug, “I can try.”

It takes no effort at all to pull myself into the Void, and it greets me like an old friend, pressing around me comfortably before moving back and settling. I’ve never felt anything like it before; it doesn’t usually feel like this. As I try to call a path to take me just outside of the border to the Shadowlands, I’m met with resistance, and I get the overwhelming sense that I’m not going to be able to leave using the Void. I try a different destination just to make sure and get the same reaction.

I have this indescribable feeling that it’s more than just the Fae Realm involved in this, being able to disable part of my gift is on a god or goddess level, and that makes me nervous. We need more fucking information.

Pulling myself out of the Void, I deliberately try to position myself in a different place to the one I left, just to see if I can. Unsurprisingly, I end up stepping out of it just behind Storm, just like I had envisioned.

“So the good news is,” I start and then try to hide my smile as Storm jumps, not having noticed me step back out of the Void. I’m the only one that manages to control my reaction though as Loki snorts and the others start chuckling.

Storm spins around and glares at me, although I can see amusement in his eyes, so his glare doesn’t have the effect that it usually does, “Really Farren?”

I shrug, “I needed to see if it was going to work.”

Everyone becomes serious again, as Mayhem asks, “So you can’t get out?”

I shake my head, “No when I tried, there was like this resistance. I’ve got this feeling that this isn’t just the Fae

Realm pulling the strings.”

Rival nods in agreement, “No, I don’t think it is either. There’s something bigger than even the Fae Realm at play, and that’s something that wasn’t mentioned in any of the books or in any of the information that I’ve read.”

“Great.” Storm grumbles as he starts to pace, his wings moving agitatedly behind him.

I’m really glad that he’s still got them out and isn’t keeping them as immobile as he was before. I wasn’t lying when we were in the cave. I am okay with them, which isn’t entirely that shocking since I have caught feelings for the man they belong to.

“Wait,” Loki suddenly says, and we all look at him expectantly. He points at me, “You said good news when you first came back and scared the shit out of Storm.”

Storm huffs, “She didn’t scare me.”

Loki chuckles, enjoying winding him up despite the situation we’re currently in as he adds, “Sure, mate.”

I decide to intervene before we have a fight on our hands and start to attract some of the creatures that hunt on the outskirts of the Shadowlands. I am surprised that our only visitor has been the Shadowlaidians.

“The good news is that I can use the Void to travel through the Shadowlands, hence why I appeared behind Storm.” I reply, and then add, “Although, I’m not sure what use that will be because it’s a waste of magic reserves to just use it for popping around the room, and it takes a while as well, so it wouldn’t be good in a fight.”

“Alright, we need more information, a lot more information,” Rival mutters, and I can clearly see how much the lack of information is bothering him, I want to go over to him and comfort him in some way, but I have no idea how, or if it would be well received so I stay where I am.

“The more pressing issue right now is that we need somewhere safe to stay before something not so unusually

friendly makes an appearance.” Reaper points out just as we hear a clicking noise.

I instantly drop into a defensive crouch, drawing my chain whip with the blade on the end and infusing it with my magic. The guys follow my lead as I explain quickly, “Too late Reaper, that’s the sound of a Ripmarou. A huge snake-like creature clicks when it’s on the hunt and eats everything. The only way to kill it is through the roof of its mouth, stabbing up into the brain. Don’t get bitten.”

I don’t have time to make sure that they understand what I just said, and they don’t have time to ask any questions because as soon as I’ve finished, the Ripmarou comes into sight.

“Fucking hell, that’s gross,” Loki mutters.

Maybe I should’ve explained that they look like they’re rotting, and the smell is just as fucking bad. Unlike a snake, instead of moving from side to side to slither across the ground, it moves up and down in the same kind of motion, like a wave.

As it approaches, Killian and Storm gain my attention as they share a look and using the same hand movements; they mutter something simultaneously too low for me to hear. Shadows burst from them, rushing toward the rapidly approaching Ripmarou. As the shadows start to wrap around the huge body, slowing it down, Reaper transforms and lets Ryu out to play. Ryu roars triumphantly and turns to look at me.

“Worry not, little mate, I’ve got this,” his voice booms through my mind, and I smile.

As he bounds toward the now almost stationary Ripmarou, I urgently call out after him, “Ryu, don’t eat him; it will kill you.”

“Smells bad, not eat.” He replies, less eloquent than he was moments ago.

I chuckle, and although I stay on guard, I’m reasonably sure that the other three have this handled. Loki strolls up next to

me, smiling wide, his sword resting on his shoulder and his vampire teeth on full display.

I shouldn't find that so fucking hot, should I?

"I kind of wish I had a snack of some sort while we watch this show. I've missed Ryu, and he's got so much pent-up energy because he was kept on lock down for so long that I have a feeling this is going to be brutal." He says excitedly as Zev and Rival join us.

Grinning, I don't bother to reply as we watch Ryu. He doesn't bother going for the weak spot I told him about, instead choosing to raise his huge spiked tail and repeatedly beat the Ripmarou's head until there's nothing but mangled pulp left and then just to make sure it's dead, he stomps all over it.

"I think he's just playing now," Storm mutters as he comes to stand beside us. I was so focused on Ryu that I hadn't noticed that Storm and Killian had called their shadows back.

Arms wrap around me from behind and I sink back into Killian's embrace, comfort flowing through me.

"Let him play for a minute. It's not hurting anyone," Loki mutters and then chuckles as he amends, "Well, he's only hurting something that's trying to kill us."

"He's got five more minutes," Storm replies, "we need to find somewhere safe to stay before something else decides it wants to eat us."

"Good point," Rival mutters, his thoughts elsewhere, most likely on the information that we're missing.

Chapter Two

It actually takes less than two minutes before Ryu is bounding back toward us. He bends so that I can stroke his nose, winks at me and then disappears, leaving a once again naked Reaper in his place. There is a slight chance that I don't avert my eyes as quickly as I probably should but fucking hell, I'm not a saint by any means, and I have never been more glad of that than I am right now.

Loki smirks at me like he knows I checked out Reaper, and I stick my tongue out at him.

"For fuck sake Ryu, again!" Reaper exclaims exasperated, and deep gravelly laughter echoes through my mind making me erupt with giggles. "Can you hear his laughter, Farren?"

I nod, unable to get any words out, and I'm met with broad and amused smiles.

"Did Ryu just wink at you?" Mayhem asks and out of the corner of my eye, I see him hand Reaper some clothes.

"Yes, he did," I reply, "although I'm not sure why."

Rival clears his throat, "We need to get out of here."

"I'm dressed," Reaper mutters.

"We need to find somewhere safe to stay as well," Zev adds, giving me a knowing look.

It's going to take some getting used to having someone who knows so much around all the time. For some reason though, I don't mind. I kind of like that he knows things and that I don't have to tell him. Strangely enough, I find myself wanting to tell him things about me which is weird as fuck.

"I can help with that," I reply, and I get curious looks in return. "I told you I'd been here before."

"Yeah, but you made it seem like you were here for a quick visit." Rival states, looking at me searchingly.

“You know their language, and you have the mark that makes you one of them. That’s more than just a quick visit, Love,” Loki adds.

“Look, I can explain all of this later. We need to get out of here,” I reply and then start to whistle, calling Fae horses to me and hoping that he’s not currently using the carriage.

“I highly doubt the horses are going to make it here,” Storm mutters, falling back on our usual banter.

“I’m not calling my horse,” I reply and give him my middle finger because despite the fact that we’re getting on so much better, I like going toe to toe with him.

“Wait, someone here taught you the call for their Fae horse?” Loki asks, his eyes wide.

“Horses,” I reply, without giving them any more information, because they’re going to find out soon enough anyway.

“Farren, there’s a lot that you aren’t really explaining right now,” Rival says pointedly.

“I know,” I reply with a shrug.

Before anyone can question me anymore, four Fae horses appear, pulling a carriage behind them and landing next to us.

“Flying,” Loki mutters, “they were flying.”

“Do you know how rare flying Fae horses are?” Rival mutters.

Zev grins, “As rare as rocking horse shit.”

Mayhem chuckles, “I see what you did there. Bravo.”

Zev mock bows, “Thanks, man.”

I smirk and start to make my way over to the horses. I’m guessing the carriage wasn’t in use, or the guys would have even more questions right now, and so would he.

“I’m not getting in that,” Storm mutters.

I pause and turn back to see all of them hesitating. I raise my eyebrow, genuinely confused by their reaction, as I ask,

“What?”

“Well, we all know the reputation of the people here. How do we know it’s not a trap,” Mayhem asks.

I sigh, “Look, we need somewhere safe to stay. I know somewhere that we can stay. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

Ultimately it’s up to them, so I turn away and carry on towards the horses, greeting them each by name. It’s been a while since I last saw them, but we have a pretty strong bond. Being here is going to get really complicated, and taking them where I am is also going to present its own set of complications.

It doesn’t take them long to decide to trust me, and I smile as I move to step into the opulent carriage. We only just fit, and as I look around at the others, it’s obvious to see their unease, especially Reaper and Storm. I guess it must be weird to have someone fly you when you’re used to flying yourself.

“What about Poca?” Mayhem asks.

I frown, “I don’t know. I’m not sure if the lockdown is going to apply to him or not. I guess we’ll find out if he decides to make an appearance.”

“Considering that we have no idea how long we’re going to be here, I really hope that he can get through,” Loki adds, looking concerned.

“Me too, but either way, he will be okay.”

He nods in agreement and then, as we rise higher, they all start to look out of the carriage at the landscape below. As they stare out of the windows and we fly over small villages, I can see their confusion at what they’re seeing.

“It’s not like I thought it would be,” Killian mutters quietly.

I smile softly. I really hope that they like this place as much as I do. Despite the rough edges, cutthroat nature, and deadly daily life, this place is my home.

“They all look so happy,” Rival adds.

“Yeah, and it’s clean,” Loki adds incredulously, “I mean, I know the towns and cities in the rest of the Fae Realm aren’t exactly filthy, but it honestly looks like they take real pride in their homes and towns.”

“It shocked me at first, too,” I reply and then decide to give them a bit more information since they’re going to need it for us to do this task successfully and hopefully pass the Warrior games, “Everyone in the Shadowlands has a role and does their part to ensure that everything runs smoothly. There is no leader, no governing body, and no king.”

Their eyes widen at my words, and Storm asks, “No, King?”

“No. There are a lot of reasons why supernaturals are here, but a vast majority of them are here because of their distaste for the kings or queens of the various courts.” I reply.

“I don’t blame them; we all know they’re corrupt as fuck. The majority of them anyway,” Killian says with enough anger in his tone that I know he’s thinking of his father.

“There are a lot of people all over the various courts that would like to live without the rule of the monarchy, so why aren’t they here?” Rival asks, always curious.

“Because although it looks peaceful, it’s not. You have to be strong, clever, conniving and ruthless to survive here. So, the average supernatural wouldn’t make it. They’d be killed or imprisoned.”

“What about consequences?” Storm asks, “Or even protectors, who protect the way of life that everyone has here.”

“Well, it’s run on kind of a rotation. Everyone that lives in the Shadowlands takes a shift watching the borders. But only the borders, any disputes in town or anywhere else are handled by those involved. That means if you pick a fight with someone, you better know for damn certain that you can fucking win because if they decide that your life is forfeit, then no one will step in to help you, and there will be no punishment.”

Killian's eyes light up as he smiles wickedly, "I think I'm going to like it here. Those are the kinds of rules I could get behind."

I chuckle.

"Ryu likes the sound of it too," Reaper grins.

"I'm still not comfortable here," Storm grumbles, his arms crossed over his chest.

Loki rolls his eyes, "Of course you aren't. You don't have enough information to satiate your curiosity yet."

Zev's eyes flash white briefly, and he smiles as he looks directly at Storm and says, "You will be comfortable here, mate."

"Does that ever get tiring?" Mayhem asks him.

"What?" Zev replies, looking confused.

"You're almost always having visions. Doesn't it get tiring to be switching between the present and future constantly?" Rival asks. It's something that I've wondered about as well, so I'm curious to hear his answer.

Zev looks momentarily surprised that someone has cared enough to ask him and then replies, "Not just the present and the future, but the past and alternate realities, things happening in different realms. I can see it all."

"Wow," I mutter, "I can't even imagine how difficult that must be."

Killian shakes his head, "Mate, it's bad enough with just the glimpses I get; as Rival said, that's got to be so exhausting."

"It was at first, and it made growing up a hell of a lot more complicated than it already was." Zev replies, "But I've gotten used to it, and I'd be lost without it now. It's a part of me, and although some of the visions are truly harrowing to see, especially if I can't help either because the goddess has forbidden me, or I can't get there in time, or they're in a different realm or timeline or something. That doesn't get easier." He sighs and then adds, with a self-deprecating chuckle, "It hasn't exactly made it easy for me to make friends

either. People tend not to like that I know more than they'd necessarily ever tell me, or if something bad happens in their lives, they automatically blame me because I didn't warn them, wrongly assuming that I see everything or that I can tell them if I do see something."

His eyes meet mine from across the carriage, and I can see the weight of his gift in his eyes. He didn't lie; he likes it, but it does get heavy, carrying the burden. I can't help but think that it must get lonely and heartbreaking too.

Following my instincts, I lean forward slightly, "I can't speak for the others, but you're one of us now, whether you like it or not. If you get a bad vision, one you know you won't be able to change, I'll be there for you, if you want to eat your bodyweight in food to make yourself feel better, or break shit or go hunting, whatever you need. I know you won't be able to talk about it, but I want you to know that I'll be there. I'm also not going to blame you for anything that happens, I know you'll warn us if you can."

He stares at me in shock, lost for words which gives the others time to chime in, with their own opinions.

"Well said, Love," Loki starts and then looks at Zev, "It sounds to me like you had some pretty shitty friends in the past."

Zev chuckles, his eyes still on me.

"I know what it's like, man, and we're not going anywhere," Killian adds, his eyes studying Zev closely, not that he notices.

Mayhem and Rival share a look and then answer together, in the most twin-like way, "You're in now."

Storm shrugs, "You fought alongside us. That means you're one of us as far as I'm concerned."

"Ryu likes you," Reaper simply adds, and I suppose that is the highest compliment that he can give. From what I know of Ryu so far, he's very sparing with his affections and if he likes Zev, that's a pretty good fucking sign.

Zev smiles as he finally looks around at everyone, “Thank you, you guys have no idea how much that means to me.”

The guys just nod; there’s no need for any more words; they’ve got their point across and said what they wanted to.

“So how long until we get to wherever we’re going, and how do we know it isn’t a trap?” Loki asks, changing the subject.

Killian smirks, “He has a point. I mean, how long has it been since you were here?”

Meeting his eyes with a raised eyebrow look, I reply, “A not-so-subtle way to fish for more information; however, I will answer anyway. I haven’t been here for six months.”

“That’s it?” he asks as he sits up straighter.

I nod and then add, “It’s not a trap, you’ll see. That’s our destination.”

Their attention turns to look out of the windows as Reaper asks, “The fortress?”

“Yes, it’s even less safe after dark,” I reply, gazing down at the huge castle, with its turrets and courtyards. It even has a small woodland within its grounds, all of it surrounded by a forty-foot, two-meter thick, stone wall. It’s warded and has built-in deterrent spells, just in case someone was ever stupid enough to try and get into this place.

I don’t know whether the guys can just tell that if they ask me anything else now, I won’t answer, or they’re too distracted by the view of the castle to bother, but either way they all remain silent. I try to see it from their eyes, and I guess you could definitely say that it’s impressively imposing.

As soon as the carriage lands, directly outside of the huge imposing doors, I jump out.

“Farren, wait,” Killian calls after me, sounding more nervous than I thought he would.

They all quickly follow me out of the carriage, a hell of a lot quicker than they followed me into it. They obviously think that there could be danger here, which is cute. I know I’m

going to have to explain all of this to them soon, but I would kind of like to put it off for as long as possible.

Within seconds, I'm lifted off the ground as strong arms encircle me, holding me close.

"Hey, Grey," I mutter, my heart lightening. I've missed him like fucking crazy. Probably more than I should've, but I'm not going down that route now.

"Put her down," Storm demands, a growl in his voice.

Grey chuckles, "Silly boy."

"Put me down, idiot. I would really like it if you guys all got along, and them thinking that you're hurting me right now would not be a good way to start."

He chuckles as he squeezes me tightly once more and then reluctantly lets me go, "Fine."

I spin around to face six very angry and very dangerous-looking men, weapons and magic at the ready, and I'm surprised that Zev is behaving exactly like the others. I guess he didn't get a vision about Grey.

I can't help but roll my eyes, "Chill the fuck out, or you're going to piss off the person who is opening up his home to us for the foreseeable future."

Grey clears his throat, and I glance over at him. He towers over me at almost seven feet tall; his hair is dark as night and tied in a messy bun on the top of his head, wisps of it framing his angular face. His black, red-ringed eyes are sharp as they look me over. He has another form, but in our nearly four years of knowing each other, I have only ever captured glimpses of wings, claws, and maybe a couple of other things. All I know is that he's incredibly fucking powerful, like out of this world crazy powerful.

"Yes?" I ask him.

"I'm letting you all stay here?" Grey asks, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I roll my eyes, "Of course you are. I'll explain, but first, I'm trying to diffuse a situation."

He arches one eyebrow and sweeps his arm out, “By all means, Little goddess.”

“Little goddess?” Zev asks, narrowing his eyes at Grey.

Grey smirks, “Nice to meet you, Seer.”

“Don’t pull your tricks on them until I’ve at least introduced you,” I chastise him.

“Sorry,” he replies, not looking sorry at all.

I decide to ignore him, “Guy’s this is Grey. He’s my friend.” Turning to Grey, I ask, “Do I need to introduce them?”

“What do you mean?” Rival asks as he pulls back his magic but leaves it just below the surface, ready to call on at a second’s notice.

“Yeah, we sure as hell have never met him before,” Loki adds.

Amusement literally sparks in Grey’s eyes, “She means Loki and Rival, that I already know your names.” He nods to each of the others, naming them as he goes, “Storm, Killian, Zev, Mayhem, Reaper and, of course, Ryu.”

The guys stiffen and stare in shocked speechlessness.

“Great, now you broke them.” I sigh, pinching my nose.

Grey’s booming laugh rings out, and he swings an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close and making all of the guys glare at him. “Come on. I’m sure you’re all hungry. I have food for every appetite,” he glances at Loki, “and I am looking forward to hearing how you managed to get through the border, considering I can’t even get out.”

My head snaps in his direction as he turns me, and we head into the castle, the guys following quickly on our heels. I have to double-check that I heard him right, “You can’t?”

When his eyes meet mine, they’re serious, the red around the black pulsing as he replies, “No, I can’t.”

“Whoa, I did not expect it to look like this in here,” Loki whistles.

The interior does not match the exterior, and since I was last here, he's done even more work. Clearly, his gifts are slowly coming back after the ordeal. Unexpectedly, you aren't greeted by stone walls and cold, dank air. No, the place is clean, bright, warm and inviting. Huge area rugs with warm lighting; he's got music coming from somewhere. Every fireplace is lit, which probably helps with the warmth in here.

There are the paintings that you'd expect, but the scenarios depicted in most of them are of battles that I have never heard of, involving creatures that I have never seen. I asked him about them once, but he brushed them off as stories, nothing more. I never told him about the feeling I got from them, anger, sadness, vengeance and triumph. I feel it all, and it makes me nervous to look at them now that my magic seems stronger than ever.

Chapter Three

“Here we are,” Grey says warmly as we enter a kitchen that has all the modern conveniences that he could possibly get his hands on.

That’s something that makes him similar to me, he may be able to use his magic to do most things, but he prefers to do it himself.

“Are you expecting guests?” I ask, looking around the kitchen and my eyes landing on the table full of delicious food.

“No, one was just leaving when you turned up,” he replies and then adds, “There is blood in the fridge, help yourselves to the food, and we can talk about what the fuck is going on.”

The guys all stay in the doorway, but I don’t bother hesitating. I’m fucking starving. Taking a seat at the table, I start to pile my plate high with food.

“Well, if it’s good enough for Farren, it’s good enough for me,” Mayhem grins, taking a seat next to me and piling his plate high.

One by one they all join us, and Grey smiles, not in a cocky or arrogant way, but just enjoying having us all here. His reaction is curious because he doesn’t like many people or anyone for that matter.

I watch as Loki fills his glass with blood and then looks at Rival and asks, “Do you mind, mate?”

Rival smiles, and I watch as a stream of fire magic dances across the table and swirls around Loki’s glass of blood, warming it for him. “There you go, just how you like it.”

“Thanks,” Loki replies, taking a sip and sighing.

It turns out that we were all a lot hungrier than we thought, and we eat in silence for a while before Grey asks, “How did

you get across the border?”

“How long have the Shadowlands been locked down for?” Storm asks, and when Grey simply raises his eyebrow, he sighs and adds, “I ask because I need to know where to start the explanation.”

Grey nods, “About five months.”

Huh, so it locked down not long after I had to leave because my father found out that I was actually alive.

“The Fae Realm has brought back the Warrior games,” Storm starts.

“Yes, I am aware,” Grey replies, leaning back in his chair and putting his foot up on his knee.

Rival pulls a confused face as he says, “But you just said that the border has been locked down for five months. Are you still getting communications through?”

“No.” Grey replies with a raised eyebrow.

“Then how?” Rival asks.

Grey just shrugs and looks back at Storm, “Continue, please?”

Sometimes, his mannerisms and the way he holds himself makes me think that he’s actually a lot older than the thirty-odd years he looks. He is a supernatural, so it’s highly possible.

Storm clears his throat, stopping Rival from further questioning Grey, “We have just finished our first task, and instead of getting transported back to the academy, we were sent straight to our second task.”

Grey’s eyes move to me, “Your uncle finally got you into the academy, then?”

“Yes, and my father is dead,” I reply with a smile.

His smile is sharp and proud, “Good, about time that poor excuse for a supe ended up in the afterlife where he can receive the punishment that he deserves.”

Zev

I sit back and observe, the thing that's perplexing me the most about Grey is that I can't see him, even when I try, and that has never happened to me. Not since my gift first properly started to develop. I don't know why, and that's bothering me more than it probably should. I knew that we were coming here, and I knew that Farren would bring us here, but Grey was a complete surprise; I thought that she was bringing us to her house. Grey didn't show up at all, not even a hint of his existence, and I want to know why. The only thing that has come close to what I'm experiencing is my visions with the others. I still get them, but instead of being able to search for them specifically, I can't; I'm given very few visions that involve them. That's also something that confuses me. I'm not used to being at a disadvantage.

Surprisingly, I have come to care for Farren, for all of them, and I don't particularly appreciate that there's something I don't know. The only thing that is mildly reassuring me is that Farren trusts him, and I don't need my magic to see that they have a bond that goes beyond just acquaintances.

"I assume that the Fae Realm is still providing the details of each task on a scroll?" Grey asks.

"Yes," I reply, "I'd show you, but we have already learned from the last task that if anyone apart from the person it appears to, touches it, then it disintegrates."

Grey nods, "Yes, that makes sense. So what do you know?"

Rival is the one to reply this time, "Not enough, unfortunately."

"All it says is that dark magic has taken hold of the Shadowlands, that someone is trying to release a great evil on the Fae realm and using the Shadowlands to do it," Mayhem explains.

"We need more information," Farren starts, "what do you know?"

“Okay, I’ll start with some background information so that we’re all on the same page. I’m assuming Farren hasn’t told you much about this place?”

“No, nothing really,” Storm replies, giving Farren a raised eyebrow look that she just stares defiantly at.

“Alright, we’ll start at the beginning then,” Grey replies, sighing, “do you know that we have no ruling body here?” everyone nods, so he continues, “while that is true, we do have factions that run certain parts, people are still given a choice on whether they want to join or not, but most supes that live here ignore them and let them get on with it, they have no real power.”

Farren interrupts, “It was more that it was a few supernaturals that wanted the sense of belonging to something; they don’t really have any control over anything.”

“Until recently,” Grey interrupts.

Farren’s eyes widen, “Well, shit.”

“Exactly. Recently the different factions have gained power, they’ve gained followers and I know for a fact that some of the people who have joined would never do so under normal circumstances. Which makes it suspicious.”

“So you think that they’re being controlled somehow?” Reaper asks.

“Yes, that’s the theory at the moment. The problem with that is, as you know, only the strongest supernaturals live here, the strength of the dark magic that would need to be used to control them would need to be incredibly strong.”

Rival frowns, “Especially to control that many strong supernaturals. I assume that you’re talking about more than one person joining these factions?”

Grey nods, “Yes. That’s not all though. We’ve also had a lot more Wraith sightings. Worryingly enough, they’re high level, and they seem to be working together, which is practically unheard of.”

Killian frowns, “What are Wraiths?”

“I believe they’re known as Rogues in the fae realm.”

Understanding crosses all of our faces but I am curious why they call them Wraiths instead of Rogues, which is why I ask, “Why do you call them something different?”

Grey tilts his head as he studies me. Despite his slightly prickly attitude so far, I think he’s just trying to suss us all out. He clearly cares about Farren, I don’t need my Sight to be able to see that, and because he cares about her he feels protective of her. I’m not sure where their connection has come from, but there’s no denying that it’s strong. There’s something about Farren that makes you feel that way. You want to protect her even though you know that she’s strong enough to protect herself, but at the same time, you want her to know that she can rely on you to protect her too, to take away some of that burden that weighs on her so heavily. I’m not naïve, I have nothing to offer her, my only magic being my sight, but I’ll be there for her regardless because there’s nowhere that I’d rather be. No one has ever said anything remotely close to what she said in the carriage on the way here, and I’m going to settle for being the best damn friend that I can be to her. I refocus as Grey speaks, unable to say exactly why my mind went down that path. I’m going to avoid that train of thinking for as long as I possibly can.

“We call them Wraiths because they haven’t gone rogue, they were triggered, most likely by a great loss, and they lost themselves. They became a shadow of themselves and who they used to be, hence why they were called Wraiths.”

I nod, “That makes sense. I think it suits them better than Rogues. That never quite sat right with me, although I couldn’t tell you why.”

Rival mutters his agreement, “Yeah, I agree. Although, there has been no documented evidence of Wraiths ever working together, occasionally, you’ll get two that have the same hunting grounds but they fight to the death over their kills. There’s no cooperation between them.”

“That’s true,” Grey replies with a smile. He clearly appreciates that Rival likes knowledge. “Which is why this is

so concerning.”

“How often are they attacking?” Mayhem asks, sitting forward in his seat.

“Is there any pattern to their attacks?” Killian asks.

“No one has looked into it, but I can get you the information. Do you think they’re being controlled by the dark magic as well?” Grey asks.

“Yes, it would make sense,” Loki replies thoughtfully.

“I’m assuming that you want in?” Farren asks Grey with a small smile.

Grey nods, “Absolutely, anything to do with the Shadowlands is something that I want to be involved in.”

Storm nods, respect in his eyes, “We need as much information that we can get on the factions and the Wraith attacks.”

“I can get that for you. There are a couple of supes we can talk to as well that might be able to give us some information. There’s one final thing that you should know,” any lightheartedness that may have been in his expression disappears in an instant as his eyes land on Farren, “There are whisperings from reliable sources that are claiming the dark magic is being controlled by the Underworld.”

Farren

I instantly go cold at Grey’s words. “Fuck.”
Kill’s eyes narrow, “Farren, what is it?”

“Love, I can feel your panic. You’re going to need to fill us in before we fucking lose it,” Loki mutters, his eyes flashing red as his fangs lengthen.

As soon as I realise that Storm, Kill and Loki are all currently able to feel what I am, I shut the bonds down, stopping the flow of my emotions as I get up and start pacing,

needing to move to think this through properly. I really wish Poca was with me right now; his presence calms me.

“Farren, they’re going to need to know this could become a serious threat to you, and I’m not willing to allow that,” Grey says firmly.

I know he’s right. He usually is in these situations. I just don’t particularly want to talk about it; I guess I can give them the cliff notes version, and then they know what they need to know, and I don’t need to go into too much detail.

“Farren?” Mayhem asks, his voice soft with understanding, and he gets up, stepping in my path. He bends slightly so his bright blue eyes connect with mine; they widen with realisation, “You’re scared. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you scared.”

“It’s not a great story,” I reply, allowing him to see me at my most vulnerable. Somehow, I feel safe with him. “But Grey is right. You need to know.”

My eyes meet Grey’s and he nods in encouragement, it’s not a good story for either of us.

“Do you want me to start?” Grey asks.

I smile, although it’s obviously strained, “No, you weren’t there at the beginning, and you can’t start a story from the middle, now can you?”

“I suppose not,” Grey replies, his gaze intense. He knows how hard this is going to be.

“Before I explain, have you got something ...” I don’t finish my sentence before a glass of fae liquor appears in my hand, shocking the guys but making me smile, “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he smiles.

“That was ...” Rival starts and then stops; Grey’s magic is immense, and it has clearly begun to recover enough that he’s getting more of it back. I don’t know what they did to him, to drain him so much, but it’s taken him years to recover, and it slowly trickles back.

“So, it started with a job for my father, an assassination,” I start, as they all silently watch me, “it went wrong, I’m not sure how but I got taken to the Underworld and tortured for two years. About a year and a half in, Grey got thrown into the cell opposite mine, and they hated him as much as they hated me. We built a camaraderie.”

“A bond,” Grey interrupts. “The worst and best time of my life.”

I smile. He was my only silver lining, “When the voice helped me escape, the same voice that told me what my gifts were, I took him with me.”

Grey takes over, “I brought her here, safe from her father, who by this point thought she was dead.”

“I stayed for a year before my father somehow found out that I was alive, and he started killing innocents. He put a bounty on my head, and I had to go back to protect the people here, people who were being murdered because they knew me. So, I went back, and then a while later, I ended up at the academy.”

“Fucking hell,” Loki curses, his voice more growl than anything else.

Glancing over at the others, I see that they’re all struggling. Rival’s hair has gone up in flames, his eyes sparking with anger; Reaper’s eyes have turned into Ryu’s, and his hands are leaving giant claw marks in the table as he tries to stop his shift. Storm is as still as a statue, a ball of fire sparking between his horns and his wings moving agitatedly behind him.

Killian jumps up, the same ball of fire growing rapidly between his horns, his tail moving behind him and occasionally stabbing the air like it’s killing the supes that hurt me. Grey’s eyes narrow slightly with interest as he watches Kill approach me, he picks me up, his tail wrapping around my waist as his arms bring me in close and his head buries into my neck.

He doesn't say anything, just holds me as he practically vibrates with anger. When Grey clears his throat to say something else, Killian simply turns me around and then sits down so that we're facing the room again. Grey raises his eyebrow, and I shrug in response.

"Since we weren't exactly let go and some of the higher-ranking Hellier guards were sent to torture us, there is a chance that the same guards will be involved with this and if they come here, then Farren is in danger," Grey adds, to my explanation, making the others tense.

"So are you," I point out, and he just waves me off dismissively.

"We need to find out what they want, whether it's just to take over, which wouldn't make much sense considering they've got their whole realm or whether they're searching for something specific," Loki suggests.

"The thing is that the underworld isn't evil. It's supposed to be safe and where we go when we die. Unless of course you're evil, and then you get sent there and get punished." Rival adds.

"Yes, that's true and while the majority of the inhabitants are dead supernaturals and humans, since the underworld is the afterlife for every realm, none of them would be able to cross back over into their original realms or any realm for that matter, or they risk having their souls unmade. While all of that is true, some creatures and supernaturals are born in the underworld and can travel between realms for various reasons. There's also a prison, it's where the worst of the worst get sent, and not all of them are dead." Grey explains.

Storm sits up suddenly, "What?"

"You heard me while I was imprisoned there; I heard whisperings of unrest, of the supernaturals born there wanting to be able to leave, something to do with the princes," Grey adds, an undercurrent of anger in his voice.

"The princes?" Killian asks. "Where is Hades? Shouldn't he be controlling them?"

Red and purple fire briefly flashes in his eyes so quickly that I'm not even sure that I really saw it.

“He hadn't been seen for a while, and they weren't sure what had happened to him. Some of the guards were actually really concerned about where he was because the princes were starting to change things for the worst, changes that would never get approved by Hades. I don't know much about him, but I do know that he's fair. He's not evil, not like the humans like to pretend he is. But the princes, they're power hungry, and would rather run the underworld under stricter rulings, allow the people born in the underworld free reign about whether they go to the other realms or not.” I try to explain what I picked up while I was there. Some days, on the days when Grey was being tortured, or he was in too bad of a shape to be conscious, I listened. The guards, or Hellier's as they're known in the Underworld, talked freely around the prisoners because there was no way that we were going to escape.

Grey tilts his head, “You picked up on a lot.”

“They talked around me because they knew I was going to die,” I reply with a shrug that makes the others growl in anger.

Chapter Four

“So, Hades is missing, the princes are in control and trying to control the different factions in the Shadowlands in order to gain access to the Fae Realm, and god knows why. Somehow we’re assuming that the Wraiths are involved as well, and we don’t have a clear motive as to why they want out of the Underworld and what their end game is,” Rival summarises.

“Yes, that about sums it up so far,” Grey replies and then frowns before his eyes suddenly widen. “There was this rumour going around, and I heard some of the torturers talking about it, while they thought I was out. There’s a way that they could permanently open a gateway between the Underworld and another realm. If this happened all the creatures that need to stay in the Underworld would be able to escape. Whereas the majority of the Underworld’s dead population would want to stay where they are, there are obviously some that would risk losing their souls by trying to get back to their realms.”

“Well, fabulous. I still don’t understand the reason why they’d want to?” Loki asks.

“There are creatures who are perpetually hungry, while in the Underworld, their hunger is controlled and dampened, but if they go anywhere else, that hunger will come back tenfold, and they will eat anything and everything in their path.” Grey replies.

“You know quite a lot about the Underworld,” Reaper points out.

Grey smiles, “You pick up on things when you’re down there for so long.”

“Do you know how they could open the gate?” Storm asks.

Grey shakes his head, “No, but I have an extensive library here and there are several people that we can talk to as well who might have the information we need.”

“I feel like we’re working with only two or three pieces of a thousand-piece puzzle.” Zev groans, and then adds, “I can’t see anything to do with it, not at the moment. I’m guessing that it’s a part of the trial, it could be classed as cheating if I could see everything and what path we should take.”

“That’s got to be a new feeling for you,” Loki smirks.

Zev rolls his eyes and flips him the bird, “Yeah fucker, and I don’t like it.”

“I didn’t read anything about the Fae Realm taking magic during the Warrior games. The whole point was that they used all their magic to the highest of their ability to prove that they were capable and worthy of protecting the realm in the up-and-coming war.” Rival replies and then adds, sounding frustrated, “Nothing I read makes sense, none of it. It’s almost like it’s been scripted, that only some of the real information is being given to us.”

“You’re right,” Grey answers.

“What?” Killian asks, and then rolls his eyes, “I feel like I’m saying that a lot during this conversation.”

I smile as I tap his arms, which are still wrapped around me.

“It was decided a long time ago, by the ruling families, that only certain information was going to be taught in the academy’s, a series of half-truths. In recent years, a select few members of the monarchy have taken that to new extremes.” Grey explains.

“How do you know that?” Mayhem asks, curiosity evident in his tone.

Grey winks at him, “I’m older than I look.”

“Right, I don’t know about you guys, but I’m exhausted, and there’s fuck all that we can do right now anyway,” I start, as I stand up and Kill reluctantly lets me go, “so why don’t we head to bed and start again in the morning. We can start by going through the archives that Grey has here and then we will hopefully have some more information and we can work out where to go from there.”

“Do you have the real information?” Rival practically pleads.

Grey smiles, “Yes, I have it all.”

I smile as they start a conversation about all things information and research, Zev moving closer to them both so that he can join in, it’s important to me that they all get on with Grey, and more than just because he’s one of my best friends, I have a gut feeling that he’s vital in the long run as well to all of us, not just to me.

I feel like there are several strings, threads that are being weaved by the fates, things that we don’t know and won’t until they deem it necessary that we know. Something big is coming.

The next morning, I’m awoken by a knock on my door. My room at the academy shocked me because it was truly mine, and I’d already gotten used to my usual living conditions at my father’s estate. Although this room was given to me by Grey, it wasn’t really mine, but the room at the academy was. I don’t know why it felt more like mine, most likely because I had just spent the last six months in absolute hell. Maybe it wasn’t the room itself; perhaps it was the people that made it seem more like home even then when they were all being assholes.

Shaking off my thoughts, since they aren’t making much sense anyway, I get up and walk to the door, pulling it open to find all of my men, I mean the others standing outside of my door. Reaper opens his mouth to speak and then snaps it closed as his eyes travel my whole body.

“What,” I snap, cranky thanks to my wondering thoughts, the slew of entirely inappropriate dreams I had last night and my distinct lack of coffee or stabbing anything recently. All of this doesn’t have me in the best of moods.

Zev clears his throat as his eyes snap up to meet mine, “Erm, you, you’re.”

“What he’s trying to say is you’re pant-less and looking sexy as fuck right now,” Loki smirks and gets smacked on the back of the head by Kill’s tail.

Glancing down, I shrug as I move back into the room, leaving the door open as I hunt around for my pants. As I pull them on, I ask, “What’s up?”

“We were just wondering how much you really trust Grey,” Storm starts.

I zip up my pants and turn around just in time to see all of their eyes move up from my ass; I smile, “I trust him with my life.”

Loki smacks Zev on the chest, “Tell her what you told us.”

Zev sighs, “I can’t see him. No matter how hard I tried, and I actually did the meditation we’re taught as kids to try and focus our magic. I still couldn’t see him.”

My eyebrows raise, “Huh, that’s odd.”

“Yeah, but as I said to the others, I also don’t get much on you guys, not like I do with everything else. That’s why I said yesterday that I think my abilities have been messed with thanks to the Warrior Games.” He explains.

“That would make sense. I mean, you’d have an incredible advantage if you did have access to all of your magic.” Killian replies.

“Also, has there ever been a Seer that’s been a part of the Warrior games, especially one that’s going to be the Seer for all the realms?” Loki asks, and we all look at Rival since he’s the one that not only did the most research on the Warrior Games but because he tends just to know these things.

Rival shrugs and rubs his hand across the back of his neck, “I have no idea. I don’t imagine that they were. Mostly because they like to have other people fight for them; I know for a fact that past Seers, whose magic is only as a Seer and who don’t have secondary magic, have not attended Black Onyx. Zev is somewhat of an anomaly.”

Zev smirks, “That’s me. I’ve never been one to do what I’m told or supposed to do, and like hell was going to let anyone else protect me.”

“This is why we get along, man,” Mayhem replies.

Before anyone else can weigh in on the conversation, Grey appears, standing next to me.

“Shit, man, do you have to keep doing that?” Loki exclaims.

Grey chuckles, “Sorry, I’ll try not to make you jump.”

Loki smirks, “Or wear a bell?”

Grey pretends to think about it, “Hmm, yes, that may be a way to go.”

Amused, I say, “I would pay to see you wear a cow bell.”

“Not going to happen, Farren,” he replies, and then continues, “I’ve set up some pastries and coffee in the library. I figured you’d all want to get a start.”

I don’t even bother replying as I walk out of the room and head in the direction of the library. He said coffee, and I need me some coffee.

The guys are quick on my heels, and we soon find ourselves in Grey’s extensive library. I already have a mug full of coffee in one hand and a pastry of some kind in the other.

“Wow,” Rival mutters, his tone hushed in awe as he gazes around at the rows and rows of books stacked all the way up to the doomed ceiling. He’s got an enormous fireplace, already lit with comfy armchairs dotted around where you can read. There are also huge tables where you can set out any research you find, in other words, it’s perfect for what we’re going to be doing here.

Storm frowns as he looks around, “Where do we even start? We have no idea how to open the gates to the Underworld, or if gates really exist since we know based on rumours that were heard in the Underworld, and they could’ve just been spouting bullshit for all we know.”

“We need to find anything that could mention opening the gates to the Underworld, and then we go from there,” Rival says as he starts to walk the aisles of books, and Grey follows as they begin to talk about the kinds of books that they need to find. We all follow and just stand there and hold our arms out, ready for them to place books in. Once none of us can possibly carry anymore, we venture back to the central part of the library and set our stuff up on the tables and get reading.

Now don't get me wrong, I actually like research and learning more about this world, but two hours later, with lots of coffee in my system, I'm done, I'm bored, I want to stab something, and I am not used to being this inactive for this fucking long.

Something inside of me is starting to yearn for violence, long for the fight, and I'm not entirely sure how I feel about it.

Slamming the book closed, Reaper gets up, “I can't find anything. I feel like we need a starting point of where to look, at least. Plus, I'm getting twitchy.”

“You're right. Why don't we go and see Monty? He's likely to have some more information for us, and we can use it as a base point. He most likely knows something about the Wraith situation and what's going on with the factions as well.” I suggest.

“Who's Monty?” Kill asks curiously.

“Someone I know,” I reply, looking at Grey to see if it's a good idea to go and see him or not.

Grey shrugs, “It can't hurt.”

“Wait, I found something,” Rival says, excitement threading through his tone as he leans further over the book that he's reading.

“Well?” Mayhem asks impatiently when his twin just carries on reading and doesn't actually explain to us what he's found.

Rival's head pops up as he smiles sheepishly, “Sorry, I got distracted. Okay, so according to this text, thousands of years ago, the Underworld was open to the rest of the realms, and

the supes born there could travel freely, much like we travel between worlds now. But, it came with issues; like Grey said yesterday, a certain few of those creatures began not to be able to control their hunger in any other realm apart from the Underworld. Not only that but some of the souls, the good ones, when they crossed back over not as a living being but more as a spirit, struggled to behave and follow the rules, which caused big problems. There were protocols in place that meant that they were not allowed to interact with anyone from their previous lives and all that bollocks.” Rival starts to explain.

Storm raises his eyebrow, “Bollocks?”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s important but not right now.” He runs his finger down the ancient-looking page and then grins, “Ah, here it is. Okay, so they had the rules but as with the supernaturals who found that they couldn’t control their hunger out of the Underworld, they suddenly noticed that the longer the souls spent in the Realms, the more they seemed to lose themselves, becoming ravenous and cannibalising their own kind, each other or pulling the souls from the beings that lived in the many Realms, souls that weren’t ready to die yet. It caused a massive problem in the Underworld and everywhere, actually, so much so that war almost broke out, and it was decided that the gates of the Underworld would be sealed shut and only Hades would be able to grant certain supes access to the Realms.”

“Wow, okay,” I reply, “that definitely wasn’t taught in any of the history books. At least none that I read.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Zev adds, “does it say how they locked the gates?”

“Yes, one second,” Rival says as he starts to flick through to try and find the right part of the book.

While he looks, Grey scrapes his silver and black hair back into the bun on top of his head, his eyes flashing with anger as he says, “It would make sense that they try to open the gates now that Hades is supposedly gone because there’s no way that Hades would allow his Realm to come under threat, and

that's what would happen. His people, his realm, everything would be destroyed. I don't think the Princes truly understand what the consequences would be if they opened the gate. They wouldn't just be letting the supes out of hell, for what purpose we don't know, but they'd be letting questionable supernaturals in."

"What do you mean?" Rival asks, temporarily distracted by Grey's words.

"I read somewhere, in a book that I probably shouldn't have had access to, that there are artefacts and treasures of all kinds kept in the Underworld to keep them safe to ensure that they don't end up in the wrong hands. They were extremely powerful things, talismans, jewels, books, the real history; it's all down there, and it's all potent. There are people in this realm especially that would love to get their hands on them and would cause the end of the world as we know it." He explains.

Loki frowns, "If all of that is there, then why can't the princes use it? Wouldn't that be easier than opening the gate?"

"In theory, yes, although we don't know what they have planned and why they want the gates open." Grey replies before adding, "According to the book though, the only person who knows the location of the vault and can access it is Hades. The princes won't be able to get any of it."

"Well, that's good news unless they know where Hades is and manage to overpower him somehow and get the location out of him," Reaper points out.

Rival immediately starts shaking his head, "Impossible, Hades is a god."

Mayhem hums in agreement, "Yes, but aren't the Princes demigods?"

"He's right," I reply, "and there are more of them, so they might be able to overpower him."

"It all comes back to us needing more information," Storm replies and then looks back at Rival, "did you find what you were looking for?"

“Oh yeah, sorry, I got distracted by the conversation. Anyway, according to this book, the key is literally a key. Look,” he turns the massive book around and shows us a picture of a key. The drawing is incredibly detailed, and the key looks ancient. The top has five intricately carved circles, each one with a different design and a precious stone in the middle, all surrounding the massive dark green gemstone in the middle of the top part of the key. Vines with skulls instead of leaves twist around it, wrapping down the shaft of the key until it gets to the intricately carved bit, it looks far more complicated than any skeleton key I’ve seen before, and like the vines, there’s several skulls carved into it.

“That’s a wicked looking key,” Loki grins, reaching out his hand and brushing his fingers over the detailed drawing.

“That’s the real size of it as well,” Rival adds.

“What? That’s the actual size of the key?” Zev asks.

Rival nods, “Yep.”

“It’s as big as my fucking forearm and wider!” Mayhem mutters.

“Maybe you should work out more, then,” Loki smirks, his eyes twinkling with mirth.

“Fuck off,” Mayhem retorts, using his magic to flick a tiny spear of ice in his direction and making him yelp.

“Stop it you two,” Storm orders and then turns to Rival who’s trying to stop himself from laughing, “I don’t suppose it tells you where it is, does it?”

Rival shakes his head, “Nope, but maybe this Monty person that Farren mentioned will be able to give us more information?”

They all look at me, and I shrug, “He knows a lot that he shouldn’t, so it’s possible.”

Grey stands up, “Alright, let’s get going and see what Monty has to say. You better fill them in on the way there, or Monty is going to eat them alive.”

“Literally?” Loki asks, sounding somewhat cautious.

Grey's smile is sharp, "Yes."

I chuckle as I get up, and we all start to make our way out of the room, "Aww, don't worry Loki, he will play with you first."

Chapter Five

“**A**lrigh, what do you mean by that?” Loki asks as he catches me up, and we make our way to the outside of the castle and to the carriage, “I don’t like the way that you worded that at all.”

“It wasn’t reassuring in the slightest, Farren,” Kill adds, with a smirk that says, despite his words he’s amused.

As we all get into the carriage, I smile, “Monty is special. He’s someone that I rescued from my father. You know how I showed you that I can create a decoy body and things that react and behave as the real body would?”

“Yeah,” Reaper replies, his eyes intrigued.

“Well, it was supposed to be a simple enough assassination or cover-up for me, my father was usually really cold and unfeeling, clinical when he sent me on these sorts of jobs. But this time, he was nervous and angry. Of course he didn’t tell me why but I knew that Monty was important. I had this gut feeling, one that told me he had to live.” I start to explain.

“I take it that you listened,” Zev says with a tiny thread of knowledge in his eyes.

“Yes, but when I got to his shop, people were already there. For some reason, instead of bringing my usual purple signature knives with me, I brought one of my rarer ones, the one with the teal gemstone. I’m guessing that you’ve all heard of the new Centre and her bonded, the one that freed the other Centres about six months before I came to the academy?”

“Yeah, she’s made quite a fucking splash in the Fae realm, although I can’t remember her name,” Rival replies with a smile.

“Sage,” Storm replies.

“That’s it. Anyway, she was there with her men. Looking for information, I used the Void to partially hide myself; they

should've never known that I was there. But I swear she saw me. There was something about her, something familiar, but that was impossible. I'd never met her before," I realise I'm getting off track, so I continue, "the voice told me to wait until Sage had gotten what she needed before I did my thing and pretended to kill Monty. The second that the voice told me to, I beheaded Monty, or at least I made it look like I did. They left, and I set up the illusion and brought Monty to the Shadowlands."

"The voice ensured that Monty gave the Centre the information she came for before you played your part?" Storm checks.

I nod, "Even if I hadn't, I don't think that I would've been able to carry on regardless. I think I would've been stopped."

Grey frowns, "You've never told me about the voice before."

I shrug, "I've only recently realised that I can rely on and trust others, and it was the last job I did before my father found me, and I had to go back."

His smile is full of what I can now recognise as affection, "Thank fuck that you've finally realised, Little Goddess."

"So the problem is that Monty is old, like really fucking old, he knows things that he probably shouldn't, and he likes to play games. This trip could be entirely unproductive, depending on whether he's feeling cooperative or not." I add, with an affectionate smile, he may be tricky but I like him a lot.

"And if he's not feeling cooperative?" Zev asks.

"Then we'll have to come back another day," Grey replies as the carriage comes to a stop outside a small shop. It's exactly the same as the store he had before, with thick dark wood beams and lead-lined glass that crisscrosses the glass. There's a small wooden sign that swings in a non-existent breeze. The store looks tiny, but that's a well-placed illusion; the inside is a lot bigger than the outside makes it appear.

As I step out of the carriage and onto the cobblestone pavement, I add, “We need to make sure that we leave before dark, or things are going to get hairy, and I’d like to keep our presence here as quiet as possible for as long as possible.”

“Good point,” Grey replies and the others know enough by now that they realise that it’s something to do with the Shadowlands itself and the dangers that live here.

As I push through the front door and the others follow me through, I hear Loki mutter in appreciation, “This place is amazing. There’s a shit ton of stuff here that’s rare as fuck.”

“And stupidly expensive too,” Mayhem mutters.

“I haven’t even heard of some of the things written on these labels,” Rival adds as he looks at the display case behind the dark wood engraved counter.

“Why thank you, I take great pride in the things I am able to acquire,” a disembodied voice mutters, and they all tense.

Monty suddenly appears in front of me, his wide toothy smile the thing to appear first before the rest of him appears, fabulously dressed as always. This time he’s wearing a dark blue velvet suit with a vine pattern embossed on it and a bright fuchsia pink shirt. His smile is broad as he pulls me in for a brief hug.

As he steps back, he says, “You’ve been here for two days and didn’t come to see me sooner. I’m offended, Farren darling.”

“How did you know?” Reaper asks.

Monty smiles, “The same way that I know a lot of things, Reaper, dear.”

“Just go with it, guys. You’re unlikely to be able to get a full answer out of him,” I add, speaking from experience.

“She’s not wrong,” Monty confirms, suddenly appearing perched on his desk.

“He’s as bad as you are with that popping in and out of existence thing,” Zev points out, talking to Grey.

Monty tuts, “Oh no, not quite. Grey’s popping in and out of existence is something else entirely.”

I share a look with the guys, I’m used to Monty’s complicated way of speaking, but any little tidbit of information he can give me about Grey will always intrigue me because he is a supernatural of such mystery, I mean I don’t even know what kind of supernatural he is, and I’m usually really good at recognising Supes, apart from the really rare ones, which means Grey is really rare and I want to know what he is.

I spent a long time with Grey, but I was dealing with the fresh torture that I had just endured for years, and I didn’t have the mental capacity to deal with the mystery of who Grey was. Now I do, and I’m curious as hell.

Grey shakes his head, a smile on his lips but a warning in his tone, “Monty.”

Monty rolls his eyes as he casually does a backflip off the counter and lands behind it, “Fine, Grey. Keep your secrets; it’s only a matter of time.”

Grey crosses his arms over his chest, his eyebrow raised, “Is that so?”

Monty just hums, “I sense that there’s a reason for your visit, so why don’t you fill me in.”

“We need to know about the key,” Storm replies.

Monty’s cat eyes narrow slightly before he tilts his head to the side and studies us all. “Hmmm, yes, I can see that.”

“So?” I question when he just stares at us and doesn’t bother giving us any information.

His grin turns slightly sinister, “You seek information from me, and I want to play so if you solve my riddle, then I will give you the information that you seek.”

I narrow my eyes, “And why do I feel like there’s a hidden catch with your offer.”

“Because there always is, that’s why,” Grey adds.

“Well, if you fail, then you don’t get the information, and I get something from each of you for my collection and my spells,” Monty replies, a crafty and cunning light entering his eyes.

“Alright,” Killian replies, starting to step forward to grasp Monty’s forearm in the handshake that will seal the deal.

Before he can, Monty is pulled into the air as a heavy presence suddenly encompasses all of us. Our weapons are instantly drawn as we try to find the threat, but it becomes clear pretty fucking quickly that the threat is focused on Monty, and although we stay alert, we don’t move as we watch it unfold.

Monty’s clothes whip around him in a wind that only affects him, as he stays pinned to the wall above the desk, reminding me of what happened in his shop in the autumn court, except the Centre Sage and her men aren’t here this time.

Now, isn’t that interesting?

“How many times, Monty? These women are not yours to play with.” A voice I recognise chimes through the room.

“Did you hear that?” I ask Zev who is closest to me.

He looks confused and then shakes his head, “No, Farren I don’t.”

“Fuck.” I hiss, turning my attention back to what’s happening with Monty.

“Alright, I’m sorry. I won’t play.” Monty gasps out, his hands clutching at the invisible force around his neck. His eyes however, they’re glued to me with a knowing light.

Musical laughter echoes throughout the room, “Good, now you will tell them exactly what they need to know at the moment, nothing more and nothing less, not yet.”

“Yes, I know,” Monty replies.

Suddenly the presence leaves, and we all breathe a sigh of relief. Monty straightens his suit and clears his throat as he watches me with a scrutinising gaze.

“Well, that was interesting,” Grey mutters, and I feel the heat of his gaze on me.

“I’ll say,” Rival replies.

“I seem to remember that I found you in a similar predicament when I saved you. Weren’t you trying to keep important information from Sage?” I ask.

Monty shrugs, “Not exactly. I was always going to tell them the information that they needed to know, but I wanted to play first to see if they were really up to their future.”

“Monty, I swear to everything stop beating around the bush, for fuck sake man,” I hear the melodic voice echo.

By this point, I am reasonably confident that I shouldn’t be able to hear her, but I can’t help my quiet chuckle, causing Monty’s eyes to once again land on me.

Grey

Farren shouldn’t be able to hear her. I always knew she was important, but just how important is apparently not something that she deemed necessary enough to tell me. I wish I could just lay everything out on the table and tell Farren exactly what I am. I know I haven’t been incredibly welcoming to her men, but I do like them; I’m just not too fond of the fact that they’ve got something that I can’t have. I can see the way that they look at her, she’s already got bonds with three of them, and I don’t think she knows exactly how extremely rare and precious those bonds are or what they mean.

Monty is as unaware as I am about how Farren can hear her, and that’s worrying and confusing because Monty knows everything far more than he should. I have no idea what it means, but I vow I will be there for her. Farren is under my protection, and as my magic returns to me, although it’s still not at full strength, I will protect her with everything that I am. I wouldn’t have survived the torment in the Underworld if it

wasn't for her, and I'm not entirely sure why she was allowed to stay in the cell near me. It was obvious that I found comfort in our conversation, and although we were careful about speaking when any of the Hellier's were around, there was an obvious bond between us.

I can see her curiosity growing about me, it was kept at bay when my magic was weaker, but it's growing now, and it won't be long until it's back at full strength, and then she's going to have questions, ones that I wish I could answer, but I am bound, literally, not to say certain things before the time is right and that pisses me the fuck off.

I would not be able to live with myself if she ever looked at me with hate in her eyes. I think that would be the only thing that could break me. Her.

That makes her extremely valuable to my many enemies, and if the Princes of the Underworld really are intending to make their way here or send their Hellier's here, then I want her as fucking far away from it as possible. Unfortunately, I am not pulling the strings, and fate has a different plan entirely.

"Come on, Monty, what can you tell us about the Key?" Farren demands, raising her eyebrow and looking so damn fucking sexy that I have to remind myself where I am and that she doesn't have any idea how I feel about her. Plus, she's got seven other men who are after her, and she doesn't even seem to realise.

"Yes, yes," Monty mutters, and then smiles with genuine affection, "you know I think you may be my favourite."

Farren does this sexy little half-smirk, crosses her arms over her chest and raises her eyebrow as she asks, "Aw Monts, I'm flattered; your favourite what?"

Monty shrugs, "In time," he then quickly changes the subject, "the location of the key is not exactly a simple question to answer."

Storm sighs, clearly getting fed up with the non-answers now, "And why is that?"

“Well, my frowny friend, because it’s in pieces. It was broken up to protect it so that no one could open the gates. The pieces were then scattered.” Monty explains.

“Any idea where?” Rival asks.

“Well, there are at least two pieces in the Shadowlands, that I do know. However, their exact locations I’m not sure of.”

Zev sighs, “Great, so we could potentially get two of the key pieces, but with the Shadowlands locked down, we won’t be able to get to the rest.”

“Which means we need to find out why the Shadowlands is locked down and fix it so that we can get to the rest of the pieces before the Princes do.” Killian points out.

“I’d suggest taking it one thing at a time. Find the first piece,” Monty suggests knowingly, “I assume that you all know about the Wraith problem?”

“Yes,” Loki replies, his eyes on a particularly wicked-looking sword.

“Then I would suggest that you find out why they are suddenly mobilising and what their targets have in common,” Monty replies.

“Alright, Monty, we hear you,” I reply. “Do you have any idea where the first piece of the key could be?”

“I only know the location of one piece, but if you found that piece, there should be clues to the next piece’s location.” Monty replies and then looks directly at Farren, “The first piece is in your house.”

Farren jolts slightly as all of her men look at her in shock, “I assume you mean my home here?”

“Yes, that’s the one. The only one that truly feels like home to you, is it not?” Monty replies. When Farren just stares him down, he chuckles and adds, “There is a room that you are unaware of, a library that even the previous few owners were not aware of its existence.”

“I’ve been through that house multiple times. I’ve scoured it while I’ve been trying to decide how I want it restored and

showed it the supes working on it, hell Grey's walked it with me too and neither of us has found any sign of a hidden room, let alone a fucking library. I even used my magic to scout it out."

"Yes, you did, but you didn't know what you were specifically searching for. If you go back and set your magic on the hunt for the library, you'll find it." Monty replies.

"Is that all the information you have?" Mayhem asks.

Farren's eyes narrow as Monty replies, "For now. I would suggest that you go to the house tomorrow though; it's getting dark."

"Ah shit," I curse. "Thank you, you're right. We'd better go."

Farren says goodbye to Monty, and we all leave the shop; the once bustling streets are now silent as everyone stays inside, knowing that's where they're safest at the moment. We all get back into the carriage, and as soon as the door shuts behind everyone they turn to Farren.

"You have a house here?" Rival asks.

Farren sighs, "Yes, but I couldn't take you there when we first arrived. Not only did we need Grey's help to find out what was really going on in the Shadowlands, but the house is under renovation. It's not fit to live in, and the renovations didn't continue when I had to leave."

Storm's eyes narrow as he studies her, "You weren't going to leave the Shadowlands, were you?"

Killian sits forward, hurt in his gaze as he waits for her answer.

"No, I wasn't," she replies honestly, "this place feels like home. It's dark and deadly; nothing is hidden behind rose-tinted glasses. What you see is usually what you get. I tried to find Kill when it was safe for me to do so," she meets Killian's eyes, "but like I said I couldn't get through to you."

"I know, Darlin'. We had a pact," he opens his arms for her, and she willingly goes, taking comfort in him as they both

seem to relax with the contact.

Their bond is stronger than the ones she has with the others, it's been nurtured. I tilt my head slightly as I study them. It's not fully cemented yet, though. I thought I'd feel anger or jealousy at seeing her in the arms of another, but I don't. I'm just glad that she's getting comfort; it's a confusing feeling and one that I'm not used to, although I have never felt about anyone the way I feel about Farren. She's the light in the dark.

Chapter Six

Farren

The carriage suddenly speeds up, and the horses start to neigh in distress and anger. Something is out there that they don't like, I can feel them begin to take off, and then we hit the ground with a bang.

“What the fuck was that?” Loki asks as we come to a halt, his eyes flashing red as he lifts his nose and sniffs the air.

“We've got a problem,” Grey announces.

“No shit Sherlock,” I mutter sarcastically.

Grey gives me a stern look, “Farren, now is not that time.”

“Bite me,” I mutter back, with a smirk as I turn on Kill's lap and glance out the window and into the dark night.

“Where?” Grey replies, with heated amusement in his tone.

“We can come back to this later,” Loki adds, and I turn to look at him curiously, “I for one am very keen to find out where we are going to bite Farren, but right now we have a situation.”

It's my turn to become turned the fuck on as I watch Grey's lips twist into an upside-down smile as both of his eyebrows raise, “We?”

“Oh yeah, Grey, if you're biting, we're sharing,” Loki replies, looking at me with so much heat in his gaze that I almost launch myself at him.

“I think I could live with that,” Grey surprisingly replies. I had no idea he thought of me even vaguely like the way that he's suggesting.

“Guys, as much as this is entertaining, and I'm looking forward to seeing how this plays out with us,” Mayhem starts,

his eyes on me, “I think we need to focus on what is happening outside of the carriage right now.”

Fucking hell, I think my brain has short-circuited. All of them, even Zev, are watching me with desire in their eyes as I don't bother to hide my reaction to what's going on right now. I don't think I've been this turned on for a while, and when Kill kisses my neck in the spot that he knows drives me fucking wild, I almost throw caution to the wind and strip them right there. However, the sound of one of the horses crying out in pain has me jumping to my feet and heading out of the door of the carriage before anyone can fucking stop me.

“Farren, for fuck sake!” Storm yells after me.

I take in the scene in seconds. The horses are thrashing around in their harnesses, unable to take off thanks to the magic thrown over the carriage like rope, keeping it in place. Drawing my sword, I head for the horse that made the sound of pain, slicing the harnesses free from the others on the way so that they can escape. It's unsurprising that the poor horse is panicked; it has a fucking Wraith Vamp stuck to its neck. Fortunately for me, the Wraith is so deep in its feeding frenzy that it doesn't notice me approaching. I call on my air magic and cut off his air supply, making him rip his fangs free from the Fae horse as he grasps at his throat.

Without wasting any time, I swing, my sword slicing through his neck like fucking butter, and his head hits the ground with a thump.

“Loki, can you see if you can help the horse?” I call out and then add, “There's more. I can feel them.”

“You can feel them?” Grey asks.

“There's no time to explain now,” I roll my eyes.

Loki heads straight for the horse and starts healing it, and I watch Grey's eyes widen in interest. Oh, he's going to have questions about that for sure. Vampires aren't supposed to be able to heal, but Loki isn't a typical vampire; he's so much more, and I know that I don't even know half of what he is capable of.

There's no more time for talking as we find ourselves and the carriage surrounded by five wraiths. That doesn't sound like a lot considering there's more of us than there is of them, but these five are higher-classed Wraiths meaning they're strong as fuck.

A sharp smile crosses my face, and I spin my sword in my hand; I love this. It's a part of me; I fucking love it.

Their attack is coordinated, and as I fight one, our blades clanging against each other, I realise that there's an intelligence in his eyes that I haven't noticed in any Wraiths eyes before it makes me curious. That is until he drops the glamour he had; instead of a dark blue, six-foot-tall supe with dark wings and sparking fingertips, he transforms. He's still dark blue, but he's bigger and taller than he was before; his mouth is now a gaping maw with rows of jagged teeth, and his eyes have become just dark empty pits.

He's a Wraith, but he's not a supe from the Fae realm or any of the others actually, he's a supe from the Underworld, and he shouldn't be here.

"At least two of them are from the Underworld; if you see black fire, do not try to counter it, it's hellfire!" Grey suddenly calls out in warning just as he ducks, and a stream of said fire blasts right where his head was moments ago.

I'm instantly distracted as the blue supe opens his mouth big enough that he can swallow me whole, and that's just fucking disturbing. It only gets worse from there when he appears to grow two extra arms, already equipped with swords.

I call my other sword to me and dance around the fucker, trusting that the others are well enough equipped to handle themselves. I spin around him and then dart forward, slicing one of his arms and making him cry out in pain and anger.

To my frustration, though, it doesn't take him long to grow it back, and because I have no experience with this kind of supe, I figure that cutting its head off might be the best way to ensure that he dies. If in doubt, behead the fucker.

The trouble is he's fast and skilled, so getting to his head is going to be more difficult than I'd anticipated. Fucking fun though.

I don't manage to block one of the swords coming for me quickly enough, and as I block the other two moving toward me another one aims for my stomach, and I have to jump backwards in order to avoid being stabbed in the gut, but in doing so I don't block the fourth sword in time, and I find myself with searing agony shooting through my side. That fucking sword sliced straight through my damn armour. Now I'm fucking pissed. I push away the pain, my magic starting to stir, not my usual magic but the magic that has slowly been building over the last few weeks.

The Wraith charges for me, and I let that magic, that's mine but I'm not familiar with, fill me. The power it gives me instantly revitalises me and I feel the best I've felt in years. Almost like when I first go into the Void, but more somehow. The world slows, and I watch as he comes for me, tilting my head as he moves like he's stuck in quicksand; it's intriguing, and I study him more closely as I walk around him. I don't know what prompted me to do this, but I'm damn glad that I did because on the back of his neck, just peeking out from the collar of his shirt, is a brand of sorts. It looks like it's been burned into his skin, and fairly recently too. I don't recognise it, but I make note of it and hope that I can recreate it later for the others and that one of them recognises it, or we can research it in Grey's extensive library.

Because he's moving so slowly, I know exactly where I need to strike to cut off his head. As I attempt to move, I briefly wonder if I'm going to be moving as slowly as he is, if maybe this new magic of mine is slowing down time somehow, although that would bring up even more questions because I'm unsure what kind of supernatural has that gift which means I'm at even more of a loss about where this magic is coming from.

I force myself away from my wayward thoughts; there will be plenty of time to worry about my magic later, but right now, I'm just grateful. Taking the opportunity to properly disarm

him, since the whole beheading thing might not end the fucker, I use both my swords and disarm him, literally, chuckling as I watch his features slowly turn from shock to pain. It's kind of disturbing watching him grow his arms back in slow motion though, and since I'm now hungry and bored as fuck I place my swords at his neck and, using a scissoring motion, I slice through it easily. Watching as it slowly falls to the floor, I'm somewhat relieved when both his head and his body go up in the black hellfire that Grey warned us about.

I expected everything to go back to real-time, but as I look around at the others, I see that they're all still fighting in slow motion. I figure I may as well help them while this lasts. I'm kind of worried that I won't be able to go back to real-time, but I can worry about that after I've helped the others. I casually walk over to where Loki and Rival are fighting a particularly big fucker. I'm hoping that the same premise of beheading applies here as well, and I slice the head off, enjoying the looks of surprise and confusion on their faces. I make my way around all of the other Wraiths, realising that I must have only been in this state for a minute or so if that.

Once all the Wraiths are taken care of, I again, hope that I'll go back to normal, but when I don't I start to panic slightly. It's not helped when the guys clearly begin panicking because they can't find me anywhere.

I can hear what they're saying, but it's almost like hearing an echo of the sound with the words slightly drawn out.

"Farren?" Loki asks, an edge of panic entering his tone as he looks around.

"Fuck," Storm curses harshly.

They all start to double-check the bodies on the floor, and when they don't find me among them, they all look towards the surrounding woods.

"Maybe one of them took her?" Mayhem asks as he strides ahead and into the tree line.

"That wouldn't make sense though. Wraiths don't kidnap; they kill and eat; that's the extent of their logic. Not only that

but who the fuck ended them?”

Killian growls, “No fucking idea.”

“Guy’s I’m right here, and you should really go back to the carriage before more come.” I try to tell them, but other than Reaper sticking his finger in his ear, no one hears me.

“Did you guys hear that?” Reaper asks.

“Hear what?” Zev asks.

“Like a high pitch whine?” he replies.

Kill shakes his head, “Nope, I didn’t hear anything.”

“Are you picking anything up, Kill? Any hint about where she might be?” Grey asks, and my interest is once again peaked. No one told him what Kill could do, and I know I sure as hell didn’t. He always has known more than he should, kind of like Monty.

“I haven’t seen anything,” Kill replies suspiciously and then turns to Zev, “what about you?”

Grey tilts his head curiously, almost as if, for some reason, despite the fact that he knew about Kill’s gift, he doesn’t know about Zev’s. It’s quite interesting seeing them all like this, although I’ve had enough now, and I’m starting to get worried that something is going to find them and start hunting if they aren’t careful. The Wraiths are the least of their worries; there are worse things that hunt in the night.

Zev’s eyes flash white as he calls on his gift, and then he frowns, “I can’t fucking see anything.”

“Wait, your sight is as strong as Killian’s?” Grey asks, seeming confused.

The guys all share a look, and I smile as they tell him the truth, recognising it as the first step in the guys actually trusting Grey.

Zev nods, “My gift is stronger; I’m the next head Seer.”

Grey’s eyes widen, “Okay, that I was not expecting. How are you on their team? How are you at the academy?”

Storm huffs in annoyance, “We can explain all of that later, but at the moment, I’m more concerned about Farren and where the fuck she is.”

Grey frowns, “Fuck, yes. I’m sorry. It’s just rare that things can catch me off guard.” He then adds, “Three of you are connected with her, are you not? Check your bonds; they should tell you at least if she’s safe or not from her emotions.”

“Fuck, why didn’t we think of that!” Loki curses, “And we’ll come back to how you know we’re connected later.”

I watch as Loki, Kill and Storm all seem to concentrate and then, as one, frown, which I don’t understand because I’m trying to project happiness; I’m fucking okay but slightly freaking out, feelings down my bond lines to them. I even try to use my stronger connection with Kill to speak to him, like I usually can, wondering why I didn’t try to before, but I can’t seem to get through.

“I can feel her,” Kill mutters, “but not very well, like it’s muffled, like I’m trying to get a read on the bond line through several layers of gauze.”

“I can’t find her at all,” Storm practically growls.

Loki shakes his head, “Me neither.”

“That’s because her bond is stronger with Killian,” Zev replies, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Well, is she okay?” Mayhem asks, sharing a concerned look with Rival.

“I think so,” Killian replies.

While they discuss shit, standing in the middle of the fucking woods, in the dark while there are things most likely hunting them, I start pacing. This whole conversation has been in slow motion, with the words filtering across this weird divide clearly but slowly, and it’s starting to give me a headache now.

“Alright, I need everything to go back to normal now before I really start to panic,” I mutter out loud.

My fingers spark with my black and purple magic, reacting to my agitation but not helping me out of this predicament. How does this new magic work? When your magic comes in when you are a kid, there's obviously an adjustment period. Still, it's relatively easy to work out how the magic works, but with this, I have no idea. Whereas I thought that I must've been moving too quickly for the Wraiths or anyone to see, I am now starting to believe that it's not the case because I'm not fucking moving, and they can't see me.

A sudden thought occurs to me, the Wraith couldn't see me, but I could interact with him, so maybe I can interact with the guys. Deciding to test my theory, I poke Killian's cheek, making him jump and draw his weapon.

"Whoa, what's wrong, mate?" Loki asks, drawing his own weapon.

"Something poked my cheek," Kill explains.

"What?" Reaper exclaims, looking at him like he's lost his mind, which despite the seriousness of the situation, I find it highly amusing, so I poke his cheek as well. "Alright, something just poked me too."

Loki smirks, "Poked you where?"

Grey chuckles and holds his hand up for Loki to fist bump, which he does and then immediately ends up on the end of one of Reaper's death glares.

"You two, focus," Storm snaps and to my shock, even Grey snaps his mouth closed. "You both got poked? Not stabbed or hurt?"

"Clearly not," Grey answers sarcastically.

While they devolve into another argument, I try to think about how I can make this work for my benefit. They can feel me poke them, which means they should be able to feel something else I do, but what else can I do without them thinking that they're being messed with by some different kind of creature who wants to play with them before it kills them, which is what they're currently discussing.

An idea slowly begins to form, but for it to work, it needs to be with one of them that knows me better than any of the others. My eyes land on Kill, and I pray that he realises it's me before he either uses his magic on me or stabs me with something. I don't see another way out of this though, I try one last time to use the bond lines to talk to Kill, but I can't get through.

I could really do with that voice that comes out of fucking nowhere making an appearance and telling me how to fix this, but of course the one time that I actually want it to talk to me, there's no fucking signs of it. I am also aware that I heard the other side of the conversation with Monty, and I don't think I was supposed to. None of the others did, and now that I'm thinking about them within the same thought process, I am reasonably sure that the voices are one and the same.

I'm kind of enjoying the thrill of this, which I know I probably shouldn't be because if I end up stuck like this then that's more than just a little problem. However, I'm just a little bit fucked up, and this presents me with a challenge I haven't had for a while. I like figuring things out, the reason why and how and all that. In another life, I think I would've been a researcher or an academic, maybe. I love the fight too much though.

Okay, enough stalling, Farren. It's now or never.

I roll my neck and shake out my arms like I'm one of those sports people that play with balls in the human realm and then run and jump at Kill, who is in the middle of a damn sentence. This better fucking work, or I'm going to be stabbed at least once.

Chapter Seven

Storm

We're getting nowhere, and I'm seriously getting concerned about where the fuck Farren is and why we can't feel her through the bond. Although I know why I can't feel the damn bond, I've had it for just over a fucking day. I have no idea how it works, and she's kept her end blocked from me most of the time. I'm trying not to let my insecurities get a hold of me and convince me that she's blocking me because she doesn't want the bond with me.

I wouldn't blame her, I'm not exactly the best person to be tied to, and I have no idea what this bond entails; if I'm honest, I don't think she does either. I spoke to Kill last night after everyone had gone to bed, and all we know is that it's not the warrior bond or the Centre bond; it's something different, and it appears that Kill has done some research on it and can't find anything similar in any documentation.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when Killian stumbles back suddenly, almost like a force has hit him.

"What the fuck," he curses before he gets thoroughly distracted, and we all stare in shock as Farren suddenly appears, legs wrapped around his waist and lips thoroughly glued to Kill's.

"Farren?" Grey asks, shock colouring his tone.

Farren pulls back, "Oh, thank fuck, you can see me now?"

"See you now?" I ask, trying not to get distracted by the way she's clinging to Kill and how much I wish that she was clinging to me.

"I've been here the whole time, I'll explain later, but right now, we really need to go before something worse than the Wraiths find us." She says urgently.

As soon as she gets down off Killian, she disappears again.

“Fuck where did she go this time?” Zev asks, searching the surrounding area.

“I’m right here,” she replies and suddenly appears with her arm wrapped around Loki’s waist this time. “Apparently, I can’t let go of one of you, or you can’t fucking see me again.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Grey mutters, “Farren’s right; we need to get out of here. I’m surprised something hasn’t found us already.” Grey calls his horses, “We better get back to the carriage and take the ropes off.”

We all make our way back to it and make quick work of getting rid of the ropes just in time for the horses to show up. We help to get them back in their harnesses, and then because they all have missing pieces, because we cut them loose to save them from the Wraiths, Kill and I use our shadows as kind of ropes to keep them in place. Fortunately for us, Fae horses are intelligent, and they know that we’re not trying to harm them, so they don’t put up too much fuss.

“Just in time,” Farren mutters as we take off, and she disappears again before reappearing, this time on my lap. While the others all start talking about the creature that’s just run out of the woods, she turns to me, “I can sit with someone else if you want me to. It just seems that I can only stay here and be solid if I touch one of you. I figure it works best with one of you that I have a bond with.”

She sounds so unsure of herself, so unlike the Farren that I’ve become used to, and I know that it’s because of me, because of how I treated her. We’ve talked it out, and ever since the whole changing room fuck up we’ve been better, but clearly how I treated her before has left its mark. She’s still unsure about what I want, and it probably doesn’t help that I kissed her, and then we got thrown into this shit show immediately after.

I don’t want her to question whether I’m going to go back to how I was behaving before, my arms wrap around her as she starts to stand up, and she settles back down. I keep my voice low, wanting this to be ours, “Listen closely, there is nowhere

I'd rather be than right here. I don't think I've properly apologised for what I put you through," she starts to make a noise, and I add, "Nope, let me finish I am truly sorry for hurting you, and I will do whatever I can to make it up to you."

Farren is silent, and it makes me nervous as hell. I'm not used to actually showing my feelings, and I'm feeling vulnerable as shit. She turns around on my lap so she's straddling me and puts a hand on my face.

"I forgive you," she says and then grins "but don't stop fighting me. I like it when you give me a run for my money."

I smirk, "You can bet your ass I'll keep fighting you. It's one of my favourite things to do." I pull her closer and then frown as she winces like she's in pain, "what's wrong?"

"I, erm," she starts, seemingly unsure of what just happened. She pulls aside her jacket and then frowns as she sees the still wet blood, "that shouldn't still be there."

"You're hurt!" I exclaim and instantly have the attention of all the other men in the carriage just as we start our descent down into the castle grounds.

"What the fuck, Farren!" Grey exclaims.

Farren gives Grey an unimpressed look that makes me smile, "Don't you start that shit with me. It happened when we were fighting the Wraiths, just before my magic kicked in. It should be healed by now."

"Maybe it's got something to do with the magic?" Rival suggests and then adds, "What exactly did it do? Make you invisible?"

Farren shakes her head, "Not exactly."

"Let's get you inside, and then you can explain. My wards are good, but I'm not willing to test it right now," Grey mutters.

We all get out, and I stand up with Farren still in my arms as we all make our way into the deceptive castle.

“I can walk, you know, Storm. I fought off the Wraiths fine enough,” Farren tells me.

I don't bother replying because there's no way that I'm going to put her down knowing that she's in pain and she hasn't healed when she should have, which is why I simply growl, a sound that most people would be scared of, but she isn't most people, she just smiles softly like I've done something cute, which is infuriating but for some reason makes me want to smile.

We head into one of the many comfy lounges that this castle has, and as I go to sit on the sofa, Farren starts wriggling in my arms.

“What?” I ask her, my eyebrow raised.

“I'm not risking getting blood on that sofa. It's fucking white.” She protests.

I roll my eyes, “I'll buy him a new one, not that I think it would bother Grey in the slightest. He's more interested in making sure you're okay than if his sofa is fucking stained.”

“He's not wrong,” Grey agrees readily and then adds, “Now, explain to us exactly what your magic is doing.”

Farren narrows her eyes at Grey, she really doesn't like being told what to do, and since she admitted that she likes the fight with me, I think I just found a new way to ruffle her feathers.

Finally, after her stare-off with Grey, she sighs and starts to explain, “It's new. My magic has never done anything like this before. It slowed everything down, or at least I thought that's what I was doing. I thought everything looked like it was in slow motion because I was moving so fast.”

When she pauses, looking confused, Zev asks, “But?”

“But I was standing still next to you guys while you were talking, and you still couldn't see me. You guys were still in slow motion as well, and your words were like drawn out; I tried to talk to you, but only Reaper heard and thought it was a high pitched squeak.”

“And if you let go of one of us, then you disappear and everything goes in slow motion for you again?” Grey asks.

“Yes, but I’m not sure if it’s something to do with the bonds, I’ve only tried with those I’m bonded to,” Farren replies.

“Come here?” Rival suggests, “just to test the theory.”

I reluctantly let Farren go, and she instantly disappears before reappearing, sitting on Rival’s lap. His arms wrap around her, and she melts into him like she does all of us.

“I guess it must be all of you then,” Farren shrugs.

“I think we need to check out your wound and find out why you aren’t healing like you should be,” Mayhem suggests.

Farren stay’s sitting on Rival’s lap and turns slightly so that she can lift up her shirt and show us the slice on her side. She frowns, “It’s just a little nick. It should have been sealed by now.”

“Okay, one, that’s not fucking small, Farren,” Reaper’s deep voice rumbles throughout the room as he moves closer.

He’s not wrong; the little nick, as Farren referred to it, is actually six inches long and relatively deep. It also looks like it’s just been done. There’s not even been an attempt for it to heal. I’m not even sure how she’s been moving around with it and not showing that she’s in pain, I had my arm wrapped around her tightly, and she only briefly winced once.

The strength she has is insane and awe-inspiring.

“Loki, why don’t you see if you can heal her while she’s sitting on Rival’s lap,” I ask him.

He looks over to Farren, “Is that okay, Love?”

“Yeah, of course. Have at it.” She replies.

Loki makes his way over and takes a deep breath as he holds his hands over the wound. Unlike when he used to heal when we were kids, his eyes glow bright green. In fact, his whole body begins to glow. The power that he’s kicking off is insane and so much more than it used to be. His gift is

growing, and Farren's gifts are obviously changing and growing too. It's concerning.

"Well?" I ask when the glow finally starts to diminish.

Farren looks down at her side which still looks red raw, and bloody. "Nope, still there. Thank you for trying though."

Loki frowns as he sits back on his heels, "Maybe my magic just wasn't strong enough?"

Zev snorts, "No way mate, your magic signature was off the fucking charts. There's no way you weren't strong enough. There has to be something else going on."

"Zev's right." Grey agrees and then adds, "Colour me impressed that you can heal as a vampire; that's incredibly rare."

Loki smiles, "Thanks, man."

"Alright, so what do we do now? No offence but hanging onto you guys is going to become awkward as hell when I need to pee." Farren announces.

"Good point," Reaper replies, looking thoughtful.

"Have you tried going into the Void to heal?" Loki asks, and I almost smack myself. Why didn't I think of that?

"No, I haven't," she frowns.

"I think that maybe this new magic that's flowing through you is stopping you from healing, and maybe going into the Void will reset you and put it all back to normal," Rival suggests.

Farren shrugs, "It's worth a try."

We all watch as she summons her magic and then steps through the portal and into the Void, disappearing.

"I really hope this works because I've got no idea how to help her otherwise," I mutter.

"Me too," Reaper replies, staring worriedly at the space that she disappeared from.

“We’ll have to stitch her up the way we would the lesser supes who don’t heal as quickly,” Zev reminds us.

We all share a look, and then Loki says, “I haven’t stitched anyone up for a while, but I’m fairly sure I can remember how.”

Zev sighs and runs his hand through his hair as shadows cross his eyes, “I can stitch her up, but hopefully, going into the Void will heal her and sort her magic out. I haven’t seen anything that would explain this, and what I have seen is not coming yet, and I can’t tell you.”

Zev looks up at us, frown lines dimpling his forehead; he looks genuinely concerned that we’re going to have a go at him or get mad.

“Mate, really, it’s okay. We get it; we know if you could tell us you would,” Mayhem reassures him and claps him on the shoulder.

“Seriously?” he asks.

“Of course,” I reply, “we don’t just say shit for no reason.”

“Thanks,” Zev replies.

“Has she been gone for longer than usual?” Grey asks, looking worried.

We share a look, and Kill replies, “No, she hasn’t, but shouldn’t you know that? You were with her for a long time. She must have travelled the Void.”

Grey shakes his head, “She didn’t like using it, she had me watch out for her when she went in to find Killian, but she refused to go in when she needed healing, even just after we escaped the Underworld. She said it would be bad.”

My eyes widen; I’m an idiot; I’d forgotten what happens when she gets back from the Void after healing. Standing up, the others do the same as the same thing occurs to them.

“Here’s the deal,” Killian starts as Grey’s eyes ping between us all, and Zev looks just as confused. He fits in so well with us that it’s like he’s been one of us for years, and I’ve got to

remember that it's actually been a lot less time than that, and he doesn't know some of the things that make us who we are.

"What's going on?" Zev asks.

"She's only gone into the Void in front of us once because it was that or she died. When she came out, she was supercharged, and she needed to fight out that extra energy. We helped her do it the best we could, but it took three of us to do it, so when she comes out, she's going to need our help to fight it out of her until she calms down." Killian carries on explaining.

"So that's what she meant," Grey mutters, and although his words could fit Farren and what she told him, I just have this feeling that he's talking about someone else.

He doesn't concern me in the sense that I know I don't need to worry about Farren or any of us being in danger from him, and I also know that he's a decent supernatural; my instincts tell me that much. However, my instincts also tell me that he's hiding something, he's not telling us everything, and I can't get a read on what kind of supe he is, so that does make me cautious and more observant.

"We're going to have to be on our guard. With her magic acting up as well, we have no idea how she's going to come out of the Void. If she's healed, then the chances are that she's coming out practically overflowing with magic, but she could be even stronger with her magic playing up." Rival points out as we all get ready for her to reappear.

"Good point, okay, so this is the order, Kill and I first, with Reaper and Loki next, then Rival and Mayhem," I start to order and then look at Grey and Zev, "Grey, we don't know enough about your magic to know how well you'll do against her so your last and Zev ..."

Zev smirks as he interrupts me, "Yeah, I've fought Farren when she wasn't all jacked up with magic from the Void. I'm all for you guys wearing her out first before she gets to me. Especially since my visions seem to be on the fritz."

I smile as Loki snorts in amusement.

There's no more time for talk as Farren comes through the Void.

"Whoa, holy shit," Zev mutters as he gets a good look at her.

"Fucking stunning," Grey adds.

"She didn't come out looking like that last time. I think shit's about to get real." Mayhem mutters.

We all stay on guard as we watch a floating, glowing Farren, a wind that only affects her winding her hair around in its own breeze as her eyes glow black like they did when we fought the Void beast.

Killian steps closer, "Darlin', did it heal you?"

"Yes," she replies, her voice sounding more melodic and not as husky as usual.

"Do you need to fight out the extra energy, Love?" Loki asks.

She hesitates slightly and then nods, "It's stronger than it ever has been."

"It's okay, we've got you, Farren," Zev reassures her.

She suddenly charges straight towards me, and I let my shadows free; I hold back but not by much because I know how strong she is and holding back is just going to get me in trouble and isn't going to do fuck all to wear her out, and that's the end game, wearing her out before she hurts herself or seriously hurts someone else.

Killian and I fight together while the others stay back, and Reaper and Loki hold Zev and Grey back, explaining that we're not hurting her and that she needs this. I suddenly find myself flying across the room as a thread of black and purple magic slams me into the wall cracking the plaster and making me groan as I crumple to the floor. She broke my ribs with that hit.

"Loki, in," I order, and he dives in immediately, no questions asked.

While Loki and Kill are wearing her out, exchanging normal blows as well as magical ones, Mayhem and Rival make their way over to me while Grey, Zev and Reaper switch between watching Farren fight with shock colouring their faces and looking at me to check I'm okay.

Chapter Eight

Storm

“Are you okay, mate?” Zev asks from the other side of the room.

“Yeah, I’m good. She broke a couple of ribs; they’re healing,” I reply.

Rival helps me stand, “Is she stronger than the last time?”

I nod my head and wince slightly as I feel the bones knot back together, “Definitely, it might take all of us to help her this time.”

We make our way back over to the others just as Killian ducks away from a particularly vicious strike, and Reaper strides in, giving him an out which he gladly takes.

“You okay?” I ask Kill as he walks over to us, a slight limp in his step.

“Yeah, I haven’t had a fight like that for far too long. It’s fucking hard to fight her. I hate it; I don’t want to hurt her.” He replies, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning heavily as he watches Reaper and Loki fight her.

“I know. It goes against everything I am,” Mayhem replies.

I clench my fist, “My shadows want out, but they want to help her; I’m not sure my magic understands that we are helping her.”

“This is hard to watch,” Grey adds, wincing.

“It is, but really watch them. They aren’t hurting her; surely you’ve seen Farren fight?” Rival asks.

“Yes,” Grey replies.

“She can handle this, and she isn’t hurting them either, not really. We’re just trying to wear her out.” I try to assure him,

and he nods.

What he says next has me even more curious than I was before.

“I’m not used to actually caring,” he mutters, his eyes meeting mine.

I smile, “Trust me man, I know. Farren has that effect on people.” I see that Loki is starting to tire, and Ryu is looking like he wants to make an appearance, so I put Mayhem and Rival in.

We watch as they do something I haven’t seen before, and something I don’t think they knew they could do, as their magic combines and strikes near Farren, making her jump and leap around, trying to escape and using her magic to do so. Her glow is starting to dim, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Grey’s eyes suddenly widen, and he says, “I think I know a spell that we could perform that would drain her magic, not completely, but enough that she doesn’t need to fight it out any more.”

“That’s a great idea. Let’s do it.” Zev replies, and from the tension in his tone, I can tell that he’s finding this as hard as we are.

“Do you need any ingredients for it?” Rival asks.

“No, but there is a problem. With the amount of power that she’s kicking off, we’re going to need to be touching her at the same time.” Grey explains.

“She managed to stop herself and reply to me when she first came out, and she’s fought off enough that the glow she’s got going on is dimming. She might be able to stop long enough for us to get our hands on her.” Kill replies thoughtfully.

I shrug, “It’s worth a try.”

“Well, you’re more likely to get a response from her and make her listen than we are,” Rival smirks.

I sigh. I highly doubt that she’s going to listen to me, “Farren! Stop for a second; we’ve got a solution.”

Shockingly she freezes rigidly to the spot, her whole body tense and her eyes flashing with fire, “Hurry up, I’m not going to be able to stop for long.”

We all rush forward and cautiously lay a hand on her anywhere we can. Fortunately, Rival and Mayhem quickly catch on to what we’re doing and follow our lead, although they look seriously confused.

“Okay, repeat after me,” Grey orders urgently and then in a language that I have never heard before and we try our best to repeat what he’s saying.

It’s a pretty big show of trust that we’re putting in him right now, considering that Farren is special to all of us.

A massive rush of power suddenly overcomes me, and we all fall to our knees as the others feel the same effects. It takes me a minute to feel moderately back to normal, and I realise that at some point, I closed my eyes. That was one hell of a rush.

“Shit, are you guys okay?” Farren asks, chewing on her lip as she looks at us worriedly.

“Erm, yeah, shit, that was one hell of a rush,” Loki grins up at her.

She breathes out a sigh of relief as she starts to smile, “Thank fuck for that. That was nuts.”

“That was Grey’s idea,” I tell her as we all start to stand up.

“Well, at least we know how to help you better now,” Mayhem points out.

Farren frowns, “I guess I just don’t know what my extra boost of power will do to you guys. I don’t want it messing with your magic.”

“It shouldn’t. The spell is designed just to disperse the power, nothing more,” Grey replies. “Dinner?”

“Oh fuck yes, I’m starving,” Reaper replies.

“Let’s go get something to eat then, and we can try to figure out what’s going on with Farren’s magic,” Grey replies, and

we follow him through the castle and back to the kitchen where we had dinner last night.

Farren

“I ’m back to normal now,” I reply and then look at Rival, “I think you were right, the wound in my side was stopping my magic from going back to normal, but my magic was slowing my healing, so my only choice was going into the Void.”

Once we’re all sat down at the table with some sandwiches that we quickly rustled up, their eyes all turn to me again.

“I have to say I’ve never heard of gifts developing this late,” Mayhem frowns.

I raise my eyebrow and smirk, “Are you calling me old?”

His eyes widen, “No, that’s not what I meant at all. I,”

“Dude, she’s messing with you,” Loki chuckles.

Relief fills his features before he gives me the finger, “Very funny, Farren.”

I grin as I take another bite of my sandwich, and my gaze catches on Rival, who’s frowning I tilt my head slightly in curiosity as I say, “You’ve got your thinking face on.”

“I’ve never heard of a gift like the one that you described,” Rival frowns.

“No, me neither,” Reaper replies and then adds, “when we pass the games, we get extra gifts from the gods, right?”

“Yeah, supposedly,” Loki replies.

“Could Farren have been granted one of the gifts early?” Rival asks, extending on Reaper’s thought process.

“Is there any record of what kinds of gifts they got given in the past?” Zev asks.

Rival immediately shakes his head, “No, there’s no record of it anywhere, not that I’ve found anyway, and I was curious enough to do extensive research on the subject before we even found out that the Warrior Games were coming back. It interested me.”

“Is there even a list of people who have won in the past?” Reaper asks.

“Not that I know of,” Rival replies with a frown.

“So the only reason why we know for sure that there were winners of the Warrior Games in the past is that soon after the Warrior Games, the world has always gone to hell in a handbasket, and they’ve fought in wars or against some crazy supernatural that decided they wanted to rule over all the realms.” Storm points out.

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up,” Kill replies.

“So where are they? And why isn’t there some sort of plaque or commemorative statue or something that has their names on it? I mean, they were heroes.” Loki asks.

“It’s definitely odd. There are so many other statues, orbs, plaques and all manner of other shit commemorating kings and important figures and shit.” Mayhem replies.

“There’s a reason for that,” Grey says knowingly, and when we all look at him with curiosity, he continues, “It’s to reduce the threat to them.”

My lip pulls up in confusion, “What?”

“Well, in every Realm, there are assholes who want to challenge the winners, to prove their own strength, to discredit the winners of the games, even though they have been through so much shit in order to save one or many realms. When the games first started thousands of years ago, they had a lot of problems with that, and the winners never got to live in peace, so they put it in place so that there was no record of them anywhere.” Grey explains, “It meant that they could live somewhat inconspicuously.”

“That actually makes a lot of sense. So do they retire and just live life peacefully after they’ve done their duty to protect

the realm, or do they carry on working?" Rival asks Grey, assuming that he'll know.

Grey shrugs, "I don't know. I guess that they can do whatever they want."

"I can see how it would get tedious. I mean, they'd be called on for every little thing that went wrong. They'd never get a moment's peace." I muse quietly, trying to stop a yawn.

"Exactly," Grey replies.

"I'm glad that they get some peace," Loki mutters.

"There's no way of knowing whether this is a gift from one of the gods, even though we haven't won the games," Storm replies.

"Yet." Killian smirks, full of confidence.

"So I guess that leaves us at a dead end then," I reply.

Rival shrugs, "Yeah, but we could do some research and see if we can find anything."

"Mate, you just love research." Loki teases.

Rival grins, "Yeah. Speaking of, I'm guessing that the plan for tomorrow is to go to Farren's house?"

"Yeah, that's where Monty said the key was, although both Grey and I searched that place from top to bottom, and if there's a secret room there, I will be truly shocked to find it," I reply.

Grey's smile is full of knowledge as he replies, "You know Monty if he says it's there, then it is. It just might not have been the right time for us to find it before."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I reply.

"Those Wraiths weren't like any that we've seen on the other side of the border. Are they normally like that?" Reaper asks, his eyes briefly flashing to Ryu's.

Grey becomes serious as he shakes his head, "They weren't always like that; they used to be just the supes that you could find in the Fae realm, now though, they're being turned into

creatures from the Underworld, and I don't know how they're coming across. Not only that, but Underworld creatures don't turn into Wraiths."

"Really?" Rival asks, sounding interested.

"Yes, they can't have the creatures and supernaturals there turning when they are in charge of the worst of the worst and policing the dead. You'd be surprised how much trouble the dead can cause."

He's got that look again, the one that is almost ancient and full of knowledge, the look that makes me curious as hell.

Mayhem's eyes narrow slightly, "You know an awful lot about the Underworld, things that we aren't taught and things that are not common knowledge."

Grey smiles, "I sense a question in there somewhere. I have been alive for a very long time, and you learn some things when you've been alive for as long as I have."

"Okay," I interrupt, seeing that this conversation isn't going to go anywhere and could possibly even devolve further, "from what you've said then I think that it would be safe to assume that the princes are getting the creatures out somehow or they wouldn't be able to turn into Wraiths, and they wouldn't be here."

"Unless they were somehow managing to change them into Wraiths in the Underworld and then send them through," Zev suggests thoughtfully.

Killian leans forward in his chair slightly, "Like a first wave, they send the Wraiths through to distract everyone, have everyone fighting off the extra threat and too busy concerned with that to look at anything else. That's what I'd do."

"That's a really good point," Grey replies, looking somewhat impressed at Killian's conclusion, "we need to figure out how they're getting in."

Storm rubs his hand on the back of his neck, "So we need to find the key's before they do to stop them from opening the gates properly and letting out everyone in the Underworld, and we need to figure out how they're getting the Wraiths in now."

We also need to figure out which factions are being influenced by black magic. We also need to find out if there are any more artefacts from the vault in the Underworld being used as well. Even though that's impossible as far as we know, does that sound about right?"

"Yep," Loki replies and then adds, "I don't think we're going to be here for a couple of days like the last trial."

I shake my head, "No, there's too much to do."

"We didn't technically get here through the right portal, though did we?" Reaper asks.

"That's not strictly true, the portals to the different stages of the Warrior games are different colours, so if you are thinking that this may not be an actual stage, then that's not the case. Plus, we've got the scroll." Rival replies.

"Okay, well at least that's one certainty that we have in the whole heap of uncertainties," Zev replies.

"We'll sort it out. We know that this place is important to the Fae realm; otherwise, we wouldn't be tasked with protecting it and sorting it out." I point out.

"We either sort it out, or we fail and end up back at the academy and having to go into the temple and be judged by the gods," Loki replies with a slight bite.

Rival adds, "The same gods that have denied us their presence for centuries. Are we even sure that they're going to show up in the temple anyway?"

"Fuck knows," Mayhem replies, "we won't know for sure until we go in."

"I think they've just been a lot more subtle about their presence. They're still around," I feel almost compelled to say.

Grey's gaze becomes penetrating, but he doesn't say anything.

Zev clears his throat slightly, "I agree with that theory. I mean, look at what happened in Monty's shop? Monty is an incredibly powerful supernatural; we could all feel that. So

who could so easily control him while keeping their identity secret?”

“You’re right. It had to have been a God or Goddess,” Reaper replies.

Loki’s eyebrows raise, “But that would mean that they are invested in what we’re doing.”

“Well, if there’s a threat of the gates to the Underworld opening and letting the good, the bad and the ugly free on all of the realms, then I’d say that all of the various gods are going to have something to say. The Earth gods, Fae world gods, ancient gods, Dragon Realm gods ...” I start to list.

Grey interrupts me listing the various categories of gods, some of which overlap between the realms, “We get the message, Farren. I see your point and it’s slightly intimidating that we’re the only line of defence against the potential downfall of all of the fucking realms.”

“Fuck, it sounds impossible when you put it like that,” I reply, and although I feel slightly nervous, a bubble of excitement mixes with the nerves. I’ve never been one to back down from a challenge, and this is one hell of a challenge.

“One day at a time,” Reaper mutters, “we take this all one day at a time. The first thing we need to do is to get the first part of the key from Farren’s house.”

“Sounds good to me. I’m all for taking one problem at a time,” Mayhem replies.

“Are we going to talk about how odd it was for the Wraiths to attack in a group?” I ask them all since we got distracted by everything that happened after.

Grey’s eyes widen, “Oh shit, yes, I’m glad you reminded me. I recognised a couple of the Wraiths, they weren’t all from the Underworld, and the three I recognised were from the three main factions, or at least they were before they became Wraiths.”

“So it definitely has something to do with the factions, then. We just need to figure out what,” Reaper replies.

Storm sighs and then stands up, “Alright, why don’t we all call it a night? It’s getting late; we’ve got to find the key tomorrow, which I imagine won’t be easy because nothing has been so far.”

Killian nods, “Yeah, to be honest, I think I preferred the other task. We didn’t really stop, and then we fought. I don’t like this planning and research stuff.”

“Me neither.” I reply, getting up as everyone starts to make their way out of the room.

“Farren, could I talk to you for a second?” Grey asks as he makes his way into the kitchen side of the room instead of out the door like the others.

“Yeah, of course.” I reply, waving to the guys, “Night, guys.”

“Night, Love,” Loki replies as the others all just wave. He comes over and pulls me into his arms briefly, kissing me on the top of the head and then leaving after the others.

I’m starting to really like it when they show me affection.

“I’m glad you found them, Farren,” Grey says, and I turn around to find him holding a mug of what they call hot chocolate in the Earth Realm. I’m ridiculously happy that they brought it over here, and although it’s not that easy to get hold of, it’s one of my favourites, and Grey always has some.

“Oh, it’s been so damn long since I had hot chocolate, thank you.” I reply, taking a sip and noting that he’s served it with cream and sprinkles as they do as well. “Do you want to talk in the snug?”

It’s where we always used to have our chats, and we’d end up talking in there for hours about everything and nothing.

He smiles, some of the tension leaving him now that the guys aren’t here, “Yes, I’d like that.”

We walk in companionable silence, sipping our drinks as we head down the wide hallway, passing paintings and weapons, as well as the occasional lit fire that’s there to keep the hallways warm since they’re so vast. The castle’s interior

décor has always fascinated me, it's a mixture of traditional and modern but it's so well balanced that it somehow works.

Chapter Nine

“I missed you,” Grey says as soon as we settle into the wide, soft seats that cocoon me entirely as I sink into the familiar space.

The heat of the fireplace warms me and casts a soft glow around the room as I glance over at Grey. For the first time that I’ll actually allow myself to admit, his words give me butterflies, and I reply, “I missed you too.”

The way his eyes light up, and his eyebrows raise let me know that he wasn’t expecting me to admit that I missed him.

He watches me closely for a minute, an array of emotions that I don’t even begin to try and understand, crossing his handsome features before he clears his throat, and his expression wipes clean and settles on a smile.

“So, did you have anything particular in mind that you wanted to talk about?” I ask.

“Well, first I want to suggest that until we figure out what’s going on with this new gift of yours, that you don’t use it. We don’t want you to get stuck and not be able to get back. The Void might not work next time.”

“Erm, that makes complete sense, but there might be one issue with that,” I reply.

He raises one eyebrow as he asks, “What would that be?”

“I didn’t exactly call on it when I was fighting the Wraith. I’m not entirely sure that I can control when it kicks in.”

Grey’s frown is heavy, “Well, that’s not what I was hoping you were going to say.”

I shrug, “I mean, I can try not to use it, but I might not get a choice. It’s exactly like when we first get our gifts and don’t know how to control them.”

Grey looks thoughtful for a second, “Okay, so maybe that’s how we treat it, and we get you to use it in a safe environment and learn how to control it.”

I nod, “Yeah, that sounds good to me. Not yet though. We need to go to the house tomorrow and try and get somewhere with what’s going on here. We know next to nothing, and it’s overwhelming.”

“Exciting though,” he smiles, knowing me well.

I grin, “That too. Although, I am worried that someone I knew in the Underworld could reappear. I don’t know how I would handle that.”

“Are you still having nightmares?”

“Yes,” I reply honestly. There were many nights when he pulled me from mine, and I pulled him from his. There’s no point hiding that I still have them.

His gaze moves to the fire, “Me too.”

We’re silent for a while; both of us are absorbed in our own thoughts, and I once again wish that Poca was with me. I miss him like crazy, and I’m hoping that he’ll turn up at some point like he usually does.

I jump slightly as hands touch my legs, and I look down at Grey crouched down in front of me and on an impulse, my spare hand covers his.

“Farren, I promise you that you are strong enough to deal with this, and I will protect you to the best of my ability. My magic isn’t quite back to where it was, but it is a hell of a lot stronger than it was. I won’t let them take you back.”

Instead of getting mad that he’s offering to protect me when I’m perfectly capable of protecting myself, I feel relief. I am sure of my skills in every other situation, but put up against someone that we met in the Underworld leaves me feeling uncertain, and thanks to what happened, there’s every chance that I could freeze or be thrown into a panic attack. Knowing that he has my back makes me feel so much better.

“Thank you, Grey,” I say sincerely, and he nods, moving back to his chair. I’ve been curious about something, and I decide now is as good a time as any to ask, “Why is it taking you longer to get all of your magic back? Mine is back and, judging from today, stronger than I was before.”

Grey shrugs, “My magic was drained a lot more often than yours, and I was there for longer than you were too. It’s just taking me a bit longer to get back to my original strength.”

“That makes sense,” I reply and then add, “you’re fucking strong as it is now. I can’t wait to see what you’re like at full strength.” He smirks, looking proud but doesn’t reply, and I narrow my eyes, deciding to go with it and speak my mind, so I state simply, “I know there are things that you aren’t telling me, things that I was too preoccupied and wrapped up in what I was going through the last time that I was here to really notice but I see it now.”

Grey tenses, and then his eyes cloud with regret as he leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees as he looks at me. I expect him to laugh it off, tell me I’m seeing things, or I’m paranoid or something else, but he doesn’t.

He takes a deep breath as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders, and he looks so torn and exhausted that I copy his position from before and move so that I’m crouching down in front of him. He immediately shifts so that he can pick me up and place me on his lap, and it feels comfortable and familiar even though we haven’t sat like this before. I turn slightly so that I can see his face, and he looks at me, his eyes studying my face intently, looking for something, although I’m not sure what. I simply wait patiently.

Eventually, he replies to me with honesty in his tone as well as regret, “I’m not going to lie to you and tell you that I’m not hiding something; I respect you more than that. But I can’t tell you Farren, I really wish I fucking could, more than anything, but I physically can’t, not yet.”

“Silencing spell?” I ask, referring to a spell that effectively stops you from mentioning things that someone doesn’t want you to talk about. There are different variants and levels right

from only lasting a day or so and being able to speak around the order, so if you're clever, you can still tell the secret. The more extreme end of the spectrum can change who you are as a person, making you act and behave differently than you usually would in order to protect the secret. That one is entirely binding, and it is impossible to go against it. When you are alone, you should be able to act like the real you and possibly around a select few people who don't pose a threat and even then, only when it starts to wear off but not around anyone else ever.

Grey nods. "Yes, a high-level one. But I'm still me, no change in my behaviour."

"Well, at least that's reassuring. Do you have any idea when it will wear off and you will be able to tell me?" I ask because somehow I'm even more curious than I was before now that I know for sure there is something that he was hiding.

Grey's eyes meet mine, and he shrugs, "When the time is right, I presume. These things tend to work that way."

I sigh and finish the rest of my hot chocolate, "Yeah, there's a lot of when the time is right things happening at the moment. Life just got a hell of a lot more complicated, and that's saying something considering my life wasn't exactly easy breezy before."

It starts off as a light sentence, but by the end of it, my voice is soft, and there's no denying the emotion that's saturating it. I'm pulled out of my spiralling thoughts when Grey's large palm cups my cheek. My eyes meet his, and something sparks between us, something else that I wasn't equipped to notice before. Time seems to slow as he leans closer to me; and I half expect music to start playing from somewhere, but it remains silent as we both move closer.

The sudden popping and sparking of the fire has us both jumping away from each other, and I stand up. That was close.

"We have a long day tomorrow," I start, and he straightens, a soft smile coming over his features as he nods in agreement, and I add, "I'm just going to head to bed."

Turning quickly, I practically run from the room and all the way back to my bedroom. As soon as I close the door behind me, I lean on it and take a deep breath.

What the fuck just happened, and more to the point, why did I run away like a scared little bitch? Would it have really been so bad to kiss him? No, it wouldn't have, except for the fact that I want to kiss the guys too and although relationships with multiple partners are normal here, especially since we have the Centres and their bonded, warrior bond relationships are not. The bonds just aren't like that; they're more familial, like brothers or sisters.

I have no idea what that kind of relationship would do to our warrior bond, but I can tell you for fucking certain that I do not feel a sisterly bond toward any of them, not even Zev, although he's not technically part of the Warrior bond, just the next head Seer as if that's not complicated by itself.

For fuck sake.

All I'm doing is talking myself around in circles, and I fucking hate it. It should be simple, but it's so not, and I've kissed several of them, which isn't bad, but I have a feeling that the secret that Grey is unable to tell us is a fucking big one, and I'm not sure that I want to add anything more complicated to the mix.

My own thoughts are exhausting me.

Alright, that's enough of that fucking bullshit. I have a lot bigger things to focus on and think about, there were a number of revelations today, but first, I need to shower and get into bed. Once that's done, I end up staring at the ornate painted ceiling for a while, as, of course, my mind wanders back to the men that I find myself surrounded with. Eventually, I start to think about what happened in Monty's store and about the voice that I heard, which I am certain no one else did. I am beginning to think that the voice may have been connected to a goddess, which blows my fucking mind, and I don't think she knew that I could hear her, although Monty certainly seemed to figure out that I could, as always though Monty knows more

than he lets on and he won't tell us not unless it's absolutely necessary.

We knew that finding the parts of the key that will prevent the princes from opening the gates of the Underworld would be difficult; I mean, it's a task in the Warrior games for a reason, but knowing that not all of the parts are going to be in the Shadowlands makes things especially complicated. The border is fucking locked down. How are we supposed to get to the other parts of the key that could be fucking anywhere, in any of the multiple realms, when we can't even get out of the Shadowlands. I guess that's going to be one of the things that we trust the process with because right now, I don't even have an inkling of how it's all going to work.

With my mind spinning with unanswered questions, I succumb to sleep.

The next morning I feel a hell of a lot better than I did last night, and I successfully managed to push away any questions that I had. We'll find answers, or we won't, and that's pretty much fuck all we can do about it. It's in fate's hands.

"Morning, guys," I greet everyone as I walk into the kitchen and take a seat at the large table that's already laid with breakfast food.

"Morning, Darlin," Killian greets me and kisses my forehead as he walks past me to get a coffee from the kitchen.

"As soon as we've finished breakfast, we're heading over to your place, Farren," Storm says, sipping his own drink.

"Sounds good to me," I reply, "my place is only a couple of miles down the road."

"Good. Any sign of Poca?" Reaper asks.

I shake my head, "No, and I miss him."

"Hopefully, he will turn up," Mayhem replies.

Killian drains his coffee, still standing and then asks, “Is everyone ready to go?”

“Yep,” Loki grins, “I’m incredibly curious to see this place that you bought.”

I smile as I stand, “It’s not much. As I said, it needs a lot of work.”

“I’m still curious about the kind of place that could catch your eye,” Loki admits.

We once again take the carriage to get my place, and I’m missing Revel. Travelling by carriage is okay, but it’s nothing compared to actually riding, and I can’t say that I’m particularly fond of it.

The carriage lands just outside of my gates. The gates are huge, made of metal and still have the initials of the last occupants in script on the front. I hadn’t planned on changing it since it seemed a bit stupid to announce where you live, especially here, where enemies are as plentiful as friends. The grounds are extensive, and I haven’t managed to explore them all since my main priority was to get the house sorted and livable. Although I liked living at Grey’s place and having the company was nice, as I said before, it never really felt like mine, and after so long being forced to live in the cells at my father’s place, I desperately wanted somewhere that was just mine.

“Why can’t we land inside the gates?” Loki asks.

“Because my wards and protections are state of the art and work slightly differently from Grey’s,” I reply.

“Meaning?” Zev asks.

“Meaning that if I don’t put your magic signature into the wards so that they know that you are allowed access and we flew over and landed inside the wards, you’d die an excruciating death,” I explain.

“Well fuck, yeah let’s not do that,” Loki mutters.

Killian looks at me with a proud and heated look, “Very well done, Darlin’. I’m impressed.”

I wink at him. “We need to get this done fairly quickly. With the Wraiths on the prowl, it’s too dangerous. We’re like sitting ducks out here.”

Storm nods, “Okay, good point. What do we need to do?”

“That’s easy enough. I need you to all slice your palms, put them on the ward at the exact time that I do, and then repeat the spell after me. Even after you say the spell, if any of you mean me harm, you will be expelled from the grounds. The magic of the wards will read you and your intent.” I explain, making sure that they understand. I don’t think that any of them wish me any harm, but I am cynical and paranoid, so a small part of me is glad that they have to go through this; call it another reassurance that I can trust them.

Without hesitation, they all get up and start to get out of the carriage, with me following quickly behind them.

“Let’s do this,” Mayhem smiles as he pulls out a knife and slices his palm. All of the others do the same except for Loki, who extends his fangs and bites down on the fleshy part of his hand. I watch in fascination, and he winks at me when he sees me watching. I’ve heard stories about what a vamp bite can feel like, and I have to say I’m more than curious. As that thought takes root, I remember something that I had forgotten about vampires and dragons. I’m incredibly unlikely to find out because when they bite, not for food but instead for pleasure, they only bite their mate, the one that they will be with forever, and unlike other species, Vamps are much like dragons, and they only mate with their own kind.

That thought has an array of emotions going through me, including sadness and jealousy, and I realise that I like Loki and Reaper far more than I should. Suddenly remembering that Loki is a part of my bonds now, I shut down my flow of feelings to all the bonds before I give something away that I don’t want to. I must let something slip through because Loki’s cheeky look becomes confused, and he frowns, studying me closely.

I know he’s going to ask me something, and I don’t want to answer or explain, so I quickly pull out one of my knives, and

I slice my palm, “Alright, on three place your palm on the gate and repeat after me it might sting a little bit, and the magic that will assess you might feel slightly uncomfortable, just stick with it okay.”

They all nod, and I notice that Grey has his palm sliced. Looking at him curiously, he mutters, “Just so you know, I’m still one hundred per cent on your side. They’ve also been upgraded since you left.”

I smile; he knows me well enough that he knows my insecurities, “Thank you.”

“Erm, Love, I’m healing, and it’s cold; my nipples could cut fucking glass. Can we get on with this?” Loki teases, making me laugh.

I nod, “I’ll say the first part and then tell you when you need to repeat, okay?”

“Got it,” Killian replies.

“Hosce homines aditum ad meam domum concedo. Grata sunt com et eunt ut libet, dum mihi nihil noceant.” I place my hand on the gate and then nod to the guys, “Put your hands on the gate and then repeat after me.”

They all repeat after me, and I feel the barrier buzz with the power and blood from the guys.

Chapter Ten

That buzzing should've been the end of it, but apparently, my wards decide to take it a step further. I become blinded by light as I hear the guys grunt, not necessarily with pain but instead sounding more like they're uncomfortable.

When the light finally fades, and I have no idea what the fuck just happened, Rival asks, "Is that what normally happens?"

Grey answers for me since I'm currently staring at my wards like they're going to tell me themselves.

"No, well it didn't last time we did it, but as I said before, the wards were updated." Grey replies.

"They're stronger now," I say, suddenly realising what it is that the wards did, "I think they absorbed some of your power to strengthen them. They weren't meant to do that."

"So that wasn't a part of your spell?" Storm double-checks.

"Nope, it's just supposed to grant you access so long as you mean me no harm."

"Well, just add it to the crazy shit pile." Loki shrugs.

Rival looks thoughtful, "Well, to be honest we all know that magic can have its own mind. There will be a reason why your wards decided to use our magic to strengthen themselves, but we probably won't be able to work it out now."

"You're right, let's go in," I reply, and I push open the gates stepping through and looking back at the guys standing on the other side.

They all follow me through, with no ill effects and without being forcibly removed from the grounds, and that small part of me settles again. Once we're all inside the gates, Grey calls his horses through, and the gates shut back up behind us all.

“You weren’t joking about it needing work,” Zev mutters.

“The bones are there. It just needs a bit of love to bring it back to life.” I reply, feeling slightly defensive.

I fell in love with what I knew this house could look like when it was restored. It’s big, as are most homes in this part of the Shadowlands, but unlike Grey’s castle, it’s in the style of a second empire home that is usually found in the earth realm in the place that they call America. However, it’s more extensive and more intricately designed than the ones I’ve seen from the earth realm. It needs a lot of work; the roof needs redoing, the windows replacing, the porch is sagging, and the inside is empty, broken and needs just as much work. I could have hired magic construction workers, but that always leaves a risk for their interpretation and if you’re away for long periods of time, then it can fall back into its previous state, which is why I want to do it the traditional way.

“Why are your wards so state of the art, but the house looks like this?” Mayhem asks.

“The wards were more important than the house,” I explain, “there’s no point making the house look nice and fixing it up if I don’t have wards that are up to snuff because the house would just end up destroyed anyway.”

“That makes sense, I guess.” He replies as we move up the steps of the porch, trying not to step on any of the rotting boards and slip through.

As we get to the top, I place my hand on the door; the house recognises me and opens, allowing us all to step inside.

“It’s got some really beautiful original features,” Loki comments as he looks around, “do you know when it was built?”

“I think it’s around a thousand years old, possibly more,” I reply. As soon as I make my way through the door, I breathe in a sigh of relief; this place has always felt like home to me, I can’t explain it, but it just feels safe. “I can’t wait until I can get it back to its former glory.”

Kill frowns, “Why hasn’t it been done already? If you get a good team on it, then it could be finished in a day.”

“I want to do it properly. It looks like this because the old owners moved on, and they didn’t restore it properly in the first place, which means underneath the magic, it was still deteriorating, and I don’t want that.” I explain.

“I’m with you,” Rival replies, “I’d do the same thing. You need to ensure that a house has good foundations, especially if you intend to live in it long term.”

“Exactly.” I smile, and he wraps an arm around me, pulling me close.

“Right; what did Monty say we needed to do?” Loki asks.

“That I need to free my magic to search again, but this time with the knowledge that there is a hidden room here somewhere,” I reply.

“You sound skeptical,” Reaper points out, his giant arms crossed over his chest.

“I am. I searched this place with my magic, and without it, there was no hint of a hidden room here.”

“It’s worth a try right? Even if there isn’t one, at least we’ll know and then we can go back to Monty and tell him he got it wrong.” Storm suggests.

Loki chuckles, “Yeah, I highly doubt that he’s going to take that well.”

Zev shares a look with him, “Yeah, I’m not telling him. That’s on one of you.”

“Do your thing, Farren,” Kill interrupts the guys.

I focus and send out magic feelers throughout the entirety of the house, all of which I recognise from when I’ve done it before, that is, until my magic hits something that, in my mind’s eye, looks like a glowing door. I tilt my head as I remain focused. My magic can’t move past the door, which suggests there’s something pretty strong protecting it, and as much as my magic pushes, it simply can’t break through. Keeping my eyes closed, I follow where my magic is leading

me, trusting it not to allow me to crash into anything. The guys are silent, but I know that they are all following behind me because I can feel them, which is curious.

I feel like I'm walking for a long time until, finally, I stop at where my mind's eye tells me that the door is. When I open my eyes though I'm in the master bedroom and staring at a completely blank wall, no nicks, no wall sconces to pull that could lead to a secret room, nothing. It's just a blank wall with peeling wallpaper.

"It's there?" Mayhem asks.

I nod, "Yes, well at least my magic seems to think it is. It can't get inside though."

Grey frowns, "So it's very well guarded then."

"Yes, it would appear so," I reply.

"The door might have a spell on it to conceal it. Try picking it apart," Killian suggests.

"Good idea," I reply.

I focus on the threads of my magic again, coaxing it forward, and then I simply think about what I want it to do; within seconds, my magic has tugged apart the threads of the spell that was keeping the door concealed, and it appears.

"I don't think I'll ever not be in awe of how easily you can do that," Mayhem mutters.

"You didn't use words or anything," Zev adds, and it occurs to me that he hasn't actually seen me do this before.

"No, I don't need to," I reply.

"With anything?" he asks.

I shake my head, "I haven't found anything that I need to say the words for yet. Sometimes I'll say them just because I want to, like with the wards."

"That's fucking awesome." He compliments.

Storm starts to walk toward the door to open it, and I hold my arm up, blocking him. When he looks at me with a raised

eyebrow, I explain, “You can’t go through; there are still protections on it. All I did was reveal the door. If it’s this well protected, then there’s a good chance that it will have a nasty kickback if you do try and open it.”

“How do we get in then?” Kill asks before adding, “Could your magic not un-weave the spell?”

“It might’ve been able to, but it would take me a long time because it’s so complicated and has so many layers to it, and by the time that I’m done, I’ll be completely drained. Since we don’t know what’s on the other side, I’d rather not risk it.”

Loki nods, “No unnecessary risks, Love.”

“We could try blasting it?” Rival suggests.

“With magic or with my favourite toys?” I ask excitedly because it’s been a while since I got to blow shit up.

Reaper narrows his eyes as he looks over me, “You have explosives on you?”

I grin, “I always have explosives on me.”

Grey chuckles before asking, “Isn’t that dangerous? What if you get in a fight and they explode?”

Rolling my eyes, I reply, “I’m not that careless. The explosives I always carry on me need to be activated by a word.”

“So you’ve managed to mix explosives with spell work?” Rival asks curiously.

I shrug, “Well, kind of. The explosion isn’t magic; it’s just triggered by magic and protected, so I don’t explode when I usually would if it goes off while it’s on me.”

“That’s quite impressive,” Rival replies.

“I’ll show you how to do it if you’d like?”

He grins, “Yes please.”

“Alright, why don’t we try to open the door with a magical blast first and then you can try to explode it.” Storm suggests.

I pout, but I nod, making his eyes fill with amusement. It's still slightly jarring to me when he gives me an unguarded look. I think a part of me is still expecting him to shut down and go back to keeping all of his emotions behind a mask.

"Wait," Grey interrupts, and we all look at him in question, "how are you going to make sure that you only blast the door and not damage the surrounding area?"

"I'll put up a ward around the blast," I suggest.

Mayhem interrupts, "I can also be on standby with my water, just in case the force field doesn't contain the blast."

I nod, "Good idea. I'd rather not damage my house any more than it already is. I have also been known to add a bit too much boom to my explosives before."

Storm pinches his nose in exasperation, "Why am I not surprised that you make your own explosives?"

I smirk and wink at him as I reply, "Because I'm fucking amazing?"

"Who's magic are we going to use to blast the door first, then?" Zev asks, getting us back on track.

"How about my fire?" Reaper asks, "Ryu wants to help, but he knows that he can't come out in here."

"Yeah, that might do it. Dragon fire is pretty fucking strong stuff," Killian replies.

"I've got an idea," Rival starts, "if we're going to blast it with magic, we may as well do it properly, right? Go big or go home and all that."

"Yeah, there's no point half arsing it," Loki replies.

Rival nods, his own fire lighting in his eyes as his orange hair starts to flicker so that it almost looks like its fire itself, "Exactly, I'll add my fire to Reaper's. We can blast it at the same time."

"I can add mine too," Grey offers and winces slightly, although I have no idea why.

"You have fire magic?" I ask curiously.

Grey nods, his eyes trying to convey something to me that he can't say, "Yes, it's one of my gifts that has just come back."

I frown, "Are you sure you want to use it then? I don't want you to drain yourself."

"Trust me. It will be fine." Grey replies with a knowing glint in his dark eyes.

I shrug, "So long as you're sure. If there's that much magic being kicked out though I think I'll ward the entire room just in case something goes wrong; at least then, the room is protected."

"I'll be on standby too." Mayhem offers his eyes glowing blue as he calls his magic forward.

Loki smirks, "I'm pretty useless in this situation, but I'll be ready to use my speed to get people out of the way, and I can heal anyone if they get hurt."

Zev frowns, "And I will just stand here, completely useless because I can't use my gift like I normally can, and I have no fucking idea if this is going to work or not and if I need to warn you or something."

I'm not too fond of the way he's speaking about himself, and judging from the frowns on everyone's faces; neither are they.

Storming up to him, his eyes widen at my approach as I crane my neck back so I can look up at him, poking him in the chest as I say firmly, "You are not fucking useless, Zev, and if I hear you talk such bollocks ever again I'm going to smack you into next week. You are valuable, you are needed, and you are one of us. There are going to be plenty of situations in the future where one of us will not be needed." I soften my voice as I add, "I know your lack of visions is frustrating you, but they don't define you or your worth, and if you woke up tomorrow and were a freaking Tripterone, we'd still want you around."

"Although I might have to get over my fear of things with that many legs," Loki shudders.

Zev's eyes are wide, and I wonder if anyone has ever told him off for talking shit about himself. I also wonder if I've maybe overstepped a line because that wasn't my intention in the slightest, I just wanted him to know that he was ours now, and nothing is going to change that. He has a lot of demons weighing him down, and I have the overwhelming urge to help him. I knew from the first time that we fought that he was important, and now, I'm even more sure.

He's silent for a few more moments, and I slowly remove my finger from being pressed into his chest, his very firm chest. Internally rolling my eyes, I curse at myself, noticing how muscular his chest is, really isn't the priority right now. Just as I start to step back and apologise for going off on him, he wraps his muscular arms around me and pulls me in tight, burying his head in my neck.

After a moment, he mutters, "Thank you. I feel like I say this a lot, but I've never had people care about me like you and the guys seem to. It's going to take some getting used to."

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I reply, "I told you that you were stuck with us now. You scared me when you went silent. I thought you were going to be mad at me because I yelled at you."

"Never," Zev replies, his lips brushing against my neck as he talks, and I desperately try to suppress my shudder, only just succeeding. However, there's fuck all I can do about the goosebumps that prickle my skin and when he steps back from me, there's no mistaking the happy smile on his face as he winks at me.

"Let's get this done then," I announce, turning back to face the others and ignoring the knowing looks on all of their faces.

"Well damn, remind me not to piss you off, Sparky. I don't want to be on the receiving end of your wrath," Mayhem chuckles and has all the guys nodding in agreement.

Warmth fills my chest at his nickname for me, but outwardly I just roll my eyes. "Just give me a second to put up a ward around the room, and then you guys can have at it."

I only need to concentrate for a short amount of time before I get it done, making sure I also protect the floor. When creating a ward like this, many supes forget that they also need to include whatever they're standing on; otherwise it has the potential for disaster; in this case, the magic will disperse into the room below since it has nowhere else to go, but if you're stood on the ground outside, then it could travel through the magic channels in the ground and cause all sorts of unimaginable danger.

I'm not sure if it was just me that wasn't taught this, I had to figure it out the hard way, and I didn't exactly have a traditional upbringing, but when I've watched other supes with the gift of force fields or wards as I prefer to call them, they often forget to cover what they're standing on with the ward. It's a really good way to sneak into a supernatural's house if you're so inclined because even the supes that are employed to fit wards sometimes forget, and that's why I built my own around this house. Not only am I reassured that my home is completely protected and I won't get any attacks from under the ground, but I am also the only one who knows how they work and how to ensure that someone else has access to the house if they need it.

"I'm done," I say out loud, hoping that I wasn't stuck in my own thoughts for too long.

"Alright, everyone that's not involved, stand back," Storm orders, as he looks at me sternly, I don't know why I always get the urge to argue with him whenever he tells me what to do in a non-emergency situation, but I do, and he clearly knows it.

I know we're in a serious situation, but I'm feeling playful, which is why I widen my stance, cross my arms over my chest and raise my eyebrow as I give him a challenging look.

"Oh shit, this is going to be fun to watch," Loki smirks and I glance over to see him lean up against the far wall, away from the door.

The others all have similar expressions as they chuckle.

Chapter Eleven

My gaze moves back to Storm; his eyes flash with determination and a fair amount of heat, making my whole body tingle. I let my lips tilt up slightly as I goad him.

“We really don’t have time for this,” he tries to reason, and I almost cave before he adds with a sharp smirk of his own, “Princess.”

Rival whistles, “Oh, that’s it, shit’s about to go down.”

“Sure we do. It’s not like you can make me move,” I tease, knowing full well that he can.

I expect him to throw a few more barbs my way but what I don’t expect is for his smirk to widen into an almost radiant smile as he strides toward me. I strengthen my stance, thinking that he’s maybe going to do something, but he ducks at the last minute and then hoists me over his shoulder, striding toward the edge of the room and the others. As soon as my shock wears off, I start trying to twist my body to flip myself off of his shoulder; I never thought I’d be one to like being manhandled, but my soaked underwear tells a different story.

“Nope, you’re staying where you are. You had a chance to do as you were told,” Storm’s voice is pure sin as he shocks me yet again and smacks my arse.

“Storm,” Loki warns, obviously worried that he’s hurt me.

Storm soothes the sting with his hand, and then as we reach the wall, he pulls me down in front of him, looking into my eyes, a thread of concern there until he realises that instead of fear or anger, my eyes are filled with heat. His eyes blaze with heat as fire sparks between his horns.

Loki suddenly chuckles, as his voice sounds strained as he says, “Oh, never mind, she liked that a lot.”

Reaper's growl vibrates the room, and I suddenly become aware of all the eyes on Storm and me.

"Well, this is interesting," Grey comments, desire lacing his tone.

Clearing my throat, I turn around in his arms because he seems reluctant to let me go and shrug, "What? That was fucking hot."

Loki and Grey share a shocked laugh, "I was not expecting you to admit that."

"Shall we get on with this?" I ask, changing the subject because we've deviated enough from what we should actually be doing enough today.

"Well, that was entirely your fault for distracting us that time." Zev points.

"I completely agree with that one," Rival adds.

"Yeah, yeah," I wave my hands at them dismissively and then glance at Reaper, Grey and Rival. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"We're just seeing if there's going to be any more entertainment?" Rival teases.

I give him my middle finger and then smirk, "Nope, I'm done entertaining for now."

"Alright, on the count of three?" Grey suggests.

The other two nod and they each call on their magic, readying it. Reaper's hands engulf in purple and red flames right up to his elbows as he looks down at them in awe, "My fire has never come that quickly to me before."

"It must have something to do with reconciling with Ryu," I suggest, and he nods, although he still looks a bit confused.

"Mine hasn't either," Rival mutters as he watches whips of orange and red flames wrap around his legs and arms. His fire is different to Ryu's, not only in colour but because his is really playful; each strand is playing with the other and

chasing one another, and his magic signature feels entirely different too.

Storm's arms tighten around me as he rests his head on top of mine.

"Are you not going to get yours ready, mate?" Mayhem asks Grey.

Grey shakes his head, his eyes tense, "I'll release mine on the count of three. It's still a little bit unpredictable after my stint in the Underworld."

The guys all nod, accepting his words as truth, but when his eyes connect with mine, I know that the reason why he's not letting his fire out now has something to do with what he can't tell me, and it's because of that one simple look, that I intend to pay more attention to what's just about to happen.

The three of them share a look and a smile, and then Grey says, "Three!"

All at once, three streams of fire hit the door, and although I want to watch Rival and Reaper's fire, incredibly curious about the strength of it, I can't I need to watch Grey to see if it gives me any hint about the secret he's keeping, and he knows that I'm watching him. I think that's why he looked at me; he's fed up with keeping the truth from me, from all of us; he wants me to figure it out, and maybe that's the loophole that he's found.

The problem is, I have never seen a fire like his. It's deep blood red, veins of black and gold streaming through it, and I have never seen anything like it. I read a fair few books on the different types of supernaturals in all of the Realms, I don't know all of them, granted, but my knowledge is relatively extensive, and nowhere have I seen a fire like that. It only lasts for seconds, and in those mere seconds, I swear I see something almost superimposed over the top of him, but it's gone too fast for me to work out what it was.

As soon as the combined fire hits the door, Zev suddenly yells, "Get down!"

Without a second of hesitation, we all hit the floor, Storm's massive body covering me completely but somehow not squashing me. I have never felt so safe, and I'm not quite sure what to do with that feeling. I glance up as much as I can with Storm above me, his wings extended and looking like a goddamn avenging angel. Rival, Grey, and Reaper's combined fire ricochets around the room on a path of destruction, and I'm damn grateful that I put the ward up, although I can feel the ward starting to fail every time that the giant fireball hits it and bounces around the room. I have no idea how we're going to stop it, that is, until Grey jumps into the air and catches the fireball, it sizzles out in his hand, and my jaw drops; how the fuck did he do that.

"Just what kind of supernatural are you? That fireball was fucking strong. My fire alone was stronger than I have ever made it before." Rival asks as we all start to stand up.

Storm reaches down a hand and pulls Zev to his feet, clapping him on the shoulder as he stands, "Nice work, man."

"Thanks. Apparently, my gift is still working. Just not as often as I want it to," Zev replies.

"No, seriously, what kind of supe are you?" Loki asks this time, "I can't get a read on you, and I'm usually pretty good at that."

Grey studies each of them individually, his eyes finally landing on me; I nod my head ever so slightly, trying to tell him that he can trust them, I do, and that should say something, considering I don't trust anyone.

"I can't tell you," Grey mutters, looking frustrated as hell.

I knew he couldn't tell us some things, but the fact that he can't even tell us what kind of supe he is, well that's interesting as hell.

Storm scoffs and crosses his arms over his chest, "Yeah, you can. It's easy as hell."

Since he's standing next to me, I give him a look and smack him on the chest, which earns me a growl, "No idiot, he

literally can't tell us. He has a high-level silencing spell on him."

Storm huffs but doesn't bother replying as realisation dawns on the other's faces.

Zev claps Grey on the shoulder, "That sucks, man."

"It's not fun, that's for fucking sure. Especially when I want to tell you, and there have been times when I could've fucking helped but couldn't." Grey runs his hand through his hair exasperatedly.

"We get it, Grey," I reply, not liking that he clearly wants to tell us things, and he can't. It's not his fault, it's whoever put the spell on him in the first place, and they are who I'll go after if one of us dies because Grey can't give us information that he knows.

"Alright, I want to see if it managed to weaken the magic on the door enough that we can get in now." Loki interrupts, already heading toward the door.

Before any of us can warn him that it might not be a good idea, considering the combined fire shot all around the room, and the door doesn't even have any scorch marks on it, he grabs the handle and immediately gets blasted back, landing on the floor with a thud and a groan.

Rushing over, I crouch next to him, "Shit, are you okay?"

He groans, sounding like he's in serious pain as he stays on the floor, and I start to think that he's seriously hurt.

"Are you okay, Loki?" Mayhem asks an edge of worry in his tone.

Loki mumbles again and says stiltedly, "Might die, need the kiss of life."

"You idiot, I genuinely thought you were hurt," Killian chuckles.

Loki lifts his head, amusement in his eyes and his lips fighting off a smile. "I am; I need a kiss."

Rival grins and shrugs, “Well, alright I’ll kiss you if it’ll help get us back to trying to find out what’s behind the door.”

My eyebrows rise, and I have to say I’m slightly intrigued about how this is going to play out. Loki looks as if he’s considering it for a second before he grins and hops up, “Not this time. I had my eye on someone else.” He winks at me, and Rival chuckles.

“Still got you to get up though,” Rival replies.

“That it did mate,” Loki winks and then turns to look at the rest of us as he switches subjects, “so clearly we can’t just open it even after it took a beating from the combined magic of those three, so how do we get in?”

“I’ve got no idea. There’s not much more that we can do. There must be some kind of specific spell that opens it.” Zev suggests.

“It would’ve been helpful if Monty could’ve told us what it was,” Reaper adds.

“That’s not how Monty works; he only ever gives you just enough information, nothing more and nothing less,” Grey replies.

“Yeah, I’m beginning to understand that,” Storm mutters.

“Farren said that he liked games,” Killian adds.

“That doesn’t help us get into the room. What’s the point of telling us where the room is and the key if we can’t get to it?” Mayhem asks.

“Ask it,” the voice mutters to me, and I jolt slightly. One day I would really like to know who the hell is talking to me but considering that it hasn’t steered me wrong yet, I’m inclined to listen this time too.

As the others talk, I walk over to the door and cross my arms, listening to it with my magic. Sure enough, there’s a kind of sentient hum.

“Farren, what are you doing?” Zev asks curiously.

I shrug, “I just want to try something.”

“Care to fill us in?” Kill asks.

“Not particularly, it’s kind of difficult to explain,” I reply and then do what the voice suggested that I do, feeling slightly ridiculous as I say, “hey, door, we would really like to enter the room, please?”

“Really? That’s your plan?” Storm asks, and I can practically hear his eyes rolling.

Before I can retort, the door hums louder, and then the lock clicks, and it swings open. I glance over my shoulder at a shocked Storm and flip him the bird, chuckling when he rolls his eyes, and Loki snorts in amusement.

“Well, it looks like the magic respects manners,” Grey mutters, sounding amused himself.

I am far too curious to reply, and I cautiously step into the room, half expecting another spell to go off. When it doesn’t, I breathe a sigh of relief and get my first good look around the room as the others follow me in. It’s like it’s been stuck in time; with a single glance, I can tell it’s been untouched for a long time. The room itself was obviously used as a mix between an office and a pretty extensive library, with a desk still scattered with papers that look aged and an empty coffee cup sitting on the desk as well, almost as if someone just got up to leave. Despite the apparent age of all the items in the room and how long the room has been sealed, there’s no dust anywhere, even though the air is stale. Magic was obviously involved in keeping everything in good condition.

The most shocking thing in the room though is that there are books flying around, at least fifty of them. Some of them are lazily flapping their pages, circling high up in the ceiling, whereas others are darting around the room at speed.

“What the hell?” Mayhem asks.

It’s like his voice has announced our presence because suddenly all the books start flying toward us, trying to dive bomb us as birds would do, they clearly don’t like our presence in here, and what was a majestic and magical

experience has turned harmful, none of the books are exactly light, and they're all aiming at us with speed.

"Ah shit, you pissed them off!" Loki yells as he ducks, avoiding a huge black and gold book that seems intent on taking his head off.

I really don't want to damage the books; I know that seems illogical because they are trying to attack us, but they're freaking books; I can't use magic against them. A thought occurs to me though; I may be able to use some sort of magical net to catch them and stop them from attacking us further until we can calm them enough or convince them that we aren't here to harm them. I weave the net in my mind using all the different strands of my magic; well the magic I know how to call on, not the new stuff. Once the net is formed, I will it into existence and throw it over the books heading toward Reaper and me.

"Nicely done," Reaper praises.

"Don't hurt the books!" Rival suddenly yells as Storm and Killian release their shadows and aim them for the books heading toward their heads; they pull back at the last minute.

"Fuck." Killian growls as he doesn't quite duck in time, and one of the books dings him on the head.

"How the fuck do we stop them then?" Mayhem yells at his brother, earning a glare from him as he bats one of the books out of the way.

"I don't know, but the knowledge that they have is most likely irreplaceable!"

"Hang on," Grey mutters as he ducks another book; his eyes flash black and red as he says something in a language that I vaguely recognise but can't quite place from where. Whatever he says has the books stopping their attack and lazily heading back to circling the ceiling and playing like they were before.

"You could've done that sooner!" Zev exclaims, and I glance over to see him with a massive bruise on his cheek.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, walking over to him and starting to reach for him before I realise what I'm doing and

stop myself.

His smile is soft, “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“I guess the books weren’t too pleased that we were in here,” Kill mutters.

“I think they’re protecting the room,” Rival replies.

“Is everyone okay? No serious injuries?” Storm asks, looking around at the others before his eyes land on me and scan me with a level of concern that he didn’t give the others.

“I’m fine, they didn’t get me,” I answer him, and he nods once, as tension releases from his frame and the others respond they’re okay.

It’s troubling that he gets so worked up when I get hurt; sweet but troubling. In our current situation and with my life the way it is, I’m going to get injured a lot. It just comes with the territory; he’s going to have to get used to it.

“Good, let’s see if we can find the key fragment and get out of here before something else decides to attack us,” he replies, clearing his throat and earning a knowing look from Killian.

We all split up to start to look around and find a clue to where it is, the room is enormous, and I have no idea where to start. I’m also in no rush to leave despite what Storm wants to do. There are so many interesting things in here, and I haven’t even gone any further into the room. I love anything to do with our history, and this place is like a treasure trove and better yet, it’s freaking mine.

“There’s a window in here,” Rival says, as he looks around the room almost reverently now that we aren’t being attacked by books.

“It’s glamoured on the outside. We checked that there were the right amount of windows for the rooms,” Grey replies.

“Why?” Kill asks.

“Because in houses of this age, there tended to be hidden rooms, but you could always tell because of the windows,” Grey replies and then adds, “this room has been sealed for a

really long time. I bet there are some books that are no longer in circulation here.”

“For a change, I am actually looking forward to reading some of these and seeing what information they contain,” Reaper adds, striding to the back of the room and looking through the shelves.

“There’s a lot of magic in this room,” Zev says as he starts to look over the desk. “Be careful with the books; they’ve clearly got a lot of magic and may have some defensive spells built into them.”

“Got it,” Reaper replies, moving further into the shelves.

Chapter Twelve

“How did you know that asking for the door to open would work?” Loki asks me curiously as he ducks his head and kisses my cheek on the way past me.

He’s started doing that recently, and although I don’t mind, in fact, I actually really like it; I’m unsure why he’s doing it.

“Well, at the risk of sounding completely crazy, the voice told me to ask it,” I reply with a shrug, and I suddenly have all eyes on me. I can’t really say I blame them.

“The same voice that told you what gifts you had?” Storm asks curiously, a hint of suspicion in his tone.

I nod, “Yep, that’s the one. It’s never steered me wrong before; in fact,” I look at Grey, “it saved us from the Underworld.”

Grey’s eyes widen, “That’s how you knew how to escape the Underworld? The voice told you?”

“Yeah, and before you ask, no, I have no idea who it is, yes I’ve asked, and no, it doesn’t answer,” I give a quick run down as I start to pull the drawers on the desk open, looking for a clue as to where the part of the Underworld gate key is.

“Hmm, well isn’t that interesting,” Grey comments.

“Since it worked before, why don’t you try asking the room where the key is? You never know; it might work?” Rival suggests.

“It’s worth a go,” I reply and then say, “Hey room, it’s me again. I was just wondering if you knew where the piece of the Underworld gate key is and could show us? We were told by Monty that it’s here, and we need it to stop the Underworld spilling out into the Shadowlands and throughout the realms.”

As soon as I started talking, I felt the need to explain a bit more about why we want it rather than just demand it. I'm beginning to think this house is much more aware than it should be. I have heard of really old houses absorbing the remnants of the magic of all its occupants over the years and becoming aware; I guess you could call it. The house hasn't let me know that it's aware before now, but it could have either been trying to figure me out, houses of this kind are rare, highly sought after and carry a special kind of magic that people seek, or the magic could have retreated to this room, to keep the important contents safe from the previous owners. I am reasonably sure that this room and its contents belonged to the house's original owner, and that was a long, long time ago.

"I don't think it worked this time," Mayhem starts and then raises his eyebrow as a whole panel pops open behind the desk, revealing a magical safe.

We watch as all the dials start to turn on their own, and various colours of magic wash over the surface before it opens slightly.

"Okay, that is seriously cool," Loki mutters, and he reaches out to it to open it up further and see what's inside.

As soon as he touches the door, a thin piece of wood moves away from the panelling and smacks him on the back of the hand as if it's chastising him.

"Oh shit, that hurt. Farren, your house is smacking me!" Loki protests as he pulls his hand back quickly.

"Do you guys feel that?" Reaper asks.

Zev nods with a smile, "Yeah, the room is amused."

Loki splutters, "Oh, so my pain is funny!"

"It obviously thinks so." I grin.

"I have a feeling that the room will only let Farren get the fragment out of the safe; after all, she's the one that asked it nicely," Rival hypothesises.

“You make a good point,” Grey replies and then looks at me, “Go ahead.”

I shrug and then walk toward the safe; that’s still only cracked open a tiny amount so there’s no way to tell what’s actually in there.

As I reach my hand out to open the door though I pause, “Alright, I asked nicely for you to show me where the key fragment is, and I’m very grateful that you did; however, if you smack me like you smacked Loki I’m going to mad, got it?”

I have no idea if the room listened to me or not, but it felt necessary to say. I don’t want to piss off the room or the house because I’m starting to think that if there’s this much magic in this room, then there’s more magic in the rest of the house that either was too weak to make its presence known or was feeling me out to see if I was worthy before letting me know of its existence. Homes that have become sentient are some of the most powerful objects in the realms.

Figuring I’ve got nothing to lose, I open the door to the safe and find a small ornate wooden box with various symbols carved into the outside. I’m hoping like hell that they aren’t cursed, or some shit, and I gently probe them with my magic just to make sure. As soon as my magic comes in contact with the box, the lid pops open almost as if it was waiting for me and my magic, which is an absurd thought. Nestled in the plush emerald green velvet, the fragment looks beautiful; it’s part of the head of the key and has a vine twining around the purple gemstone. It’s very clearly a broken piece, but it’s huge and so pretty. Taking the box out carefully, I turn around with a smile on my face to show the others.

Reaper

I should be paying attention. We need this fragment to find the rest and ensure the Underworld gates remain closed. Usually, I would have no problem at all in paying

attention, but I can hear it whispering to me, and I just can't shake the growing desire to go for it, and Ryu is just as curious as I am.

I can't resist it anymore, and I know that if something does go wrong with retrieving the piece, then the others have it handled. With this in mind, I slowly move back into the shelves, following the sound of whatever is calling me.

It's not necessarily using words to gain my attention, but more, a feeling, something in this room wants me to know that it exists. I have no idea what it is, and it momentarily occurs to me that this is nuts. I shouldn't be blindly following a magical calling. With that thought, I force my feet to stop heading further into the shelves of books and display cases.

Briefly, my mind clears, and I wonder what the hell I'm doing here and not with Farren when the box with the key fragment could be hexed, and she could get hurt. Whatever got a grip over me was fucking strong.

I try to turn around only to realise that I physically can't move my feet. Fuck! It appears that although I've regained control of my mind, the compulsion still has control of my body.

"Ryu," I ask him in my thoughts.

And although I can see him in my mind's eye, he doesn't seem to be able to hear me, which sends a shock wave of panic through me. I have never not been able to communicate with him; even when I was holding him back, I could still talk to him, and now it feels like there's a wall between us, an impenetrable one. What's more worrying is that he doesn't seem to be aware of it, and is sleeping, which he would never do with Farren in possible danger. He shares the same overwhelming urge that I do to protect her and keep her safe. Even though she's more than capable of doing it herself, it's all a part of a word that Ryu likes to throw out regularly. Not understanding the complications of the word and that she has no clue what the implications are.

I'm avoiding it for now.

Finding myself jolted out of my mind, my feet start to move forward again without me telling them to do so; this isn't going to end well. I know that; what I don't know is why it's only affecting me. No matter how hard I try, I can't break the control that it has over me, and I watch helplessly as my body is moved without my permission. It finally comes to a stop in front of a row of old thick spined books; they look impossibly older than any of the others that I found when I first went into the books to explore, and I know that if I walked down here, I would've noticed them.

Instinctively, as my hand reaches for a dark burgundy spine, I know that I shouldn't touch it, and I pull on all my magic, trying to stop my hand from reaching for it. I know that it won't just hurt or knock me unconscious if I touch it; no, it's going to be deadly. Relief and hope start to fill me as my hand pauses and begins to shake, but it's short-lived as I feel a more substantial wave of magic crash over me and my hand darts forward, grasping the book and pulling it toward me.

Immediately all consuming pain encapsulates me, and my body is finally my own again. I roar in pain, Ryu's pain-filled roar joining my own as my vision goes black and my body crumples to the floor. As my mind gives in to the pain and slips into unconsciousness, my only thought is Farren.

Farren

With the sudden roar of pain that I instantly recognise as coming from one of mine, the key fragment is forgotten as I move in the direction of the roar, the world blurring around me as I move with speed, the others following behind me quickly. What I see when I finally round the corner into the shelves has my heart in my throat and fear pulsating through me.

Dropping to the floor beside Reaper's fallen body, I reach out my hand and place my fingers on his neck, feeling for his

pulse; even though I can hear his heartbeat, I need reassurance.

“What the fuck happened?” Loki hisses.

“I think it might have something to do with this,” Rival replies, as he kneels by a dark red book lying on the floor just outside of Reaper’s reach.

“Don’t touch it. It’s cursed!” Grey suddenly yells, stopping Rival just in time.

Rival tilts his head and frowns, “You’re right. It’s also sentient.”

“Fuck, he’s starting to convulse,” Mayhem curses, his hands going into his hair as he stares at Reaper hopelessly.

In the small amount of time that we’ve been talking, Reaper’s condition has already deteriorated; he’s pale, sweating, small wounds are starting to appear all over him, and his body is convulsing violently with whatever curse or poison is currently running through his system and damaging him.

Fuck, I can’t lose him. He’s become so incredibly important to me in such a short amount of time, and I can’t imagine going forward without him or Ryu. My anger starts to stir.

“If I’m correct, then this isn’t a curse as such, more of a poisoning, and the cure is in the book. There’s no other way to find it.” Grey tells us.

“So the only way to help is to touch the book that did this in the first place?” Zev mutters, sounding angry.

“Or get it to tell us itself. It is sentient after all.” Killian replies, his tail whipping back and forth with his anger as his horns spark.

“Yeah, that’s likely,” Rival mutters.

“Loki, see what you can do,” Storm orders, taking charge, even as his own horns light up with angry fire.

I breathe a sigh of relief; in my panic at seeing him on the floor, I had forgotten that Loki could heal. My anger is still

growing, and I can feel my magic responding to it, we don't like that one of ours was attacked and hurt.

Loki kneels down next to a still convulsing Reaper and grasps hold of his arm, his eyes glow as he starts the healing process, and I feel my anger and magic recede slightly as it appears to work, and Reaper's convulsing stops.

"I can't heal him," Loki mutters, his hands still glowing. "I've managed to slow the progress of the poison, but I can't stop it, and I can't heal the damage that it's already done."

"What?" I ask.

He looks up at me, his eyes bleak, "Unless we can get the antidote from the book Reaper's not going to make it."

Those are the words that flip the switch inside me that were holding back my anger and magic, which comes rushing forward.

The room starts to shake with my anger as things begin to fall on the floor, and a wind that only affects me whips my hair and clothes into a frenzy. I am vaguely aware that as I move toward the book, I'm not walking but floating, I couldn't give a flying fuck though because I'm pissed, and I will fucking save Reaper, and the only way I can do that is to get the antidote from the book, by any means necessary.

"What the hell is going on?" I hear Grey ask urgently.

"Farren is angry as fuck," Killian replies, although there's a hint of tension in his voice as well.

"I've seen her angry; she didn't do that," Grey replies.

I ignore them as I command the book to come to me.

"Wait Farren, don't touch it!" Storm yells, too late, as the book appears in my hands.

I feel it try to take control and trying to control me, but it's barely a blip on my radar as my magic simply bats it away. The book starts to shake in my hands, not because it's trying to cast more magic but because it's nervous.

“The only reason why I am not destroying you is because I need the antidote. None of us meant you any harm, and it was a real fucking dick move to curse him. He is mine and not for you to harm!”

“I’m so sorry. I thought he was like my last master, I’ve lived in peace for so long now, but the trauma of what happened before still haunts me. I reacted instinctively.” The book replies, panic evident in its tone, and while I am mad as fucking hell, I do know what it’s like to leave with trauma that dictates your reactions and makes you act without thought.

“If that is true and you are truly sorry, then tell me the cure, help me save him, and maybe I won’t burn you,” I reply, my threat harsh, but there is no length I will not go to in order to save Reaper.

“Yes, of course.” It replies immediately, and I hold it in both hands as the pages start turning until they finally stop on a page that glows and reveals the ingredients that we need to gather in order to fix Reaper.

“Thank you,” I reply, as my feet hit the ground again and my anger recedes slightly.

“You should know the antidote needs to be given quickly. Your mate has slowed the progression of it and, in doing so, has given you extra time, but I fear that it’s not enough.” The book explains. “I’m sorry. Had I realised who you were, I never would’ve harmed one of your mates. I would’ve known you meant me no harm.”

Not much of what he just said makes sense, and there’s that word again, mate. I don’t know what it means, and I don’t have the time to question or ponder it right now; all I can focus on is that we’re going to run out of time.

“I’ll deal with you later. What’s your name?”

“I’ve never had a name,” it replies.

Frowning, I reply, “I’ll think of one.”

“What’s happening?” Storm asks cautiously.

Turning to face him, I say, “You heard the book, we’ve got the antidote, but we don’t have much time to get the ingredients. We need to get him back to Grey’s and hope like fuck we can find all the ingredients here in the Shadowlands.”

They all share a look, “Farren, none of us can understand what it was saying.”

Frowning, I look at Grey, “Even you?”

He shakes his head, “We couldn’t understand you either.”

“Again? For fuck sake.” I curse and then turn my attention back to the book, turning it to face the others so they can read the ingredients, “alright, we don’t have time for more of my weirdness. Look, we need to find these things.” When they all stay silent, I sigh heavily and ask, “What now?”

“We can’t read that. It’s in a language that we don’t know,” Loki explains.

“Oh for fuck sake, seriously,” I mutter and then add, “Book, could you please make it so that they can read it?”

“Yes, of course, one second,” magic consumes the pages as they glow with a warm light again.

Turning it around, I ask, “Can you read it now?”

“Yeah,” Rival replies and then starts to reach for it before pausing, “Is it going to harm me?”

“No, he’ll behave himself now. He didn’t mean to in the first place; well not entirely, it’s complicated.” I try to explain and then hand the book to Rival.

“Some of these ingredients are really fucking rare,” Rival mutters, and Grey walks up behind him, reading over his shoulder.

“The best place to start would be Monty. Even if he doesn’t have it all, he’ll have most of it and most likely know how to get the rest too,” Grey suggests.

“Great, let’s get him back to the castle and get him comfortable and then we can go to see Monty,” Zev adds.

Rival hands me back the book as he and Mayhem carefully pick up Reaper, and we leave the room as I grab the key fragment box on the way past.

Chapter Thirteen

When we're all in the carriage once again, Reaper's head resting in my lap, I gently sweep the hair that's falling out of his low ponytail off his face. He looks even worse than he did, and I didn't think that was possible. A sense of urgency is riding me; we need to get the damn ingredients and cast the spell to make the antidote.

"Why don't Farren and Loki head back to the castle and get Reaper settled, and the rest of us head to Monty's place? I don't like how he's looking. If we need to go to another place to get some of the ingredients, then there is enough of us to split up." Storm suggests his worried gaze on Reaper.

"That sounds good to me. It's probably going to take all of you to get the ingredients and jump through whatever hoops that Monty requires you to jump through in order to get the ingredients." I reply, feeling better that something will be done quicker.

"And I will keep an eye on his condition and try to hold back the progress of it as much as I can," Loki adds.

"Alright, if we're all in agreement, I'll have the carriage drop us off at Monty's shop and then take you straight home," Grey replies, and everyone nods in agreement.

"Stay alert and armed, it's going to be dark soon and it's not just the Wraiths that you have to worry about now," I start to warn them, "it's also the factions that are being controlled by dark magic."

Storm watches me closely, "We'll come back in one piece with the ingredients to save Reaper."

I nod as we come to a stop outside Monty's, and they all get out. As each one passes me, they find a way to touch me, either a brush of fingers on my cheek from Mayhem, a kiss on the forehead, the brush of fingers on the back of my hand or even full-on kissing me senseless courtesy of Kill. His

goodbye earns him looks of both jealousy and envy as he smiles proudly before leaving the carriage.

“Hmm, you are very powerful to have more than two mates,” the book mutters, and I chose to ignore it.

“What did it say?” Loki asks as we take off again and head the short distance back to Grey’s castle.

I shrug, “Nothing important.”

His gaze is penetrating as if he doesn’t quite believe me, but I don’t know what to make of the book’s words, and I’m not even sure that what he said is true. The book is ancient, and it most likely is just the way that speaks to identify someone that I’m interested in, or in this case, multiple someone’s that I’m interested in.

“Let’s get him inside and up to his room. He’ll be the most comfortable there.” Loki changes the subject as we get to the castle.

With a show of strength, he lifts Reaper with ease and strides inside as I rush ahead to open the doors for him. As soon as he’s laid him on the bed, I start pacing, the wounds that have opened up on him are oozing a black sticky substance, and I know that is the least of what he’s dealing with. I hate that he’s in pain, and I can’t immediately fix it.

I’m aware of Loki’s eyes on me as I continue to pace, but I feel better moving. It makes me feel like I’m not just sitting here watching him deteriorate and twiddling my thumbs.

“I’m so sorry,” the book interrupts my spiralling thoughts, stopping my pacing.

“I know,” I reply as I look over to the chair where I laid it. When Loki looks at me curiously, I sigh and ask, “Is there any way that you talk so that he can understand you?”

It’s silent momentarily, and then the book asks, “Do you understand me now?”

“Yes, I understand,” Loki replies in wonder. “Do you have a name?”

“No, I’ve never been given one,” the book replies, and I feel a pang of sadness.

“How old are you?” I ask it, grateful for the distraction that it’s offering right now.

“I’m not sure. I stopped counting the years after a couple of thousand; it seemed tedious and pointless.” It replies casually.

“Fucking hell, thousands?” Loki mutters, and then his gaze hardens, “Why did you curse my brother?”

“I really am sorry, all I knew was that there were very strong supernaturals in the room, and I couldn’t go back to being controlled and used to do truly horrendous things again.” It starts to explain.

“Someone used you before?” Loki asks curiously.

“I have a lot of magic, not just as a sentient book but also because of what’s within my pages. I trusted someone that I shouldn’t, and they captured me and performed some sort of spell that made me become completely under his control and have no choice but to obey.” It’s easy to hear the pain in the voice of the book.

“What happened? How did you escape?” I ask.

“He was killed, and it broke the spell he had over me. I was able to conceal that I was sentient and change what my pages had written on them. Eventually, Aramis found me and brought me to his home, where I’ve stayed ever since. I think he knew that there was something different about me, but I could never bring myself to reveal what I truly was. The room that you found me in has stayed hidden and empty for centuries, the magic of the house retreating to it to keep it concealed. After a hundred years or so, I felt comfortable releasing the spell concealing me, and then you showed up, and I panicked.”

“I’m sorry for what you were forced to do,” Loki replies.

“Thank you,” it replies, sounding somewhat surprised, and then adds, “Had I known who you were, Farren, I never would’ve attacked one of yours.”

Loki's gaze switches from the book to me as he raises his eyebrow in question. I chose to ignore his searching gaze and the smile that tilts his lips, "We need to find you a name. I can't just keep calling you book."

"What about Frankie?" Loki suggests.

I chuckle, "No, that doesn't feel quite right."

"Oh, thank fuck you said it. I didn't want to be rude, but absolutely not," the book adds, sounding offended, and I can't help my smile.

As the two of them go back and forth, trying to find a name that feels right, I try to do the same, and suddenly my intuition and magic sparks and fizzles, "I know what your name is."

"Well, are you going to share?" Loki asks.

"Xerxes," I reply confidently.

"I like that," the book replies and repeats the name, "Xerxes, it feels right."

"Good," I reply, feeling proud that I've managed to give him a name. Everything deserves a name, which reminds me I should probably name my house at some point. After all, it is sentient as well.

"I'm sorry, but I need to rest. I'm out of practice, and casting the spell so that they could read and Loki could understand me has taken it out of me. If you need me," he pauses and then says with evident joy, "just say my name."

"You got it, Xerxes," I reply with a soft smile.

I know that he poisoned Reaper, and if he dies, then I will seriously struggle to forgive him; however, having heard a small part of his story, I understand, and I would be a hypocrite if I held it against him, considering the things I was made to do in the past and how I'd react if I thought there was a chance that someone would like to use me in the same way again.

"Farren," Loki suddenly exclaims, abruptly pulling me from my thoughts, and I turn back to him, rushing over to the bed as I see Reaper starting to convulse again.

“I don’t think I can hold it off this time. We’re running out of time; where the fuck are the guys?” he demands.

An idea hits me like a lightning bolt, and I grasp Loki’s hand that’s on Reaper’s chest and still trying to heal him. He looks at me in question, “You guys managed to drain some of my magic when I came out of the Void; I think that using our connection, I can channel some of my magic to you, and it will strengthen yours and you can use it to hold back the poison.”

“I’m willing to try anything just don’t give me too much; not only do I not want you to burn yourself out, but I don’t think I could handle the amount of power that you have,” he replies.

I nod and then focus on opening the bond line between Loki and me entirely as I close the ones between Storm, Killian and me. I’m taking a risk doing this because he’s going to be able to feel everything that I do; I mean, sure, I can try to conceal it, but I also need to concentrate on getting the magic through to him, and I might let something slip. Reaper is more important than my fear of rejection or confusion about what I feel about all of them.

I send a stream of magic through the bond, hoping that this works and it won’t backfire in some way. Loki grunts as my magic flows through him, but he quickly takes control and directs it to stop the poison from continuing to wreak havoc on Reaper. Through my connection with Loki, I can see how our magic is working together to slow the progress. My magic holds no healing properties, but it almost desperately wants to help and to save Reaper. It’s almost mesmerising watching the two magics work together.

As soon as Loki pulls his hand back, I stop the flow of magic, or at least I try to, but my magic doesn’t want to come back; it wants to play with Loki’s, and it takes some serious strength on my part to coax it back to me, and when it does come back, I get a distinct feeling that it’s fucking pouting.

“Well, that was interesting. My magic didn’t want to let yours go,” Loki mutters.

“Mine wanted to play,” I reply with a weary smile.

Loki pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around me and holding me close. It settles the nerves inside me. “We managed to hold the poison back again. We make quite a team, Love.”

“I like when you call me that,” I admit quietly, my eyes still on Reaper, watching his chest rise and fall far more quickly than it should.

His lips kiss my shoulder, and I shiver at the contact, “Then I’ll do it more often.”

“I’d like that,” I reply.

We’re silent for a while as we both watch Reaper. The guys need to hurry up; even with our magical plaster stopping the poison for the time being, it’s not going to last much longer; I can sense that, and it’s worrying me.

“Do you want to talk about what I sensed when you opened the bond up to me, Love?” Loki asks, his voice hushed.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” I reply, “It’s complicated for more reasons than it should be, we’re warrior bonded, and I don’t want to ruin that. I finally feel like I have a family of sorts, although what I feel for you, all of you, isn’t a familial bond kind of thing. I’m fucking this up, and I guess what I’m trying to say is that I feel like I belong, like I’m actually doing something to help for the right reason. The warrior games, you guys, I don’t want to risk any of that. I’m scared.”

Loki stays silent as he mulls over my words, and I try my hardest not to shift with nerves. That was more honest than I intended it to be.

“I understand, Farren. I didn’t realise it before, but we’ve been missing you. It always felt like there was a part of us that we were missing, and now that we have you, that emptiness isn’t there any more. I know the others feel the same. Just look at what you’ve done for Storm? You brought Kill back to us. You repaired the broken bond between Reaper and Ryu, something that I thought was impossible. You give us a reason to be more than just warriors; you have made us feel more like

brothers than we have been in a long time. I understand your hesitation, Love, but I just want you to think about it. Don't rule it out, and don't start pulling away from us. Just see what happens," Loki finishes.

He's invoked so many emotions with his words that my eyes become damp, and my heart beats like a freaking drum. He repaid my honesty with honesty of his own, and I appreciate that he's put his feelings out there.

I twist on his lap slightly, kissing him on the cheek and allowing my lips to linger, "I won't rule anything out. But as soon as I see any hint of an issue, then I will pull back, and I'll put boundaries in place that will have to stay in place."

"That's all I ask, Love. Just don't close us out completely," he replies with a soft smile, "don't give up on us. We've got more demons than you realise, no pun intended."

"Regardless of anything else, we're in this for life, and either way, I will always be there for you all."

He squeezes me tightly, "Always, Love. I think the fates and fuck knows what else has a plan for all of this, and we've just got to trust that they know what they're doing."

"They'd better," I reply with a half smile. I agree with him. I have thought the same several times over the last few days or even weeks. Ever since I turned up at the academy, I felt like I was finally where I was supposed to be and on the right path.

The conversation has gotten a bit too emotional for me, and I'm not really equipped to deal with any more emotional stuff, so I turn my attention back to Reaper, "His breathing is getting worse."

"I know. The guys have been gone for a couple of hours. I just hope that they've been able to find all the ingredients within the Shadowlands," Loki replies anxiously.

"If anyone has the things we need, it will be Monty," I reply, trying to sound reassuring.

"So how crazy is it that there's a magical talking book sleeping on the chair over there," Loki says, sounding almost incredulous.

“I know, he’s rare, and he’s spent a long time being mistreated. I know he did this to Reaper, but I’m glad that we gave him a name.” I reply.

“Me too. Also, he doesn’t feel like an enemy despite what he’s done.” Loki replies.

“No, he doesn’t to me either,” I agree.

“He might have some useful information for us as well, but I don’t want him ever to feel pressured into telling us. He needs to know he can give it freely and without consequence.”

“Definitely, and we can ensure that he stays safe now as well,” I reply.

Reaper’s back suddenly arches up off the bed, and we stare in shock as blood soaks his shirt. I instantly jump up off Loki’s lap and rush into the adjoining bathroom, grabbing a towel and heading back into the room to see Loki has already moved Reaper’s shirt out of the way to reveal a

two-inch wide slice that’s opened up on his chest that runs from the base of his neck all the way down to the top of his trousers. His hands are glowing as he tries to stop the bleeding, but it’s having no effect on the wound.

“Fuck, this isn’t good. At this rate, it won’t matter that we’ve managed to stop the flow of the poison. He’s going to die of blood loss,” I curse, panicking as I try to stem the bleeding with the towel.

Before Loki can reply, the door bangs open, and the others rush in, carrying an assortment of weird and wonderful things that are for the spell.

“Fucking hell, he looks so much worse,” Storm curses.

“Did you get everything that you need?” Loki asks.

Grey grunts but nods, “Yes, Monty was a little shit about it, but less so than normal we managed to get everything without too much fuss.”

“Thank fuck for that,” I mutter.

“It probably helps that Grey threatened him badly enough that it scared the shit out of Monty,” Zev replies and then adds, “I wish the rest of us could have seen the look you gave him.”

“You scared Monty?” I ask, surprised because he doesn’t get scared easily.

Grey doesn’t bother replying; he just shrugs, crosses his arms over his broad chest and switches his gaze to Reaper, looking worried.

“I’m going to set everything up over here,” Killian starts and then turns to Mayhem, “have you got this, or do you need a hand to perform it?”

“I need someone else, it requires two people, but the second person needs to be fairly knowledgeable. We’ve got to get the quantities exact, and the words need to be said with precision,” Mayhem replies.

“I can do it,” Zev offers. “I’ve got extensive experience in Alchemy and have read and taught myself things that we aren’t supposed to know yet. The subject interests me.”

“Me too,” Mayhem replies and then adds, “Let’s get this done then. I need the book and some blood from Reaper to ensure that it’s tailored to him specifically.”

“Unfortunately, we’ve got plenty of that,” Loki replies.

Chapter Fourteen

Rival takes over from me and holds the towel on Reaper's chest while I walk over to the chair and to wake up the book, "Xerxes? We need the ingredient quantities and the spell words."

"Xerxes?" Grey questions. "That's its name?"

"No," Loki replies, "he never had a name; Farren gave him that one."

"I'm awake, one second," Xerxes replies, and his pages flip open rapidly. "If it helps, I can read the ingredients out to you as well as you reading it. I know you won't trust me to read it without you checking."

"Yes, that would be helpful," Mayhem replies as I carefully carry the book over to where he's set up the copper bowl and the ingredients so they're easy to access.

We all watch tensely as Zev and he quickly follow the directions in the book as the Xerxes read it out to them as well. It's obvious they both have incredible skill in alchemy.

As they throw the last thing in, which is purely an educational guess on my part because Xerxes has stopped talking, Mayhem turns to face us as he explains, "We need to burn it with magical fire that matches his strength. Mine is a different kind entirely. Ideally, we'd use dragon fire, but we don't have that. Grey, and Rival, I'm hoping that your combined fire will be enough."

"If you both place a drop of your blood in the bowl as well, then it will help to solidify your connection with him, and the fire will work," Xerxes explains.

"And why should we trust you?" Storm snaps, a ball of angry fire between his horns, as his wings move agitatedly, "You did this to him."

“Whoa, calm down, it’s not entirely his fault, and he’ll explain it, but we don’t have the time right now,” I reply firmly.

“You trust him?” Storm asks incredulously.

“I trust that he’s telling the truth right now, and if he doesn’t, he knows that I will burn him to ashes,” I reply, trusting my instincts.

“Guys, his heartbeat is fucking fading,” Loki yells, “we’re only going to have one shot at this, and if Xerxes says this is the best chance he has, then we need to take it.”

Without any more argument and a sense of urgency riding us all now, Grey and Rival both draw blades that they clearly carry with them all the time, slice their palms and drip blood into the bowl with the other ingredients making them sizzle and smoke. They then both send a small stream of their fire to the mix. The whole consistency of the mixture changes, becoming thick, iridescent purple and moving without being disturbed. Zev quickly decants the mixture into a small bottle, and both Mayhem and he quickly make their way over to the bed. I rush forward, helping to manoeuvre Reaper’s head so that we can get the potion into his mouth easier and then hold my breath as I watch them pour the whole bottle into his mouth. I feel two different hands thread through each of mine, but I refuse to take my eyes off Reaper to check whose hands I’m holding.

It feels like forever until I watch his wounds close up, and as the largest one across his chest seals shut, he suddenly gasps, rapidly sitting up, his eyes roaming the room like he’s looking for a threat before they land on me, and a serene smile crosses his face. He reaches for me, pulling me down on the bed next to him, his arms wrapping around me tightly as my head lands on his chest.

I try to sit up slightly so I can make sure that he’s okay, even if I can feel the reassuring thump of his heartbeat under my head, I can’t move though, and his arms just tighten around me.

“Erm, Reaper?” I ask.

Loki appears in my line of vision with a grin on his face, “I think you’re stuck there for a while Love. He’s gone to sleep.”

“He’s okay though, right?” I ask, not bothering to hide the worry in my voice.

“He appears to be okay,” Killian replies, relief suturing his tone.

“He will be fine. He’s just going to be asleep for a while; the healing will have taken a lot out of him, not to mention the ordeal he’s just been through thanks to the poison,” Xerxes explains.

The tension in the room suddenly evaporates, and from where I’m lying, I can see Rival, Loki and Zev all slump in various seats next to the bed.

“Fucking hell, that was close,” Mayhem curses.

The room falls silent, and although I feel slightly weird that they’re all gathered around the bed watching as Reaper holds me close, I know that they all need the same reassurance that I do, that he’s okay again. Plus, it doesn’t seem as weird as it probably should.

“Would you like to hear my explanation?” Xerxes asks quietly.

“Yes, I want to understand why I shouldn’t burn you. Although, you were helpful and gave us the suggestion of adding Rival and Grey’s blood to the antidote, so you have that going for you at least,” Storm replies, his tone not quite as sharp as it was before.

“Of course,” he replies and then launches into the same story that he told Loki and me earlier.

Since I’ve heard this explanation before, I tune out, feeling soothed by the strong sound of Reaper’s heartbeat, that is until Xerxes says something that has my interest peaking.

“You’re looking for the pieces of the Underworld gate key, yes?”

“And what if we are?” Grey asks, sounding somewhat suspicious.

“Then I can help,” he replies.

I really wish I could fucking sit up right now. It feels weird as hell to be lying here, unable to see what’s going on around me properly and if my men are sharing any looks.

“How can you help?” Killian asks.

“I was given the task a long time ago to guard the knowledge of the location of a piece of the Hellgate key.” He announces.

Silence reigns, and I know they are all sharing a look that no doubt questions the legitimacy of Xerxes’s claim. I hear nothing but truth ringing in his words though, and although we got off to a rocky start, I trust him.

“Where is it, Xerxes?” I ask.

“Here, in the Shadowlands, Temperance has it stored at her stronghold,” he answers immediately.

“The leader of the west part of the main city,” Grey replies.

“Please tell me that it’s not one of the factions that we’re worried are being controlled by dark magic?” Loki asks.

Grey moves into my eye line, and I see him wince slightly, “Erm, unfortunately, I can’t tell you that.”

“Fantastic,” Storm mutters sarcastically.

“If they’re being controlled by dark magic, as you say, then there’s a strong chance that whoever is behind it is also using them to spy on what’s going on around them,” Xerxes explains.

“Which means if we succeed in breaking this stronghold, whatever that may be, then the princes are going to know what we’re up to, and we want to keep them in the dark for as long as we possibly can,” Killian points out.

“Yes, but it’s the only one that we can get a hold of while we’re stuck in the Shadowlands,” Rival replies.

“Is there any way that we could break the hold the dark magic has over them before we get the key fragment? That

way, we could at least stop the princes from realising what we're up to," I ask.

"I don't know of anything that could do that," Rival frowns.

"There's most likely an object that's being used to channel the spell from the Princes and is the catalyst for the spell. If we can find it, then we should either be able to destroy it, which is a bit hit and miss. It might break the spell, but it might not, and since we're most likely only going to get one shot at this, we want to make sure that what we plan to do to stop Temperance and her faction members from being controlled by the princes through dark magic, fucking works." Grey starts to explain.

"What's the other option?" Zev asks.

Grey's eyes move to me, and I start to understand where he's going with his explanation.

I smile, "Well, I'm good with unravelling spells so I'm guessing the other option is for me to pick apart the spell so that we can ensure that it's completely disabled and all of them go back to normal."

Grey nods, "And so that the princes stay in the dark for as long as possible about what we're up to."

"Do you think you can do that?" Loki asks, "It's going to be magic from the Princes, so it's going to be intricate. It's probably going to be hard to pick it apart."

I nod, or at least try to, but Reaper is still holding me tightly, "Yeah, I can handle it. I've had quite a bit of practice with picking apart dark magic. Remember, my father used to like to use it a lot. That's why he started to drain my magic more, so that I couldn't pick apart his spells. Although, he had no idea how I was doing it," I smirk, "he fucking hated that."

It's silent for a while; I can tell from how tense it's suddenly become that none of them are okay with having the reminder of what's happened in the past. They don't even know the half of it. I can feel Zev's eyes on me, and as I meet them, it's clear that he's seen some of my past. He looks devastated before

his eyes flash white again, and I'm guessing that he's just got more of an idea of my past than he ever hoped for.

I expect him to ask questions; however, it must be evident to him that the others don't know. Instead of saying anything, he tries to communicate with his eyes, and I pull a face. I don't really know what to say or do. I know what he's seen, or at least I have an idea of what he's seen, and no one needs to witness that, so I hold my hand out to him, and he practically stumbles in his rush to get closer to me. He sits on the bed on the other side of Reaper and grasps my hand tightly.

"What's going on?" Storm asks, and as I glance behind Zev, I see that they've all gathered in my eye line and are watching me curiously.

"Not for me to explain," Zev replies firmly, his eyes flashing with steel.

Grey's eyes fill with respect, "Good man."

"Farren?" Kill asks.

I sigh, "I will tell you one day when I'm ready, but for now we have more pressing matters. I know that I can undo the spell that is weaved into the object but how do we find the object?"

Although they don't look happy about it, they all agree to let it drop, and the conversation turns back to the problem we have at the moment.

"I should be able to create a spell that can locate the object, but I'd need plans of the stronghold where it's likely to be located. We are assuming that it's there, right?" Mayhem asks.

Grey nods, "Yes, it would need to be close to them, especially for when they sleep since they'll be more susceptible to the effects of the spell then."

"Great, so all I need is a map of the stronghold somehow because I'll need it to narrow down the location inside the house," he replies.

"I've been inside, she gave me a tour, and I did my own explorations as well. I can draw you a map of the inside,"

Grey replies, and when I raise my eyebrow curiously, he adds, “It’s always better to know those who are considered the strongest. That way, you can learn their weaknesses as well, should you ever need them.”

“That’s smart,” Rival replies.

“If you can make a spell to find the location of the object spelled with dark magic, why can’t you use the same spell to locate the key?” Loki asks Mayhem.

“Instinct,” Mayhem replies, “I can’t properly explain it, but I just know that it won’t work with the key fragments, which is why it never occurred to me before now.”

“He’s right,” Xerxes interrupts, “The key fragment is understandably very well-warded so that it can’t be easily found. However, as I was made one of the guardians of the key fragments, I can help you find it. Here,” I can hear his pages start flipping.

I try to sit up again, and this time Reaper’s arms let me, he doesn’t let me get far, his arm slipping down around my waist and holding me against him, but it gives me just enough space to push up on my elbow and see the room properly, including Xerxes.

“You seem to have turned a lot more pages than you appear actually to have,” Loki says curiously.

“I’m an enchanted book,” Xerxes replies drily and then adds, “Now hush, I’m trying to find the right page.”

Loki holds his hands up, “Sorry, mate.”

My lips tilt up in an amused smile, he’s undoubtedly got a personality on him, and I think the more comfortable he becomes around us, the more his personality is going to show, and I have a feeling that it’s going to be amusing as hell.

“Aha, found it,” he exclaims, and I can imagine him smiling in triumph, “here it is. This is the box that the key fragment will be in. It can’t be opened, so it is definitely still in there.”

The page has a box depicted on it, similar to the one that we found the first key fragment, but this one is made of black

wood and has different carvings on the top.

“Is there no way we can trace it now that we know what it looks like? I imagine that the stronghold is fairly big?” Killian asks.

“The strongholds that the factions have are really like villages within the main city, they have large walls built around them, which are warded, and inside there are the homes of those that have agreed to have the factions protection or work for them,” I try to explain.

“Okay, so even getting over the wall is going to be difficult,” Storm replies with a smile.

“I’m sure we’ll work it out,” Loki replies.

“You know actually I might be able to track the box,” Mayhem suddenly says.

“What do you mean?” Zev asks.

“Well, I can’t track the key, but now that I know exactly what the box looks like, if I’m close enough, I may be able to trace it, but the spell would have to be cast in close proximity,” Mayhem replies.

“Well, it’s worth a try,” Rival replies.

“Failing that, we’ll just have to check the usual places and hope we get lucky. I’d rather not have to ask Temperance for a favour, one she will get curious, and we need as few people as possible to know about this, but also, favours here come with high prices, and it would be best if we could avoid that.” Grey explains.

“Agreed,” Storm replies, and his eyes soften as he watches me yawn, “we’ve had one hell of a day, we have a plan for tomorrow, and we can work out the kinks then. For now, everyone needs to get some rest. Farren, I’m going to leave Mayhem in here with you, just in case you need to get up or the poison has some after-effects. I would just feel better if you’ve got someone with you.”

I nod, “Doesn’t bother me either way.”

“I can tell you’re tired because that was a perfect opportunity to go toe to toe with me, and you didn’t,” Storm smirks.

My smile is tired as I reply, “I’m just storing it all up for tomorrow, and then I’ll let you have it.”

He steps closer to the bed and leans down to kiss me on the forehead, which shocks me but is not unwelcome.

“Xerxes, are there any side effects we should be aware of?” Grey asks.

“In all honesty, I do not know. No one has ever survived the curse,” Xerxes explains. “I never had the cure before.”

“What?” I ask, suddenly a whole lot more awake than I was a second ago.

“The cure appeared as soon as you picked me up. That’s how I knew that I fucked up because that never happened before.” He explains, sounding confused as hell.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Grey mutters.

“Alright, let’s get to bed,” Storm says again as he walks toward the door.

The guys all say goodnight to me, and Zev squeezes my fingers once before he gently kisses my hand. Just before they all leave, Mayhem, Reaper and I, Rival pauses and turns back around, looking at Xerxes.

“Are you comfortable in here, or would you like to go to the library to rest?”

“Oh, the library, please?” he replies immediately.

Smiling at Rival and his thoughtfulness, I watch as he carefully picks Xerxes up and then strides out of the room, winking at me as he goes.

“If you aren’t comfortable with me being in here I can get one of the other ones to come back?” Mayhem asks, standing at the side of the bed and rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m as comfortable with you as I am with any of the others.” I reply honestly, and he instantly looks relieved. “I do have a favour to ask though.”

“Okay, shoot?”

“I really need to pee; any chance you can help me up?”

“I mean, I can try,” he chuckles, looking amused by the situation.

Chapter Fifteen

“D ick,” I reply with a smile.
He smirks as he uses the majority of his strength to move Reaper’s arm around me. As soon as there’s enough space to do so, I jump up and move off the bed.

“I’m sorry Farren, you’re going to have to be quick. He clearly doesn’t like it,” Mayhem says worriedly, as Reaper starts to move restlessly, still fast asleep, he’s rapidly getting more upset the longer that I’m not there and I quickly make my way toward the bathroom, doing my business and then taking off my weapons and tight trousers so I just have my shirt on, it’s long enough that it reaches the middle of my thighs and it’s better than nothing, it’s also better than sleeping in tight clothes.

When I walk back into the room, Reaper is thrashing around on the bed, still appearing to be deep in sleep, and Mayhem is standing as close as he can without being hit by flaming appendages.

“Oh, thank god. Nothing I’ve said is working, and I can’t get him to wake up,” Mayhem says as soon as he sees me. As I rush to the side of the bed, he adds, “Careful, he’d be absolutely devastated if he accidentally hurt you.”

I pause in my advance, “Good point. Maybe talking to him will help?”

Mayhem shrugs, “It’s worth a shot. He’s already calming slightly, and you just said one sentence.”

“Reaper, it’s Farren. I’m coming back, but I can’t get close while you’re thrashing. It would be best if you stayed still,” I tell him firmly, and shockingly even in his unconscious state, he listens and lies still. I quickly make my way over to him and lie back down on the bed next to him. He immediately

wraps me in his arms and settles back down, slipping into a restful sleep once again.

“Thank fuck for that. I had no idea how to help him,” Mayhem mutters, watching us in relief.

“I’ve got this. Why don’t you go and get ready for bed? We’ve got a big day tomorrow, and I’m hoping that Reaper is going to be awake and ready to be involved.” I suggest.

“Yeah, he’s going to be pissed if he misses it,” Mayhem smiles and then heads off to the bathroom.

I try to stay awake, but it turns out I’m more tired than I thought I was, and my eyes drift closed as I sink into sleep.

I can’t have been asleep for very long, although the room is now dark, and I can’t figure out what woke me up until soft lips touch my forehead and Reaper whispers, “Thank you.”

I think I mumble something in reply, but I have no idea if it’s coherent or not, and as I turn over, Reaper follows me, his arms wrapping around me, and I hum happily, a sound I’d be embarrassed to make usually, as I fall back to sleep.

The next morning, Reaper, Mayhem, and I all walk into the kitchen to grab breakfast, finding the others all awake. They greet Reaper warmly as we all take our seats.

Once we’ve all finished breakfast, Grey pulls out a roll of paper, clicks his fingers to clear the table and then lays it out so that we can all see.

“Alright, this is the layout. It should be the same as it was when I was the last there. She’s a vampire; they like their consistency.” He starts to explain.

“Is the entire faction made up of vampires?” Loki asks.

Grey shakes his head, but I reply, “No, that’s not how it works here, there’s no separation, and the factions are a mixture of all kinds of supernaturals. They’re just made up of

those who have accepted their protection and the benefits of being in the faction.”

“Okay, well at least there’s that.” Storm replies.

“Great, I’ve already prepared the spell,” Mayhem says, pulling a small vial from his pocket.

“When did you do that?” Reaper asks curiously. We caught him up on the plan on the way here.

“When you and Farren were fast asleep,” Mayhem replies.

Reaper looks at me, and I shrug. I had absolutely no idea that he did that, but then again I had the best sleep of my life last night, so I wouldn’t have noticed anyway.

“Do you need us to do anything?” Rival asks his twin.

“No, just step back. It’s going to flame and burn the map until it narrows down the location,” Mayhem explains.

We all stand up, moving away from the table slightly but keeping it within our eye line; we’re all curious. I just hope this is going to work; if not, we don’t have any way to identify the object that’s controlling them, and we have no way of stopping the princes from finding out what we’re up to.

Mayhem spills the potion over the very detailed map of Temperance’s main house, within the stronghold of the walls, and then says one word. Nothing happens for a second, and I start to open my mouth to question him when it looks like the whole thing starts to burn and a different worry crosses my mind, what if it burns the entire map? I suppose Grey could always draw another one, but I can’t help but feel like we’re running out of time.

I shouldn’t have worried because the flames start to glow purple as they lock in on the object, and they start to burn with more precision until they finally stop burning.

Mayhem taps the small piece of the map left, “There, the object is in that room.”

“How do we identify it once we’re in there?” Killian asks.

“Dark magic gives off a very specific signature. You’ll be able to feel it,” Grey replies.

“Alright, give me ten minutes to arm up, and I’ll get going. It shouldn’t take me too long to get to the object and un-weave the spell, but I am going to keep watch for a while first,” I announce.

“What do you mean? You aren’t going by yourself,” Loki is the first to reply, but no one else looks happy about my suggestion, not that it was a suggestion.

I raise my eyebrow and cross my arms over my chest, “Of course I’m going. This is what I do, what I have been doing for years. Granted, I’m used to murdering things, not finding objects, but it’s not much different.”

The guys share a look as Killian says, “I don’t like it, but I know that you are capable of this.”

“Fine, tell me your plan though,” Storm insists.

I nod, appreciating that they aren’t arguing with me or trying to say I’m not good enough to handle it; that would make me mad as fuck. “Well, I’ll play it like one of my usual jobs. So I’ll make my way through the warding using a spell so I don’t alert anyone of my presence but also because I’m not entirely sure of the effects that the lockdown has on the Void, which means I don’t want to risk using it and it going sideways. I will only use it if I absolutely have to.”

“Okay, that sounds good so far, but what about once you’re inside?” Zev asks.

My smile is sharp, “I’m very good at keeping myself in the shadows and travelling unseen. There’s a place that’s not the Void but not on this plane either, where I can see and hear everything, but no one can see me. Then I’ll keep an eye on the castle, the comings and goings, the guard patterns, everything. As soon as night falls, I’ll head in to find the object and unravel the spell while in that in-between place so the Princes can’t see me and then find the box using the spell from Mayhem.”

It's silent while they all think over my plan, and then Storm asks, "And there's no way that I can convince you to take one of us with you?"

I shake my head, "No, and not because I don't want to but because I can't take anyone else into the in-between space between the Void and here."

Rival frowns, "So we've just got to sit here and wait?"

I'm not used to having someone concerned for me when I go on a job, let alone several someone's, and I have no idea how to reassure them that I'll be okay. I don't know how to ease their worries.. Killian's gaze becomes understanding, and he tucks me under his arm and squeezes tightly.

"She can use the bonds with Loki, Storm, and I to keep in touch, sending us feelings associated with what's going on," Killian suggests and then looks down at me and asks, "Can you still talk to me through the bond? I only ask because when your magic did that weird thing, you didn't try to contact me, and what we were feeling from you was really muted."

I shrug, I actually haven't tried since then, and now that the idea I could've lost that has been put in my mind, I start to panic that I've lost the ability, I love being able to communicate with Killian like this, and I'm sure that as my bonds with the others strengthen and grow that I'll be able to do the same with them as well. Although I'm not entirely sure of that because I have no idea how I'm bonding with them in the first place, there's no information on it, so there's no way of finding out any information about how they work.

Quickly reading the panic on my face, Kill squeezes me tighter and suggests, "Why don't you try now and see if it works? Before you start freaking out anymore."

I give him an unimpressed look and open the bond line between us both more. I usually keep them all relatively muted because no one wants to know what someone is feeling all the time, especially when it changes so quickly and is often layered with other emotions, which makes misunderstandings more likely.

“Smug bastard,” I mutter down the bond line to Killian, and he immediately bursts out laughing. I grin, “So it worked; you can still hear me then?”

“Yeah, Darlin’, it works. It must have had something to do with that weird glitch that your magic had.”

“Great, so if you need backup, you tell Killian. If, for whatever reason, you can’t get through to him, you send emotions to all of us,” Storm orders.

I automatically salute him and smirk but add honestly, “Don’t worry, I will. I promise.”

“Good,” Reaper replies for him.

“I’ll take one of the horses to get me just outside the wards and then send it back. I’m going to be gone for a while; I need to study the house so I know the best time to enter, and I won’t enter until it’s dark. Everything is better under cover of darkness.”

They throw out a few more half-hearted grumbles of protest, but they all know I can do this, and instead of finding it annoying, it’s actually kind of cute.

Grey interrupts them all as he says, “You better go and get ready. We want to make sure that you have enough time to gather the information you need to make it in safely.”

I nod and head out of the door while Loki calls after me that they will all meet me in the courtyard. When I make it back to my room, I pull on my armour that’s spelled to protect me and as many weapons as I can. I have to admit, as weird as it may be, I always feel naked if I don’t have a certain amount of weapons on me and by that, I mean at least ten. I mean, I’m always armed, but any less than ten and I feel vulnerable. It’s a testament to the guys that I feel comfortable enough with them that I don’t feel the need to be armed with ten.

It takes me no time at all to be ready, and as I leave my room, my excitement grows. I’ve been going through so much change and so much new stuff, and it’s good, great even, but I’m not used to it, and this is what I’m used to, hunting and doing things by myself. I feel like my feet are on solid ground,

and although the other things are good, I need this to feel more like myself.

“Farren?” Zev asks, stepping into my path just before I head out of the doors, and I pause.

“Hey, are you okay?” I ask.

He sighs and runs his hand through his hair as I see conflict grow in his eyes, “Look, I know you know that I saw your past yesterday, but I don’t want you to think I’ve hidden things from you, so I wanted to let you know that I saw all of it.” He pauses as his eyes flash with dark and deadly anger. Instead of saying sorry or pitying me like I think he would, he gently takes my hands in his and ducks slightly so that he can meet my eyes, “You are so incredibly strong, most people would’ve buckled and let it warp them, if they went through even a fraction of what you’ve been through. I think you’re fucking incredible.”

His words knock the breath out of me, and it takes me a few seconds of swallowing back my emotions before I can reply, “You know you’re probably one of the only people that would think that.”

He shakes his head rapidly, moving a step closer so my head has to tilt up to see his face as he looks down at me, “You’re wrong, the guys, they’d feel exactly how I do, I understand that you’re not ready to tell them yet and I’m not suggesting that you do, but I do know that they would feel like I do and I also know that it’s a damn good job that you killed your father because they would’ve fucking tortured him.”

I smile, “I know that, but like you said I’m just not ready.”

“That’s fine, and I can understand that; if you ever want to talk about anything, I’m here.”

“Thanks, the same goes for you. I don’t need to be able to read the past or future like you can, to be able to know that you’ve been through shit. You’re in good company. We’ve all got shitty pasts.”

His eyes search mine, and he nods, “Okay, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. Come on, let’s get this done. I’m excited,” I smile, and as I start to take a step back, he stops me. My breath stutters in my chest as his hand moves to cup my cheek, and I couldn’t make myself pull away even if I wanted to, and I definitely don’t want to. His lips meet mine in a soft kiss, and I find myself not being able to hold back; I thought I was starting to develop feelings for him, but it turns out I was just kidding myself. I have all the feelings for him, the same as I feel for the others, and it took him kissing me, his tongue expertly moving with mine, for me to realise just how much I like him.

His smile is soft when he pulls back. He clears his throat as he steps back, “We should get out there, they’re waiting for us. Remember what I said though? Any time that you need to talk, I’m here.”

I nod, no doubt looking ridiculous since it goes on for longer than it should, and he smirks, as we head toward the doors, and I pull myself together. Well fuck, I’ve never reacted to a kiss like that before, and I’m not mad. Slightly confused, sure, but not mad. It was one hell of a kiss.

All of the guys are in the courtyard, and Grey has one of the horses ready to go. Flying fae horses take a lot to get used to riding. Fortunately, I have some experience with it, and it shouldn’t take me too long to get used to it again.

“All ready?” Rival asks, nibbling his bottom lip, which does unexpected things to me, despite the fact that I just kissed Zev.

“Yep, I’m looking forward to this,” I grin.

Kill shakes his head with an affectionate smile, “Of course you are.”

“Zev, Kill, have you seen anything that she needs to be aware of?” Reaper asks.

Killian shakes his head, “No, nothing, but then again I haven’t had a vision since we were back at the school. Zev?”

“Give me a second, and I’ll see if I can encourage something,” Zev replies. His eyes immediately flash white,

and he frowns. This vision seems to last longer than the others he's had here, and I start to worry about what he's seeing.

When he comes out of it, his frown is even more pronounced as his eyebrows dip together, and his eyes move to me, "There's a spot on the left wall close to where the main house that's weak. You should be able to pull the spell apart easier so that you can save your strength for pulling apart the spell on the object."

"And?" Loki asks, his eyes narrowed as he crosses his arms over his chest.

Zev sighs, "And I couldn't pick up anything else but a foreboding feeling. I'm not going to try and tell you that you shouldn't go, but you need to be even more on your guard."

I nod, "I've got it. I will be, and I will call if I need you guys."

"I don't like it." Storm frowns, his horns starting to spark slightly.

"I know, but this is our best chance," I reply.

"I get that, and I'm not saying don't do it. I'm just saying that I don't like it," Storm replies.

Chapter Sixteen

There's nothing else that really needs to be said, so I just turn around and get on the Fae horse, grasping the reins and then turning to face the guys with a sharp smile, "See you guys soon."

"Stay safe," Reaper calls after me, and I can hear Ryu in his tone.

I nod and then urge the horse forward, holding on as she takes off. Thankfully, like I predicted, I still know how to ride a flying horse, and I tell her where we need to go, knowing that she doesn't need any more direction from me. Landing a flying horse so close to the stronghold is instantly going to earn me suspicion and possibly even end up with me being detained, and because of that, I have to try and work out a more elaborate way to get to the place in the ward where it's weaker. I didn't want to use the Void to make my way here from the castle, I'm still unsure of the effects of the lockdown, but I am confident enough that I can use it to get from the horse to the ground, easily enough.

As we approach the stronghold, I picture where I want to go. I tell the horse my plan so she doesn't freak out when I suddenly disappear from her back and tell her to head straight back to Grey's, and I'll call for her when I need her. She lets me know that she understands, and I slip into the Void, feeling instantly refreshed, even though I didn't realise that I didn't feel one hundred percent. I want to linger, but I have a place I need to be, so I find the exit that I need and step through, pleased to find myself standing where I need to be as I keep myself partially wrapped in the Void so that no one can see me, should they be looking for me, or get suspicious.

Technically, I could use this to just walk straight through the front gates; however, it comes with risks of someone being able to sense me with their magic, and although they can't see me, my body is still there, which creates a problem when

walking through crowded streets. It's also a problem because my gift works better in the shadows, and it's midday, so there are not many shadows. Besides, I like keeping my skills sharp and don't like doing things the easy way.

No one is walking past, so I send my magic out along the section of the wall that I'm currently standing in front of, searching for the weak spot that Zev mentioned. I quickly find it just a few feet to my left and quickly move over to it. Thanks to all the discussions this morning before I left, I haven't got as much time as I would usually like to scope the place out.

My magic finds it easy to pick apart the spell in the wards to make a big enough hole in them for me to slip through; I then close it back up behind me. I may not agree entirely with how the factions run, but I can't deny that they help supes and keep them safe so long as they live within their rules. I don't want to risk something coming through the hole after me and killing innocents.

I've come out in some close-knit alleys at the back of some stone buildings. There's barely enough space for one person to walk, but there are plenty of shadows that I can hide myself in. I've used the Void like this so often by this point that it doesn't drain magic at all, it almost rejuvenates me, so I don't need to worry about staying like this for too long and can just focus on getting to the main house.

I can actually see it, not too far ahead, a massive castle with a wall similar to the one that surrounds the rest of the stronghold. I quickly make my way through the alleyways, heading straight for the castle and hoping that my luck holds out and I don't run into anyone. I'm not sure that even pressed against the wall, I could avoid brushing against someone else and alerting them to my presence.

Thankfully it holds out, and I make it to the wall quickly. I'm not going to risk making a hole in these wards; they will be watched a hell of a lot closer than the wards on the outer walls, and no doubt there will be an alarm built into them that will go off if they're breached. So instead I use the Void again, even though I'm trying to use it sparingly I don't see another

way around this predicament. As I step through the void and out onto the other side of the wall, my eyes widen, and I have to step back quickly to avoid running into a guard patrolling the perimeter.

If I was even slightly skeptical that they're being controlled by dark magic, I'm not anymore; the guy practically fucking reeks of it and being half in the Void has done something to my perception because I can now see his aura, and it is literally saturated with dark oozing streaks of the stuff. Well, that's handy; I'm definitely going to be using that while I'm here. I mean, there's a small chance that not everyone has been tainted yet, although that's unlikely.

As he passes me, another one is not far behind, and I know that I need to find somewhere out of the way that still has a good view of the castle. I also need to try and find a vantage point outside of the room that the object is actually in, and if my memory is correct, then I'm on the wrong side of the house. Avoiding the guard, I stick to the shadows cast by the many trees on the property as I make my way around the vast building, quickly locating the window that I need and feeling like luck is still on my side as I spot the giant tree outside, out of the way and a good vantage point. Nice.

Once I'm situated on a branch that gives me a good view of the window to the room I need and the guard rotation as well and I settle in to observe. I haven't been here long, but I'm already starting to pick up on some anxiety coming down the bond lines from the guys, so I send happy feelings back, and I think it helps because the anxiety lessens.

It's dusk, and I've already learned plenty from observing. I'm going to have a very small window where there is no one underneath the window or in the room; they obviously consider the object something that needs some serious guarding, which means the spell isn't on like a bowl or something but something worth a lot, either in regards to magic or money. Plan A is to pull apart the strings of the spell while still partially in the Void so that the Princes can't see me and know what I'm doing; they'd have Helliers here in seconds, and no one wants that. If that doesn't work, then plan

B is to literally break it and hope that it works, although I'm hoping that it's not going to come to that.

I'm starting to get twitchy from staying still for so long, so I decide that it won't hurt to get in position and the ledge outside of the window is pretty substantial, so I should be able to perch there comfortably until it gets dark, I'll have to thicken the Void since it's still not quite dark and I'm going to be exposed I might get to overhear something interesting if I'm up there too and I'm bored. Any extra information would be great; the guards aren't exactly talkers. I've got to give it to Temperance; she runs a tight ship. I think under other circumstances, we might get on. I don't know all of the factions, but I do know Temperance's one, as hers is one of the biggest and the most fair as well. I hope that I can break the spell controlling them, for them, as well as so we can get to the key fragment.

Some of the factions need their spells broken because they're already depraved, and add in dark magic; it's a potent and deadly mix, but there are a few that genuinely try to protect the supes that go to them for help, and I can't even begin to imagine how scared they are, now everything has turned upside down, and their leaders are being controlled.

As soon as there is a break in the guards, I quickly make my way down the tree, and then, using my air gift to help, I propel myself up the wall and perch on the ledge. It's actually slightly smaller than I thought it was, but nothing too bad. The view from up here is pretty fucking amazing, but I need to focus on what's happening within the room.

Just as I turn around the door to the room opens and I hear voices gradually getting louder and a woman walks in, a man following behind her and judging from the respectful nod he gives her and the flash of fang that appears when she replies, with her own greeting, this is more business than pleasure, and I perk up even more.

I'm hoping I get some information that we can use from this. I must admit that Zev's warning about being more on my guard is playing on my mind; I don't think that I will ever take

his warnings as anything other than something that I need to listen to.

I pull the Void tighter around me as I watch and listen to the occupants in the room, the woman I know to be Temperance. They move across the mostly empty room to a giant ornate mirror, and I watch as it glows with runes before Prince Remehus appears in it. Well, shit, I'm willing to bet that this is the thing that is cursed and the thing that I have to pull apart the spell on. The issue with that is I was expecting an object a lot smaller, and the spell on something that large is going to be more complicated to pull apart. I should be able to do it, but I'm not as confident as I was.

I am, however, always up for a challenge.

"We don't have much of an update, my prince," Temperance starts as the supe who came in with her stands at her back, and I realise that he's there as a protector. Not that he'll be able to do much against a prince even if Remeus is in the Underworld; his reach is clearly long.

Remehus purses his lips and then frowns as anger crosses his features, "We need to find the fragments; we know that there are at least two in the Shadowlands and with the one that is already here in the Underworld, we'd only need to find one more piece."

"We understand that sire. We are doing everything that we can without raising suspicion," Temperance replies evenly.

Fire flares in his eyes, and his barely there façade of calm breaks in an instant as he roars, "It's not good enough! Someone is going to get suspicious. It shouldn't be taking this fucking long."

Temperance's calm facade starts to crack as she nods rapidly, "Yes, sire, we will try harder. We'll have the location at least by the next update. Members from Remiki's and Khaos's factions are also searching and, as requested, are reporting to me. Are you certain you do not wish to involve any more of the factions?"

He regains his control and inclines his head regally, “Good and no, the three of you should be enough, don’t prove me wrong.”

“Of course,” Temperance replies, nodding once.

“If you don’t mind me asking, sire, why do we need these fragments?” the guard asks.

Remehus looks offended that the supe has even addressed him but is clearly prideful enough that he answers anyway, “We’re going to unleash the worst of the Underworld on the realms and when they are mere echoes of their former glory, we will make our offer, we will swoop in like the heroes and save them, help them rebuild, and convince them that not all of us are bad.”

“Domination of all the realms?” Temperance asks, being very careful to hide her opinions on the subject.

“Yes, we’re going to separate everyone by species, like it should have been. We’re going to have supernaturals prove their worth with regular fights to the death. Only the strong will be allowed to live.”

“And what of the earth realm?” Temperance tilts her head as she asks, “They don’t stand a chance against supernaturals or the beings from the other realms.”

Remehus’s smile is evil, and I feel like the darkness it radiates can reach me even through the mirror and me being surrounded by the Void. It doesn’t feel like my darkness; it isn’t comforting and warm; it’s not inviting. It’s like death.

With his smile still in place, he replies, “They will be our pantry. We’ll breed them like cattle, a never-ending supply of food for those of us with a preference for them. They are, after all, considered a rare delicacy in most of the other realms. We will also keep some as workers, to do our bidding.”

“Slaves,” Temperance replies, disgust evident.

Remehus narrows his eyes, “Now, now Temperance, it looks like you need a little top up. We can’t have you thinking for yourself, can we.”

Without any hesitation, a spear of dark magic pierces the mirror and slams straight into Temperance's chest. I wish I could help, but the best thing I can do now is pull apart that spell and stop the hold the magic has on her. She's clearly really fucking strong and has a good set of morals as well.

Since I'm in the Void, I can see as her aura fight's against the control the darkness is trying to exert over her, she's strong, but she barely lasts for seconds before she is entirely under the prince's control again.

He smirks as he asks, "Now, how do you feel about my plans, especially for the earth realm?"

Temperance's smile is stiff as she replies, "It sounds like the perfect plan."

"Good." Remehus replies and then adds, "Now find me the fucking fragments!"

The mirror goes dark, and although the guard tries to talk to her, the influence of the magic is clearly too strong, and she ignores him entirely as they both make their way out of the room.

I can't go in just yet. In two minutes, a guard is going to walk the perimeter of the castle underneath the window, and in four minutes, a guard will check the room. From what I've observed, they don't actually enter the room properly; they just check to make sure that everything is as it should be, so I should be able to be in the room while that happens. There are shadows in there that will help to conceal me.

I don't want to use the Void yet, so I need to use the small gap I have between the guard crossing underneath me and the guard entering the room to open the window and get inside. I've already scanned it, and there are no spells or wards on the windows. Which is an oversight in security that I will bring up with Temperance when she's not being controlled by dark magic.

As I wait, I start to think that this is huge, and if they manage to get the key and follow through on their plans, then we're going to need allies. There is no way that we can fight

against them, just the guys and I. Temperance would make a good ally and I can tell that just by how much she fought the prince and that she needed the dark magic topping up to begin with. Some supes easily succumb; one hit with it, and that's it; others need more convincing and regular doses. Those supes tend to be strong-willed and have high conviction in their morals.

I bet the princes are struggling to keep the control topped up on the other two factions that they seem to be exerting their control over. All Shadowland supes are strong as fuck. At least we know that there are only two more faction's being controlled. I have a lot of information to take back to the guys and it's things that could be instrumental in helping us win this.

I want to get this over with now so that I can get back to the others and tell them what I have found out, but as I check that the coast is clear, I notice the guard underneath the window pause and seem to take in the surroundings, I don't know what he's waiting for, but he hangs around long enough for the other guard to enter the room and do the checks, which is annoying but doesn't affect my plan too much, since the guard underneath me quickly leaves.

As soon as he does, I carefully open the window, thanking my lucky stars that it stays silent and doesn't make a noise that will alert everyone to my presence here and then step into the room, closing the window behind me just in case someone comes into the room while I'm in here, the last thing I want to do is rouse anyone's suspicions that there is something amiss in here that they need to pay closer attention.

As soon as I'm in the room, I can sense the dark magic radiating from the mirror, and it's clear that my suspicions are correct and this is the object that I need to remove the magic from.

Chapter Seventeen

Keeping to the edges of the room, I move closer to the mirror as I send my magic towards it cautiously to see just how complicated it's going to be to pull it apart. I'm going to have to work reasonably quickly because although I can't sense any kind of alarm that would let the princes know that someone is tampering with it, I don't want to risk it. That's also the reason why I'm keeping to the peripheral of the mirror as well; just because it doesn't look active doesn't mean that it's not, and even though I'm shrouded in the Void, more so than I usually am in these sorts of circumstances it doesn't mean that if someone was paying attention that they wouldn't be able to see or sense me and raise the alarm.

I've dealt with the worst of the Underworld, and I have no intention of going back, not for a long time anyway.

I start to use my magic to pull on the threads, and at first they offer little resistance, fooling me into believing that this may be less complicated than I had thought. The more I pull it apart though, the more it starts to resist, and I have to put more strength into getting it to unravel than I ever have before. The last thread that will break it entirely will not budge, and I start to wonder if I even have the skill to pull this off. I'm not one to give up easily though, especially when it's something this important, so with sweat beading on my brow from the exertion, I dig deep into my magic, deeper than I have gone before, and I feel that new magic that I've only briefly touched before start to unfurl, welcoming me the rush of it rejuvenates me and I grasp hold of it, temporarily forgetting that Grey had asked me not to use it until we understood it more.

The difference is astonishing, and as I send it toward the last thread of the spell, it's met with absolutely no resistance and disintegrates, something that I have never seen happen before. As the spell finally breaks, a shock wave releases from the

mirror as it turns to dust. The shockwave is so strong that it knocks me backwards, and I lose the hold I have on the Void to keep me concealed. Thankfully, with the mirror gone the princes won't know of my involvement.

As I sit there, dazed, that new magic sinks back into the depths of my soul, my usual magic wrapping around it almost protectively. I'm so distracted by my magic's behaviour that I've let my guard down, a rookie move and one that I should know better not to do. The door slams open, and I jump to my feet, ready to fight since, by now, it's far too late to use my cloaking technique. The fucker has already seen me.

However, my confidence quickly disappears as I see who I'm facing. Memories start to play through my mind rapidly. Being sliced over and over again until there was no part of me that wasn't bleeding. Then they'd fix me up and start all over again. The memory of them burning me until I was charred and bleeding, on the brink of death and repeating the process, is so strong that I swear I can smell burning flesh, the acrid scent burning my nose.

“Well hello, little queen,” Astaroth grins, all of his teeth sharp, teeth that he used to like to sink into me, tearing chunks of flesh away and scraping bone.

My body begins to shake. Anyone else, and I might've stood a chance, but not Astaroth; he was my biggest tormentor.

No, you can do this. You're stronger than you were then. Do not let him hurt you again.

Despite trying to give myself a pep talk, I can't seem to make my body move, and because of that, I start to panic for a different reason. He just watches me, his smile wide, and I begin to get angry. I encourage the feeling and welcome it; anything is better than this paralysing fear that is currently consuming me.

My anger fizzles out when he brings forth his favourite blade, “Do you remember this blade? We've missed you.” He plays with the knife as he slowly moves toward me, and I feel a small amount of relief as my foot moves back. At least I can

move, even if it's not to fight but to retreat. He smirks as he flicks his hand out and holds me immobile, "Ah ah, I don't think so; I'm going to get so many rewards for taking you back; the princes have been looking for you. You're at the top of their most wanted list."

"W-w-why?" I stutter and immediately curse myself for my show of weakness.

"No one knows, but I'm sure that it's for nothing good," he replies, "they didn't, however, specify what condition that you had to be in when they got you."

He strides forward with more purpose and even more aggression than he had when he was approaching before. His words have brought that anger back, but I'm not fast enough to call on my magic to pull apart the spell holding me still; just before he gets to me, a giant dark blur darts in front of me and attacks him.

My heart soars as my eyes land on Poca, holy fuck I've missed him.

"A hellhound?" Astaroth asks incredulously as he stares at Poca, "Impossible."

Poca pounces again as Astaroth starts to retaliate. He is strong though, and although Poca is more than capable, I will not let this fucker take him away from me. I'm stronger than this. While I gather my courage Poca viciously attacks, he seems to be getting the upper hand, and I am so fucking proud of him. Astaroth is starting to get pissed though, and using his vast strength; he launches Poca across the room, making him crash into the now useless mirror, Poca tries to get up but whines and falls back down.

"No," I hiss as Astaroth continues to approach him. There's no doubt in my mind that he is going to kill him.

"You can do this, daughter," the musical voice whispers through my mind, getting stronger, "do not let the fear control you. Use it to end him for once and for all; you have the skill, daughter."

The voice calms the ragged edges inside me and I call my magic, it rushes forward, eager to help and before he can take a single step closer to Poca, I hold my hands forward, concentrating on my gift and combining all my magic, even the new magic, into one blast. It strikes him in the chest, blasting a hole straight through him, big enough that I can see the wall behind him through it. He looks down as if surprised and then back at me; he seems to come to some sort of realisation as his eyes widen in horror, his mouth opens, but before he can get out any words, he disintegrates in front of my eyes, the black glitter of my magic consuming him entirely.

I shake off my shock at what just happened and rush to Poca's side, checking him over and then sinking my hands into his fur. He licks my face and barks quietly, letting me know that he's okay.

“We can't leave yet. I need to find the key fragment. Are you up to it?” I ask him.

In response, he hops to his feet and shakes out his coat giving me a doggy smile that would terrify anyone else considering his multiple rows of teeth and smouldering fur that harms anyone who touches it unless he allows them to. I am even more keen to get out of this damn place now and I can hear arguing, meaning that the occupants are starting to realise what happened. We need to get out of here now before they begin to blame us for their current predicament.

I quickly activate the spell that should lead me to the fragment and then sigh as I look down at Poca, who has made himself smaller than his usual size, “Is it too much to ask that the fragment be in here.”

He lets out a sound that is curiously similar to a chuckle and then heads to the door. I guess we're leaving then.

Slowly pulling open the doorway, I check the hallway, relieved when it's empty and follow the tugging sensation the spell gave me that's leading me in the right direction. I just hope that it's not downstairs somewhere; there is still a lot of shouting going on, and they all sound panicked. I imagine that

if they found me in the house, it would be kill first and ask questions later and whereas they wouldn't mind killing me, I am opposed to killing them, I just have this feeling that we're going to need them.

Fortunately, it seems to be leading us further down the upstairs hallway. Finally, I get to a door that Mayhem's tracking spell is pulling me towards, and I know that the key fragment is behind it. Poca alerts me at the same time that I pick up on the nasty spell guarding the door. They may not realise that they have the key fragment that the princes are searching for, but they clearly have something else in here that they want to protect.

"It can't hurt you, daughter. Open the door." The voice whispers.

It shocks me, not because of what it tells me because now that the words have been said, I instinctively know them to be the truth. What shocks me is that the voice has spoken to me so soon after the last time; that has never happened before.

Poca whines as I reach for the door but doesn't stop me as I simply grasp a hold of the handle and pull the door open; I feel the tingle of the spell, but none of the effects that it's supposed to have, and I walk straight through, Poca following behind me. The room is full of priceless and magical artefacts, and there's no wonder they had such a deadly spell on the door.

I am curious why I could break that spell but not the one that Astaroth cast on me to hold me still. Maybe it has something to do with when I use my new magic, it's possible that each time I use it, I get stronger and the new magic grows.

I really don't have time to think about this right now, and I follow the tugging to the other side of the room and quickly locate the box perched on the mantelpiece above the fire. It's not in any of the display cases dotted around the room, each one of them with deadly spells protecting them. Which means they don't think it's worth protecting.

Poca suddenly becomes alert, and I hear footsteps rapidly moving down the hallway and heading in this direction, fuck. I

didn't want to use the Void again, but I'm going to have to or risk getting caught. Grabbing the box, I call Poca to my side just as the door begins to open and then step into the Void, just in time to avoid being seen by the supe walking through the door.

The Void welcomes me like usual, but I need to get back, so instead of lingering like I want to, like my magic is asking me to, I imagine the spot on the outside of the first layer of wards and step through.

My fist swings out as I sense someone approaching me quickly and I flip my attacker over my back as I draw my sword, landing on top of my attacker and holding it to his neck.

"Whoa, Farren, it's just us," Loki says, appearing next to me as the others all step out of the woods. I look down at Mayhem beneath me, his eyes wide but heated, and I wince.

"Shit, sorry. It's been one hell of a night. I guess I'm still on edge." Standing up, I hold my hand out for Mayhem to take and help pull him back up. As soon as he's standing, he wraps me in his arms.

"Yeah, we know that. Why do you think we're out here," Storm says, with a slight bite in his tone.

"What?" I ask with a frown.

Before he can reply though, Poca makes himself known, bounding around them all and loving on them.

"Poca? When did he turn up?" Zev asks.

"A hellhound?" Grey asks, and I remember that Poca was still doing his only appearing to me and making me look fucking crazy to everyone else.

"It's a long story. Can we just get out of here, and I'll explain everything when we get back," I reply, aware that we are really exposed out here, the main house is in chaos, and I have no doubt that they will be sending extra patrols out soon to make sure that their people are safe.

They share a look, but they instantly do as I ask, and Grey wraps an arm around my shoulders as we quickly make our way into the surrounding woods. I'm glad when I see that they haven't brought the carriage, as that would be far too conspicuous. Of course, they know that so that's why they didn't bring it, and my brain is circling.

We end up with some of us doubling up on the horses as we ride back, under the cover of darkness, as we're soaring high above everything my mind and my body calms. I got what I went in to get, and I overcame my fear and took out Astaroth. He can never hurt me or anyone else again. Although his soul will be in the Underworld, it will be contained to the side where the most evil of beings ends up to be eternally tortured.

As soon as we make it inside, Grey directs us to one of his more homely and comfortable sitting areas and I happily sink into the plush couch, my hand sinking into Poca's fur.

"What the fuck happened?" Killian asks, "You were fine, excited and happy, and then suddenly we felt this overwhelming fear. I have never felt anything like that before."

I sigh and sit up straighter, "Everything went off without a hitch at first. I got through the weak spot, and then into the main area surrounding the house. It wasn't until I was perched on the window sill outside of the room where the object was that it started to get interesting." I then explain what I overheard.

"So the third key fragment is in the Underworld," Rival replies.

"Yes, Prince Remehus was very proud of that fact. He had no idea that they had a fragment in their possession." I reply.

"Well, we aren't going to be able to get to the third piece while the Shadowlands is still on lockdown," Loki adds.

I nod, "True, but I have a theory about that. Poca didn't show up until after I broke the mirror that was controlling the dark magic. So, I think that it broke the spell holding the Shadowlands hostage or at least part of it."

“That sounds plausible to me, although I think it’s more likely that it’s only part of the spell.” Grey starts, “I am reasonably certain that there are two more factions that are being controlled by dark magic, and of course they are the biggest ones. The smaller ones seem to be unaffected.”

“If that’s the case, then we need to break the other objects in the other factions in order for us to get the other pieces,” Mayhem replies.

“This must be a part of the Warrior games,” Rival mutters with a frown.

“Well, we were brought here by the portal, and we would have been recalled if it weren’t.” Storm replies.

“All true. I have never known a trial to last as long as it has already though, and I am quite well versed on the history of the games,” Grey adds.

“What are you suggesting?” Kill asks him.

“I’m not sure, but it may be that this trial is actually more than one, that for some reason the fae realm and most likely a couple of the gods or goddesses have decided to change things up a bit,” Grey replies thoughtfully.

“Why would they do that?” I ask.

Grey shrugs, “They get bored.”

My eyebrows raise, but before I can ask the question of how in the realms he could know something like that, he winces before he cries out in pain, and his hands grasp the side of his head like he’s trying to hold it together. Rushing over to where he’s dropped to his knees, my hands flutter unsure how to help him.

“Grey, are you okay? What’s happening?” I ask him, his eyes meet mine, and I can easily read the pain in them.

“Let me through so I can see what I can do?” Loki questions, gently moving me out of the way. Loki’s hands glow as he holds them over Grey’s hands, still holding his head. “There, that should help.”

Grey slowly moves his hands and then breathes out a sigh of relief as he falls back on his butt.

“What the fuck was that?” Killian asks.

Grey just stares at us as if he’s not willing to trigger whatever it was again.

“I’m guessing that was the effect of telling us something that his silencing spell didn’t want us to know,” Rival suggests.

Grey nods but looks confused, “I don’t know how I managed to even say that much. I have never been able to before, and I’ve wanted to say a lot.”

His eyes meet mine; he means he’s wanted to tell me.

Chapter Eighteen

“How do you know that the gods get bored?” Zev asks and then winces, especially since the rest of us are practically glaring at him. “Sorry, of course I don’t want you to say anything that will trigger that reaction again.”

“It’s okay. I’d be curious in your position too,” Grey replies, his voice slightly hoarse.

“I’m actually ordering you to try not to trigger it,” Loki warns, and Grey looks at him incredulously like he’s not used to being ordered to do anything, and I suppose that’s true. Loki isn’t having any of it though. He raises his eyebrows and crosses his arms over his chest as he stares him down, “You can give me that look all you want; I am not backing down on this. Do you even realise what was causing you that much pain?”

Grey looks confused but impressed as he answers, “It was just a headache.”

Loki scoffs and shakes his head, “No, it wasn’t just a headache. It was your blood cells in your brain bursting over and over again, as soon as they heal, they burst again, and I don’t know how much of that your brain can take before it’s irreparably damaged, and I can’t heal it. So, I’m ordering you not to try to tell us anything. It’s not worth it; it’s not worth your health.”

Grey seems surprised by his words and then looks around at the rest of us, we all have the same firm look on our faces.

He clears his throat, “You would all pass up on knowing information that could make your lives easier, that could help with all of this just to stop me from being in pain?”

“Duh,” I reply.

“You’re one of us,” Storm shrugs.

“Thank you,” Grey replies, and then clears his throat and looks at me, “what else happened?”

“He’s right, the amount of fear that you felt, that we all felt,” Killian says, looking at Loki and Storm, “none of what you just told us explains that, so what else happened.”

I hesitate, my gaze lands on Grey, and his eyes widen as he pushes himself up off the floor and moves toward me.

“Farren, what happened?” he asks, crouching down in front of me.

“Astaroth,” I reply.

Understanding fills his eyes along with a healthy dose of anger, “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I froze. It was like I was paralysed with fear and I was suddenly weak, right back where I was when he had me.”

“Astaroth?” Storm bites out.

“One of her main tormentors from the Underworld,” Grey answers for me.

“Fuck,” Killian curses, looking tormented himself.

All of the guys are looking at me in concern, but not with pity which I’m grateful for. I don’t feel pitiful I feel strong, I ended one of my tormentors, I overcame my fear and feel fucking good about it.

Zev leans forward in his chair, “Did Poca save you?”

Grey shakes his head before I can answer, “No, that’s impossible. Hellhounds are strong but wouldn’t be able to take down a higher-level Underworld demon like Astaroth. He’s pretty much impossible to kill.”

“If that’s the case, how did you get away?” Rival asks me.

The wheels in my head are spinning; if he’s so impossible to kill, how the fuck did I manage to do it so easily.

“Farren?” Killian asks, sensing that I’m not telling them something.

“I didn’t escape,” I reply, my smile sharp.

Zev's eyes narrow slightly as one of his eyebrows raises with confusion, "You must have. You're here."

My sharp smile grows, becoming proud, "I killed him."

Grey shakes his head, "Are you sure? He's not easy to kill. Maybe you just knocked him out?"

I can't help but look amused, "He had a hole in his chest that I could've put my head through, and then he went poof."

"Poof?" Loki asks, sounding amused despite the seriousness of the situation.

I nod, my smile excited, "Yeah, he went poof. He exploded into black glitter."

"What?" Grey asks, his voice coming out in a snap. "That's impossible, unless."

"Oh no, don't you say anything else," I say firmly, "I'm not watching you go through that pain again."

"Fine," Grey says somewhat reluctantly.

"It's alright, man. When we're supposed to know, we will," Zev reassures him.

Grey studies him closely but nods.

"No one has asked the most important question yet?" I say, changing the subject.

"Oh, and what's that, Darlin'?" Kill asks me, looking damn proud.

"Did I get the key fragment?" I reply.

When I don't say anything else, Mayhem chuckles and asks, "Well, don't keep us in suspense, Sparky. Did you get it?"

I smile and reach my hand into the Void; I left it in there when I transported myself out of the castle and beyond the ward. It's different to the main part of the Void that I walk through. I use little pockets that are a part of the Void to store weapons mostly but they are useful for storing other things as well.

“Of course I got it,” I smile and open it up, showing them the part of the fragment that’s inside.

“You’re amazing,” Zev grins.

“Why don’t we put it in the safe with the other piece?” Rival suggests.

“We could put the pieces together and see what happens?” Loki suggests.

“No, I don’t think so. We aren’t sure what is going to happen. So it’s probably best that we keep the pieces apart for now.” Grey replies, and from the frustration in his voice it’s obvious to us all that there’s more that he wants to say but can’t.

“Okay,” Rival replies, and then adds, “Are we even going to put the key pieces together? I mean we only need the key whole if we want to open the gate, right?”

“Or close it,” Storm adds ominously.

“Well, that was cheery,” Killian teases.

While they start to bicker, I stand up and head out of the room to put the box in the safe in the library with the other one.

“I’m going to get some food ready,” Grey calls after me.

“Okay, I’ll meet you in the kitchen. I’m going to check in on Xerxes as well.”

“Have fun,” Loki calls after me.

It takes me no time at all to stow the key fragment with the other one, and when I put it on top of it, I can feel the magic of the key pieces reaching for each other; they clearly want to be whole again. Closing the door to the safe and locking it, which automatically reinstates the wards I start to walk away before something encourages me to turn back around and add another layer of wards to the safe.

Once I’m done, I frown, that was easier, and the ward is stronger than any that I’ve cast before; I think my earlier suspicion about my magic getting stronger after each use was

correct. It would also explain how I walked so easily through the ward that was on the door guarding the key fragment; it didn't break; I simply walked through and somehow granted Poca access as well, keeping him safe while keeping the ward up. Grey obviously knows something, but he can't tell me; Xerxes might know something though; he's old, really fucking old.

I walk the aisles of books until I find him. He insisted on being placed on the shelf with the other books, said that he felt the most at home there and that he loved hearing the stories from the books that surrounded him. He explained that even though we couldn't hear them, he could.

"Xerxes? Are you awake?" I ask, when I find his shelf.

He pulls himself out from between the other books and flaps his pages as he moves over to a nearby table and lands.

"Farren," he says, sounding pleasantly surprised. "I'm surprised to see you."

"Why?"

"I'm normally left alone, even by past masters, once they've gotten information from me, or unless they want information from me," he explains.

It's at that moment when I hear the sad resignation in his tone that I decide not to ask him if he knows anything about what is going on with me, I don't want him to think that's the only reason I wanted to come and see him, especially since that was an afterthought any way and I really was just coming to see him.

"Well, that was shitty of them," I reply, "I wanted to come and check in on you. You've had a big upheaval and I wanted to check that you were okay."

"Really?" he asks incredulously.

"Yes, really. So, how are you?" I ask as I take a seat at the table. It's kind of weird to talk to someone who doesn't have a face. I'm used to reading facial expressions, but his voice is very expressive, and I'm just going to have to rely on that to tell me how he's feeling.

“I’m good. I like it here,” he replies and then adds, “I hope I can stay.”

“I see no reason why you couldn’t if that was what you wanted to do. I’m sure that Grey would be happy to have you here.”

“Will you be moving into the house?” he asks.

“Yes, eventually, when I have restored it properly,” I reply and then add, “If you would like to, you could come back there with me. You can either go back into the room we found you in, or we can find you another place in the house that you’d prefer. It’s entirely up to you.”

There’s silence for a minute while he thinks over my offer, “You know, I think I’d like that. Not in the room, though. I don’t particularly appreciate being confined in small spaces. You know that as soon as the house is back to its original glory and it understands that you mean it no harm, it will come out of hiding.”

“What does that mean?” I ask curiously.

“Well at the moment, it has retreated to the room that you found me in. The house is still very much magic and alive, but the last owners fixed it with magic, and it didn’t like that, so it retreated to the room that no one else knew existed. The good news is that the house clearly likes you because it opened the door.”

“I hope so, I adore that house, and I want us to live together harmoniously when I finally manage to get everything fixed and where it should be,” I reply with hope.

“Have no fear. I think you’ll be surprised by how welcoming the house will be; as I said, it likes you.”

“Does the house have a name? I mean, it’s sentient?” I ask curiously.

“No, he doesn’t, but not for the same reason that I don’t. He didn’t like the first owner very much and obviously didn’t like the second, so no one named him.” Xrexes explains.

“Well, I’ll have to change that if he will allow me to,” I reply.

“He will, he’s a little grumpy at first, but once he decides he likes you, then he becomes a giant teddy bear who would die for you.”

“I can’t wait to be formally introduced to him,” I smile.

Xrexes pages ruffle, and he lifts up into the air as he moves closer to me, and I stay still, wondering what exactly he’s doing.

“Farren, are you aware that you have a Maradrache in your hair?” Xerxes asks.

“What?” I reply, staying still. “Aren’t they deadly, and why is it in my hair? How did it get into my hair? And where is it?”

“It’s okay, just stay calm, I don’t think that it’s going to hurt you, or it would’ve by now, I sense that it’s been there for a while.”

“Okay, so what should I do? I can’t even feel it, and my magic didn’t pick up on it at all.”

“They have incredibly good cloaking skills. Hold your hand up to your hair and see if you can coax it out. It’s scared,” he replies.

Doing as he says, I hold my hand up near my hair and figuring it can’t hurt, I start talking, “Hey, I don’t know how you got in there, but I’m not going to hurt you. Why don’t you come out so we can introduce ourselves properly?”

Despite my nerves, and the fact that I know they have the ability to kill any supernatural creatures from any of the realms with a single bite, when I feel a tiny nose nudge and sniff my fingers I stay still. My intuition isn’t tingling, and so I trust that it’s not going to hurt me. Ever so slowly, it climbs on my hand until it’s settled in my palm, and I can feel small claws on my skin and a long tail moving against my wrist.

“I’m going to pull you forward now, okay? I’m not going to hurt you, I promise.” I say gently, and I feel the tail wrap

around my wrist gently.

So far, it hasn't tried to hurt me, but there's very little information on them as anyone who has seen one has ended up dead, I don't even have any idea of what it could look like. When I say there's very little information, I mean we named it and know that it can kill anything; that's it, that's the extent of the information we have. If Xerxes says that's what's in my hair though, then that's what's in my hair. He is far more knowledgeable than me and most likely most supes since he's been around for so long.

When I finally pull my hand forward and get a good look at the most deadly creature in the realms I couldn't be more surprised. Not only is it tiny, but it's cute as fuck. It tilts its head as it studies me just as closely as I'm studying it. It's a tiny dragon with black scales that have an iridescent shimmer to them that catches in the light as it moves its wings. Its forked tongue snakes out and tickles my hand, and my lips start to tilt up into a smile before the panic sets in that it's just licked me.

"Don't worry; you won't die unless he wants you to. Curiously enough, he seems to be inquisitive. I think he likes you," Xerxes warns me.

"It's a he?" I question.

"Yes," he answers with a fondness in his voice.

"Is he a baby? He's smaller than I imagined him to be?"

The tiny dragon tilts his head to the side, looking like a cute puppy, before he starts running around in circles and chasing his spiked tail. While the crown of dark night blue horns spark, it reminds me of the way that Killian and Storm's horns produce a fireball between them when they have strong emotions.

"No, he's not a baby. One of their many skills is being able to change their size. Most of them like to remain this size until they're about to attack and then they will increase their size until they're bigger than their opponent unless it is more

advantageous for them to remain small, they are the ultimate hunters.”

“Wow,” I reply, and then look back at the Maradrache in my hand, “you’re a pretty fucking amazing creature aren’t you?”

It makes the cutest little chirping noise as it flaps its wings proudly.

“How did you end up in my hair?” I ask, not expecting a reply, so I’m shocked when its eyes meet mine, and a series of pictures appear, showing me how he was in the room where I found the key fragment, that he was guarding it and was supposed to end anyone who came near it, but when he saw me, his mission changed from protecting the key to protecting me.

“As far as I know they can’t communicate with other supes,” Xerxes says.

I smile, “Apparently, he can, he showed me how he was tasked with guarding the key fragment and killing anyone who tried to take it until I showed up and then it changed to protecting me.”

“You know it’s very rare that I’m caught off guard by information that I didn’t know,” Xerxes replies, sounding both intrigued and amused.

I shrug, “It’s not really surprising, there’s so little information on Maradraches that I’m surprised you know what you do.”

“So he’s protecting you?” Xerxes asks.

“Apparently, but I don’t know why, and I don’t know who told him to protect me. He didn’t decide to share that,” I reply, as I gently raise my hand and run my fingers down his back. Logically I know that this is probably a stupid fucking idea, but he hasn’t tried to hurt me yet, so I can’t help myself.

“Has he got a name? Since you gave me mine, I’ve realised the importance of having one.”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask him,” I reply and lift my hand so I can see him better, “do you have a name?”

To my surprise, he nods and then shows me a picture of his name written on a piece of parchment.

“So what is it?”

“Merikhah,” I reply and then add with a chuckle, “but he likes to be called, Meri.”

“Well, that’s a damn interesting name. It means death,” he replies.

“Fitting, but I like Meri better,” I say, and then realising how long I’ve been gone for, I add, “okay buddy, do you want to go back into my hair to go and meet the guys or stay on my hand?”

Meri seems to consider it before he runs up my arm and settles back into my hair, I guess he’s staying there then. “Okay, I just have one request; please don’t kill any of them; I like them.”

I feel his paw tap my neck and a wave of reassurance goes through me. I’m going to assume that means that he won’t.

“Farren?” Xerxes asks.

“Yes?”

“Please may I come with you, I can’t wait to see your men’s reactions to Meri,” he asks, and the amusement in his voice is more than evident.

I smirk, “Of course. Do you want to fly, or would you like me to carry you?”

“I’ll fly.” He replies.

Chapter Nineteen

“Hey, Love,” Loki greets me as soon as I step foot into the kitchen.

“Are you okay? You were gone for a while,” Storm asks, looking concerned.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I thought I’d be more shaken up than I am after running into Astaroth, but I really do feel okay.” I reply, knowing that’s what they’re worrying about.

Kill’s smile has a distinct edge to it as he replies, “It’s amazing what killing the person who tormented you can do. They say that revenge never makes you feel better, but sometimes it really does.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Grey replies.

“That’s not why she took so long though,” Xerxes sing songs.

Raised eyebrows and curious looks turn my way, and Rival asks, “Oh? So why did you take so long?”

I decide there’s no way that they’re going to believe me unless I show them, so I hold my hand up to my shoulder and say, “Come on, Meri, the guys want to meet you.”

Loki pulls a confused face, “Meri? Who the fuck is Meri?”

Meri decides that this is the perfect time to make his entrance and scurry’s forward onto my hand; of course, there are no pictures of Maradraches anywhere, so the guys move closer.

“Okay, now I understand he’s cute as fuck,” Zev mutters, peering down at Meri, who’s strutting around in my hand and showing off.

“I’ve never seen a dragon like him before,” Reaper mutters and then frowns, “but Ryu is cautious; he won’t let me get any

closer than I am already. He's unsure why but his instincts are screaming at him."

"That's probably because he's a Maradrache," Grey says cautiously, with knowledge in his eyes that he shouldn't have.

None of us bother to ask him how he knows that, after what happened in the front room, we won't risk asking him something that could trigger that pain in him again.

"What the fuck," Storm exclaims as they all move back away from me.

"Farren, Love, you need to explain how you have all the realm's biggest threat sitting on your hand all cute and shit?" Loki asks.

I explain everything, and by the end of it, they're all looking at me even more shocked and are still keeping their distance.

"Okay, so now you have a hellhound and a Maradrache protecting you." Rival mutters.

"And we have no idea who told Meri to protect Farren," Reaper adds.

"He won't hurt you guys unless you hurt me," I decide to reassure them since they're still standing far away from where I am with Meri.

"Are you sure? Because he's looking at me," Rival asks, sounding more than a little bit cautious.

"I'm sure," I reply and walk closer, holding up my hand and then stroking Meri with my other one and cautioning him, "Be nice."

Meri nods, much to the surprise of everyone, and Xerxes chuckles, obviously finding this amusing.

Rival is obviously taking too long to stroke him because when Poca makes his appearance, Meri flaps his wings, lifts himself off my hand and lands on the floor in front of Poca. We all watch cautiously as Poca watches him and then shockingly lays down on his belly, resting his head on the floor as Meri approaches him cautiously, they stare at each other intently, and Meri shocks me when he grows in size not

by much but obviously bigger than he was. The way they're staring at each other makes me think that they're having a conversation.

"Well, neither of them has hurt the other, that's a good sign, right?" Zev asks.

"Definitely. Although it's not surprising, they both protect you and want to keep you safe. So, why would they harm each other?"

Kill nods, "Okay, that makes sense."

We carry on watching them, curiosity overtaking everything else. Poca suddenly lights a small portion of his fur on fire right between his shoulders and lets out a huff that almost sounds like a laugh as Meri moves around him and clambers up his side heading straight for the portion of Poca's back that's on fire.

"Whoa, careful Meri, a hellhound's fire kills the majority of creatures that walk the realms," I warn him and smile when he pauses.

However, he doesn't seem to heed my advice at all as I swear he winks at me and then runs towards the flames on Poca's back; he snuggles down, releasing a happy sigh and falling asleep within seconds even as Poca stands back up. Now he's slightly bigger, I can hear tiny snores coming from him, and it's the cutest damn sound I've ever heard.

"Alright, I know he's here to protect you, supposedly, but he's sleeping in hellfire like he's having a warm fucking bath, hellfire that would kill any one of us if we touched it," Rival exclaims.

"Apart from Farren," Zev adds.

Grey's eyes snap up from where they are staring at Meri and Poca; his eyes widen before narrowing slightly, "You can touch his fire? Not just his fur?"

I nod, "Yes, I always have been able to. It doesn't burn me; we found that out by accident."

Grey shakes his head, and in a voice so quiet that I don't think any of us are meant to hear, he mutters, "What the fuck is she playing at?" When I raise my eyebrow in question, his expression shutters and he clears his throat as he adds in a normal tone, "If you don't mind me asking, when did he first appear to you?"

I pause before answering, so I can ensure I answer truthfully, "I think I was about four. He showed up after a particularly bad beating from my father. He was only a baby himself."

Sensing my distress at the memory, Poca whines slightly and comes to my side, resting his head against my stomach, as I sink my fingers into his fur and give him light scratches. I can feel the heat from his fire, but I don't need to worry about it burning me, and just because I can feel how incredulous Grey is about the whole situation right now, I reach my hand into the flames and stroke the top of Merri's head making him make the cute chattering noise he did earlier.

"This is impossible," Grey says, sounding truly shocked, and I get the impression that it doesn't happen often.

"What do you mean?" Rival asks, his curiosity high.

Grey sighs and takes a seat, prompting us all to do the same. Meri stretches and moves from the fire circle on Poca's back to curl up on my lap. He's still the size of a small cat, and I stroke his scales as I wait for Grey to answer Rival's question. I know that my bond with Poca is unusual, but it appears that it's more uncommon than I thought. Poca lies down next to me, and he's big enough that he can rest his head on my lap next to Meri with ease.

"None of what Farren can do makes sense, in general, but even more so when it comes to Poca. Hellhound pups have zero control. They kill, maim and eat everything they can, and it takes centuries for them to become as calm as Poca is right now. Not only that, but I don't know any supernatural apart from Hades himself that can touch their fire," Grey explains.

"Fantastic. Why can nothing ever be simple when it comes to me? It's strange enough that I get a familiar, that's rare, but

I get a hellhound which is stupidly rare, and he's also special," Poca huffs, and I smile as I stroke him again, "I'm glad you find it amusing, dude. Add to that the fact that I can do things with my Void magic that no one has been able to do, at least not that I can figure out anyway. The Void is changing," I reply, not meaning to say it out loud, but it's too late now.

"What do you mean?" Storm asks.

"Also, Darlin', that's what makes you so special and one of the many things that we all adore about you," Kill adds, smirking at me.

"What he said," Loki grins.

I decide to ignore them both because I have no idea how to deal with it and answer Storm, albeit reasonably vaguely, mainly because I don't have the answers and also because I don't think I should, not yet anyway.

"Ever since I could enter the Void, it's been black, like pitch black, the only pinpoints of lights being the doors that I summoned myself in order to walk through them." I start to explain.

"And now?" Mayhem asks.

"Now, it's still dark but not as dark, and we've already learned that there are creatures there. I just feel like there's more to it." I try to explain.

"From all the accounts that I've read from Void users, they all describe it how you first describe it, I haven't ever heard of there being creatures in the Void, but our last task proved that not to be true." Rival adds.

"Things are changing," Grey says ominously.

"Everything will be revealed when it needs to be," Zev adds, and when we look at him, he smirks.

"Well, I guess that's the end of that then," I smile and notice that the slight tension around his eyes disappears entirely. I think it will take him a while before he stops worrying that we're going to get angry with him for not filling us in on something he's seen.

“What do you think about all of this?” Kill asks Xerxes, his lips tilting up, “Meri can kill you too, right?”

“Probably. I am kind of a supernatural creature, so it stands to reason. It’s just amusing because in this room, there are the most powerful supernaturals that I have ever come across, and the majority of you don’t even know your own strength and how far your magic can really go.”

“Care to expand on that?” Storm asks him, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Nope,” Xerxes replies, popping the ‘p’.

Rival is sitting next to me, watching Meri closely. I think Meri is aware that Rival wants to stroke him but is nervous because he opens his eyes and flies out of Poca’s fire and onto my lap, still the same size as a house cat. Once he’s settled back down, Rival looks at me, and I nod in encouragement, he pauses slightly before slowly reaching out and stroking his back. Meri closes his eyes and enjoys the gentle touch. He can obviously somehow sense what I’m thinking because I get a flash of images almost too fast for me to really see them, but I get the same impression from each one, pain and suffering. Inflicted on him and that he’s inflicted.

Speaking in my mind and trusting that he can hear me, I make a promise that neither I nor anyone else in this room will ever intentionally hurt him, that he’s safe with us.

He makes this cute, almost purring noise and snuggles down further into my lap as Rival withdraws his hand.

“Alright, well since that’s cleared up, let’s eat and then get some sleep. We’ve had another crazy day. We can go over the plan to break the dark magic holding the other two factions under the Princes control and how we’re going to get the last two pieces of the key, all of it tomorrow.” Storm orders.

The topic quickly changes to more relaxed conversations as we eat, and it’s not long until I can barely keep my eyes open, exhausted from the stress of the day.

Moving Meri into my arms, I stand up, Poca moving to get up with me, “Good idea. I’m going to go to bed, guys, it’s

been a long few days, and I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

“Alright, Love, sweet dreams,” Loki replies, standing up and kissing me on the cheek before he makes his way over to the kitchen side of the room to get himself some more coffee.

One by one, all of the others get up to give me hugs, and either kiss me on my forehead or cheek; by the time I finally turn around to leave, I feel like I’m floating on air. I’ve never experienced a feeling quite like it, the feeling of being cared about by so many people.

I go through my bedtime routine of showering and getting ready for bed. At the same time, Poca and Meri make themselves at home on my bed, and it’s not until the lights are off and I’m under the covers that the events of the day and, more importantly, Astaroth catch up with me. I don’t cry, it’s not in my nature, and if it were, then I would’ve spent the majority of my life crying. I’ve certainly had enough reasons to. Even so, a single tear makes a wet track down my face and lands on my pillow. Poca whines and nudges my hand until I place it on his head as he gets as close to me as possible, and once again, surprising me, Meri nudges my nose with his own and looks at me with sad and understanding eyes.

I stroke him gently, both of them, but I can’t seem to find it in me to reassure them with words, and I know that they don’t mind. That one tear is quickly followed by more, and there’s nothing I can do to stop them. I reach out to the bonds and close them down as much as I can without making Loki, Storm and Kill suspicious. Although, by this point, I hope that they’re all asleep anyway.

Memories start to press in on me as his face flashes through my mind him smiling and laughing as I scream in pain. Meri growls, his growl mixing with Poca’s, and I somehow realise that they’re both able to see what I’m seeing. I don’t know how to stop it, and I get the feeling that they don’t want me to; in some strange way, it’s almost a relief to share it with them.

The tears won’t fucking stop. Why won’t they stop?

Mayhem

I'm tossing and turning in bed. I can't get the look on Farren's face when she thought I was someone from the Underworld out of my head; she hid it well when we were talking and at dinner, but I could see them, the shadows in her eyes. She looked haunted. I know what that's like, and because of that, I know that she is not okay now, and I can't fucking stand it. But ultimately, what right do I have to go and check on her?

We've been through a lot together, but her connection with me isn't nearly as strong as it is with the others, and I don't know how welcome my presence will be. Throwing off my covers, I sit on the edge of my bed, trying to figure out what the best thing to do would be. I need to see for myself that she's okay, the thought of her hurting and alone is physically hurting me and the severity of my reaction to it makes me realise that my feelings for her are a lot stronger than I thought they were.

Finally, I can't take it any more, something in me is screaming that I need to go to her, and I know I'm not going to be able to rest until I know for certain that she is okay. Getting up, I stride across my room to the door, aware that I'm only in loose linen pants but too focused on what I need to do to bother with grabbing a shirt. As I pull open my door though, I pause as I find my dishevelled looking brother standing on the other side, looking as if he were about to come in and dressed in much the same way as I am.

"Worried about her brother?" I ask him.

He nods, "I saw it in her eyes, and I know you did too. The fear, the memories."

"I saw. I couldn't let her relive it all alone, and she puts up such a good front that I'm not sure the others even picked up on it."

"I don't think so, or they'd be doing what we are."

“They might already be there,” I reply before adding, “Come on.”

We move down the hall in silence, but where we started the walk to her room at a brisk pace, we both seem to get the urge to move quicker, to get to her now, at the same time and within seconds, we find ourselves standing outside of her door, as we both listen to see if we can hear the others.

“She’s crying,” Rival’s voice is clogged with emotion and without any more words needing to be said we both push through the door, finding the room empty apart from Poca, Meri and Farren all curled up on the bed together, Farren looks smaller and more vulnerable than she has ever looked before and to see her like this breaks something in me. I want to tear the fucker apart and watch him bleed for what he’s put her through, and I know there were others. I may not be able to take out my anger on him, but I can on the others, and she doesn’t know it yet, but I can be a sadistic bastard when I fucking want to be, especially when someone I care about is hurting.

“Easy, brother,” Rival mutters under his breath, “she needs comfort right now, not vengeance.”

I nod that I heard him, and force the darker side of me down, now is not the time for it to come out and play. Meri and Poca are obviously on edge, so we both approach the bed cautiously; neither of us is equipped to go up against them if they decide that our presence here is unwelcome. Farren is so consumed by her tears that she isn’t even aware that we’re in here and we weren’t exactly quiet when we entered.

Meri and Poca are though, and they watch us closely as we approach. I try to convey that we just want to be there for her, and I hope that they get the message because, one way or another, I am comforting Farren.

Chapter Twenty

Mayhem

To my utter surprise, as soon as we're right at the edge of the bed, they get up, moving away from Farren and leaving space for us instead. Farren lifts her head to see where they've gone, and when she sees us, I almost expect her to play it off like it's nothing and pretend that she wasn't crying; instead, she cries harder, like seeing us allows her to feel what she is really feeling.

Neither of us can stand it a second longer, and we both dart forward at the same time. I lie down next to her pulling her head onto my chest as Rival moves behind her and wraps an arm around her; we hold her close as she falls apart in our arms.

"Let it all out, Farren. We've got you," I tell her softly as I hold her hand in mine, wishing that I could take the pain away and make it easier for her.

"We're not going anywhere," Rival adds, holding her tighter.

My eyes meet his over the top of Farren's head resting on my chest, and I know that he's finding this as hard as I am, seeing her in pain and not being able to take it away for her, not being able to make it better and only being able to offer her our comfort and nothing else. We come to an agreement at that moment, without words needing to be said, no matter the cost, we are going to protect her and help her. We both care about her a lot more than we should and far more than the warrior bond is supposed to help us care about each other.

Eventually, the sobs quiet, and she drifts off to sleep. She hasn't asked us to stay so I'm not comfortable staying while she's asleep; the last thing I want is for her to think that we think that we're expecting something just for being here for

her. My eyes connect with Rival's over her head, and I can see clearly how hard this was for him.

"We should go now that she's sleeping," I whisper quietly.

He nods, "Yes, I don't want her to think that we've taken advantage of the situation."

I nod in agreement and slowly start to edge myself out from underneath her, trying not to disturb her as Rival starts to lift his arm from around her waist so that he can move out from behind her.

"Don't leave, please?" Farren mumbles and we both glance at each other before my eyes drift down to Farren to see her red rimmed eyes gazing back at me.

She reaches one of her hands down and rests it over the top of Rival's hand on her waist showing him that she wants him to stay too.

"If that's what you want, Farren, then of course we'll stay." Rival replies, snuggling back down behind her.

I lean forward slightly and kiss her forehead, "We'll be here for as long as you need us to be."

Sleepily she replies, with her eyes now closed, "What if I never want you to leave?"

"Then we won't leave," Rival replies like it's the easiest promise to make to her and it is. Neither of us is willing to leave her; we're both in too deep.

"Get some sleep, we'll be here, and if your demons decide to come back to haunt you, then we'll protect you. You're not alone." I add.

She doesn't bother to reply as she smiles softly and drifts back off to sleep. Rival soon follows, and I worry that this situation could trigger some of his own memories, and mine. I struggle to fall asleep after that because I want to make sure that I'm there for both of them, even though they both seem to be sleeping peacefully. At some point, Meri and Poca join us on the bed as well, and I become surrounded by soft snores that are strangely relaxing.

Farren

I wake up slowly, wrapped in warmth that, at first, I think is thanks to Poca and his always hot fur, but then last night comes flooding back, and I can't help the smile that lifts my lips. I felt like I was drowning until they came in, and somehow, they made it easier. I have no idea how they knew that I needed them, but I will forever be grateful that they did. If they hadn't shown up I know I would've been stuck in my horrifying memories for the rest of the night and they wouldn't have stayed specific to Astaroth they would've included my father and several other experiences that I'd rather forget.

"How're you feeling, Sparky?" Mayhem asks me, using the nickname he gave me yesterday.

"That was probably the best night's sleep I've had in a long time," I reply honestly.

He continues to watch me, his expression is unguarded, and because of that, I see when it switches from concern to something else entirely, my body immediately heats.

Mayhem's voice comes out gravelly as he says, "You need to stop looking at me like that."

My smirk widens as I reply, "Look at you like what?"

The bed shifts behind me as Rival's face appears above mine, his eyes filled with heat, "Like you're thinking about doing dirty things to him."

"To you both, actually," I reply, taking advantage of their shock to lift my head and kiss Rival. His lips caress mine with a hunger that shocks me. I'm in control of the kiss for mere moments before he takes over, as he nips my bottom lip and

takes advantage of the gasp that escapes me to tangle his tongue with mine.

I become aware of Mayhem's hand clenching my hip, and there's no way that I want to leave him out, pulling my mouth from Rival's, I turn to look at Mayhem; his eyes are blazing with heat, and instead of simply kissing him, like I did Rival because I'm not sure how he'll feel about it I raise one of my eyebrows and give him a challenging look. He rises to the challenge with no hesitation at all as he pulls me on top of him and I eagerly kiss him, his hand runs up my back and tangles in my hair, holding me tightly as he deepens the kiss. When I feel a different set of lips start kissing my shoulder and up my neck, I damn near explode at the sensations and moan needily as all the nerve endings in my body spark and ignite.

I don't want to stop, I want them both naked and wrapped around me, but my stupid fucking instincts are telling me that I need to slow this down. I am so fucking tempted to ignore them, but the feeling intensifies, and I know that if we did continue and I did get what I wanted, this feeling would ensure that I don't enjoy it properly anyway.

I smile as I pull back from Mayhem, giving him one final quick kiss and then turning to Rival to do the same before hopping off Mayhem.

"I now need to take a long shower," I mutter, grinning and then quickly getting distracted by the delicious show of abs that they're putting on right now. I mean seriously, they're so fucking defined that they both look like damn sculptures.

Rival pushes up so he's leaning on his elbows and makes his stomach flex as he asks, "Weren't you going in the shower?"

Feeling more than slightly flustered, despite the fact that not only did I start this but I was also being so cool about it earlier, I reply eloquently, "What, huh, hmmm?"

Mayhem's eyes dance with heated amusement as he adopts the same pose as his brother and adds, "The shower? Sparky, you were going to take a shower."

Clearing my throat and reluctantly dragging my eyes away, I murmur, “Right, shower. That’s what I was doing,” throwing my hands up in the air, I turn back to face them, “you know this is entirely your fault if you weren’t so damn lickable, I wouldn’t be having trouble concentrating right now.”

Rival looks like he’s desperately trying to hold in a laugh as Mayhem asks, “Wait, you’re mad at us because you think we’re lickable?”

I nod, trying to remain serious and not laugh, “Yep, totally your fault.”

Rival finally bursts out laughing, and Mayhem grins, raising his eyebrow, “Whatever you say Sparky.”

Their laughter follows me into the bathroom as I shut the door behind me and lean back against it, unable to stop myself from lifting my fingers to feel my kiss swollen lips. Damn, those two can kiss, and although the kissing me at the same time didn’t last that long, it does make me wonder just how well they work together in other aspects of the bedroom because, yes, please, do I want to explore those. I have no idea why my instincts warned me not to continue, it’s not like I’m shy about sex or even that I don’t trust them. After last night I trust them with not only my life but the rest of me as well. I trust them on a more personal level and not just to have my back in a fight. That’s special to me, because I don’t give that kind of trust out easily.

When I finally come out of the shower after relieving some of the tension that the two had built up in me, I find the room empty and a note on my pillow.

Reading it out loud I chuckle, “Best morning wake-up ever. I think you might find yourself with permanent bed buddies now. Rival and I have never slept so well. We’ve headed to the kitchen for lunch since we all overslept,, Poca came with us, but Meri’s hanging out somewhere.”

Sure enough, Meri bounds towards me from underneath the bed. He’s still the size of a house cat but has obviously decided that my shoulder is where he wants to perch. As he flaps his wings and lands smoothly, he rubs his face against mine,

chittering happily like he's telling me all about his morning. I hum and ah in all the places I should as I listen to him on the way to the kitchen.

"Morning Love," Loki smiles as soon as I enter the room and I receive similar greetings from them all.

As I take a seat between Storm and Killian, I ask, "So, what's on the agenda for today?"

"Well, we need to get into the last two factions and destroy the spells on the objects that the princes are using to control them." Grey starts.

"Definitely. I was thinking about it last night, and if Poca came through, then hopefully, that means that whatever is holding the Shadowlands hostage has started to weaken." Reaper replies thoughtfully.

"Maybe you should try and see if you can get outside the barrier using the Void?" Zev suggests.

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I mean, in theory, it's a similar mode of travelling as what Poca does when he appears and buggers off." I reply.

"After everything that's happened, I'd rather that one of us goes with you, I'm not risking you. If the rest of the fae realm have worked out that the Shadowlands is on lockdown, then it could cause problems, the last thing that we need is to be questioned or taken in," Storm adds.

I nod with a smile, "You won't catch me arguing."

"That's a first," Storm replies sarcastically with a grin.

I stick my tongue out at him but don't bother replying as the guys all try to figure out who will be coming with me.

"Can I go, if it's okay with Farren? I haven't been into the Void with her before and I'm curious," Grey asks.

"That's fine with me," I reply, standing up.

Grey's eyes widen slightly, "Wait we're going now?"

I raise my eyebrow, "Yeah, no time like the present and all that shit. A couple of things though, do not let go of me. You

will get lost if you do, and there are things in the Void that don't take kindly to strangers and will most likely try to eat you."

"Got it," Grey agrees, with an excited light in his eyes, "I can't say that it would be a hardship not to let you go."

Reaper chuckles, "That's why he really wanted to go."

My smile is amused as Grey just smiles and shrugs, not even trying to deny that's why he wants to come.

"Are you shrinking down and coming too?" I ask Meri, just assuming that Poca will stay behind, he's not keen on coming with me into the Void.

Meri answers by making himself smaller and then scurrying up my arm and settling on my shoulder. I hold my hand out for Grey to take, and he quickly accepts it.

"Be careful, and for fuck sake stay together okay?" Killian warns.

I nod as I pull on my Void powers and step through into the darkness that always feels like home to me and fills me with so much peace.

Grey

I have to admit that I am intrigued to see what the Void looks like through her eyes, it's been a long time since I've travelled it, and I want to see if I can see the changes that she's saying that she can see. I thought I was somewhat in the loop when it came to Farren but it appears that there have been some things left out. Unfortunately, I am more than aware of how these things usually work and if I haven't been told then it's for a reason.

Not that I'd be able to tell them or help her in any way, thanks to this stupid fucking silencing spell on me. I was looking for a way to break it even before they all turned up,

sensing that I was going to need to be able to speak freely. I found nothing.

It's hardly surprising that when I step into the Void that the changes that Farren spoke about are evident. However, I pick up on something else, something that she didn't measure and something I'm not sure even she is aware of. The creatures that reside here, seem to be drawn to her, they're following alongside us, just outside of the light that she is radiating. What is strange about their behaviour is that they are by no means harmless, but they're all watching her almost reverently, the urge to speak to them to see what they know and why they're behaving like they are is strong, but I can't let go of Farren, and if I show her that I can speak to them then it's going to trigger the negative effects of the silencing spell and if that happens I won't be able to communicate with them anyway.

They are clearly protective of her and I have no idea how they would react to me anyway. Their behaviour is baffling.

"So what do you think?" Farren asks as we linger in the Void instead of heading straight through the door that will lead to just outside the barrier.

For the first time since we entered the Void, I look at her instead of the surroundings and the strangely behaving creatures. She looks stunningly beautiful; she's glowing, her hair seems to be moving in a breeze that only affects her, and her eyes are not only glowing, but they've turned black with bright glowing flecks of gold. Using one of my gifts, I look at her more closely and see the swirling strings of magic surrounding her, not only that but she seems to have a direct attachment to the Void itself which I have never heard of before. Squinting I notice something in her magic that is concealed but connected to all of her magic somehow.

"Grey?" she asks, snapping me out of the magic I was using to see her magic here. The grip on my hand tightens.

"You look different here," is my eloquent reply. I can't help it; she undoes me and affects me in ways that after so long I thought it was impossible to feel.

“I do?” she asks me curiously, a small smile tilting her lips.

“Yes. It’s cold here,” I reply, trying to change the subject.

She shrugs as we continue forward toward the glowing orb that she refers to as doors, “Is it? It’s always warm and comforting for me.”

“Hmm, that’s interesting,” I reply thoughtfully.

“Can I ask why or is it one of those things?” she grins, looking up at me as we continue to move the door.

“One of those things, at least I think it is,” I reply honestly.

“Alright well, let’s not risk it. Let’s see if we get through to the other side.” She suggests.

I pull her to a stop just before we step through, “Wait, where is the exit point? I don’t want to risk running into any guards that they may have put outside.”

“Why would they put guards outside the border?”

“Because the shadowlands pose a threat to all of the courts in the Fae realm, from the Shadowlands you can exit into any of the courts, it holds a central position. If one of the courts gained control of the Shadowlands, then they’d have easy access to all of the courts.”

“How did I not know that?” she asks.

“It’s something that the kings and queens of the courts have worked very hard to keep out of public knowledge,” I explain.

“Okay, could there be a link between that and the Princes plan?”

Her question shocks me because I hadn’t even considered that, “Why would you think that?”

“For one, my father was heavily into dark magic, and that sounds like something that he’d do,” she replies.

Chapter Twenty-One

Grey

“Well fuck.” I curse. “That’s something that we need to look into. Storm and Killian’s father is the King of the Autumn court, right?”

She frowns, “Yes, how did you know that?”

I shrug, “I know a lot. My point is they might have some information. I hope you’re wrong; otherwise, this goes further than we thought and gets complicated. The corruption is far-reaching.”

“We know that the monarchy is corrupt, at least most of them are. I think there’s probably a high chance that King Lucien is involved with dark magic; he was a close friend of my father,” she replies.

“Good point, and that’s concerning. Let’s see if we can get through the barrier and then go and ask the others some questions and see what they know about their father’s involvement.”

“We also need a plan to get to the other factions as well,” she adds.

“We certainly have a lot to do,” I reply. “But my original point was that we don’t want to cross over to any of the usual cross-over points but instead somewhere more remote.”

She nods, “Don’t worry, I know the perfect place. I will be highly surprised if they put guards there. The locals aren’t exactly friendly and known for accommodating outsiders.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

She nods and then squeezes my hand as she steps toward the glowing door, however when she steps through, my hand is zapped with pain and magic, and I hit a wall as I try to step

through; her hand is ripped from mine as she disappears from sight and I'm left alone in the Void. I know the dangers of being here without someone who has the Void gift, and Farren very definitely isn't here. She better be okay, or I'm going to lose my shit. The thought of something happening to her has always haunted me, but now, after spending more time with her, something has changed and grown, and I will destroy the realms if something happens to her. The Princes will be the least of everyone's problems if something happens to Farren. I will watch the world burn, and I can guarantee that there will be several other extremely powerful supernaturals joining me.

I am pulled out of my thoughts as a loud and threatening growl echoes around me, and I remain still, now that the light from the door has gone out and now that Farren has left, the Void has gone back to being pitch black, and I can't see a damn thing. I channel some of my magic into my eyes, and the world around me appears, it's still dark, but at least I can see what is surrounding me.

Fuck, I hope like hell they believe that I mean Farren no harm because, in my current state and with how many of them there are, they could very definitely take me out.

Farren

Stepping through the other side, Poca appears next to me having decided to make his own way here rather than travel through the Void with us and Meri still securely snuggling on my shoulder, I become acutely aware that Grey is not with me, which means he's left alone in the Void. On the plus side, the forest that I've come out into is entirely devoid of anything but creatures, and the fact I'm here proves that we were right about me breaking the spell on the first object weakening the spell that's holding the Shadowlands hostage.

My only worry now is what if I can't get back into the Void; not only is this not the best place for me to be hanging out, but

if I can't leave and go back through the Void, then it means that Grey is stuck in the Void and there's every chance that he could die in there and I can't lose him, just as much as I can't lose any of the others. I have very real feelings for them all.

Well, there's only one way to find out if I can get back in or not, and if I can't, then I'll figure something out. There is no way that I'm abandoning Grey in the Void, not to mention all the other complications that will happen if I'm stuck out here. I mean, if I'm not in there to participate in the Warrior Games, then does that mean I fail?

Realising that I'm stalling because I'm panicking, I call my Void magic forward, asking it to take me to Grey and hoping that it works since I've never tried to go to any specific place in the Void, and especially not a person. I usually just step inside and then call the door to me.

When I step through, I'm so relieved to see that Grey is alive, albeit looking a little bit tense, I don't take any notice of anything else as I launch myself at him, wrapping my hands around his neck as he scoops down to hug me back.

"Erm, Farren, while I am extremely glad that you are back, could you please reassure the creatures surrounding us that I mean you no harm?" Grey asks, his arms still around me.

My eyes widen slightly at his words, and as soon as he puts my feet on the ground, I spin around to see what exactly we're dealing with. We're surrounded by so many creatures of different kinds as far as I can see in the darkness. But standing directly in front of me, I see a familiar face, and I smile as I step forward, holding out my hand to him.

Grey's hand on my arm tightens, stopping my progress, "Farren, don't approach them. The only reason they aren't attacking is because you have the Void gift. You absolutely cannot pet a Void beast."

I'm about to argue my point when a couple of the pups that I saw when I brought Laikynn home run toward me.

"Farren!" They call excitedly, and I'm surprised when Grey lets go of my arm and takes a step back instead of trying to

stop me from advancing. It's almost like he can understand them, but I assumed that I could understand them because I have the Void gift.

"Hey guys," I greet the pups as they rub against me, and I stroke their heads. Even though they are babies, they are already ridiculously big, which isn't surprising because their parents are fucking huge. Speaking of, I incline my head, "Hello, Laikynn, how're you?"

He stretches one of his feet forward as he bends his other leg and bows to me, "Much better, thank you, Bellator Regina. We were protecting your mate for you while you left the Void."

I really fucking hope that we are both speaking in the language that none of the guys understood and that Grey doesn't understand it right now because otherwise, there are going to be a lot of questions that I don't know how to answer.

"Thank you, Laikynn," I reply with an affectionate smile. I reach back for Grey's hand and add, "We need to get going."

"Of course, next time you have the time, we would love to give you a tour. I have a feeling that this place will surprise you." Laikynn offers.

"I would love that," I reply and then tilt my head as one of the smaller creatures catches my eye. It's different from the others. Whereas they're solid, this one seems to be wispy around the edges, not quite substantial like it's here, but it's not at the same time. It's cute in an odd way, with huge purple eyes, a small snout and a mouth filled with sharp teeth, its body is almost cat-like but smaller, with a tail that's twice the size of its body, and its feet have some wicked long claws on them.

Laikynn follows my gaze and his eyes fill with knowledge as he nods.

"See you soon," Laikynn says affectionately, and I watch as he leads all of the creatures further into the darkness.

"Well that was interesting," Grey mutters.

I turn to face him as I ask my magic to provide me with a door to get back to the castle and the guys, just like Laikynn there is knowledge in his eyes, and for some reason, he looks shocked. I ask, “Was I speaking a different language again?”

He nods, “Yes, you were. Where did you learn to talk to the Void beasts?”

“I didn’t learn it so much as it just happened. Laikynn was a part of the first trial for the Warrior games, I brought him home. Did you understand them?” I ask curiously.

He just looks at me but doesn’t say anything as we step through the glowing door and back into the kitchen. Either he doesn’t want to answer that, or he can’t, whichever reason it is though; at least I don’t have to talk about the whole mate thing and whether he knows what Laikynn called me.

“How did it go?” Storm asks as Kill pulls me into his arms.

“Well, Farren can get in and out, but I can’t,” Grey replies as he strides into the kitchen and grabs a glass before filling it with some pretty fucking potent fae liquor. He downs it in one and then immediately fills up the glass again, making the others all look at me curiously.

“Are you okay, mate?” Reaper asks.

Grey nods, “Yep.”

“Wait, you were left in the Void without Farren? Did something happen?” Rival asks.

I quickly explain what I walked back into the Void to, and Grey just nods along. I’m starting to think that he really did understand what was being said and now knows something important. The thing is if he isn’t willingly sharing whatever that information is, then he can’t because of the silencing spell on him.

“Okay, I feel like there’s more to it, but we really need to talk about how we’re going to get into the next faction’s stronghold. We are now certain that breaking the dark magic objects will weaken the spell holding the Shadowlands hostage,” Mayhem adds changing the subject.

“Before that, we need to discuss something else,” Grey starts, seeming to have calmed down now.

“Okay?” Loki asks.

“Are you all aware that Shadowlands is central in the Fae realm, and from it you can access all of the courts?” Grey asks them.

“What?” Reaper asks.

“No, I had no idea, but that would explain why my father has always been so interested in the Shadowlands,” Storm replies.

“That’s actually where I was heading with this, Farren pointed out that her father was heavily into dark magic,” Grey starts, and I interrupt.

“He was also working on something, and he spouted all of that shit about me not being in the games, or it would lead to war and his death.”

“And he was close with our father before you killed him,” Kill replies.

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if Lucien were involved with the Princes. He’d be more than happy to give them any information that they’d need so long as he was getting something out of it,” Storm adds.

“So, that’s something else that we need to try and figure out. We need to know if Lucien is definitely involved, what he had planned with the princes and who else in the rest of the fae realm knows about what the princes are trying to do,” Zev replies.

“Hopefully, it’s more of a coincidence than an actual threat,” Reaper says.

“Before we can look into it, we need to break the remaining two cursed objects and break the spell holding the Shadowlands hostage, and then we need to find the rest of the parts of the key and make sure that the borders of the Shadowlands aren’t being guarded.” Loki replies..

“Don’t forget that we also have the whole Warrior games thing. This is a task, but there are some inconsistencies surrounding it and why it’s so much longer than any known task in the history of the games.” Rival reminds us all.

“You know, I almost forgot about the whole Warrior games thing. The first task was a breeze compared to this one,” Loki replies and I nod in agreement.

“Me too,” Kill replies.

“I can get us a meeting with Remiki, he’s wanted to do business with me for a while and has been requesting a meeting. I’ve put it off for a while, but I’m reasonably certain that he will still be up for a meeting.” Grey announces.

“Great, okay, so you get a message to Remiki to see when you can have the meeting, you aren’t going in alone, and I will not send Farren off to break the spell by herself either,” Storm starts and then looks at me crossing his arms over his chest, “don’t even try to argue with me, Farren, you aren’t doing it alone after what happened last time and don’t try to argue that you have Meri and Poca now because I’m just not risking it.”

I glance over at Mayhem and Rival, who both nod, we shared something special last night, and I will never forget that they were there for me when I needed them most. They also showed me that it’s okay to have help and I don’t have to do everything by myself.

I shrug, “I’m not going to argue. I don’t want to risk running into someone else from the Underworld. Besides, I’m starting to realise that it’s actually more fun to do things with people rather than on my own.”

“Well, that’s a first,” Storm smirks, and I promptly stick my tongue out at him. Killian chuckles underneath me and kisses my neck, making me jump slightly.

“Do we need to do the location spell again?” Loki asks.

“No, we’ll wait and see how quickly they respond first.” Grey replies. “I’m going to go and get this message sent.”

Once he’s gone, we turn and look at each other, “Alright so what do we do now?”

“I don’t know, we’ve got at least today. It feels weird not to have something else to do,” Zev mutters.

“Well, let’s find something to do. I think we could all do with some down time after the last week,” Storm suggests.

“We could shoot stuff?” I suggest with a smile.

The guys look at each other, before Zev asks, “Why is it that your first choice to chill out is violent?”

I shrug, “I like violent stuff.”

“I know; why don’t we start clearing stuff at your place? Get it ready to start fixing up?” Loki suggests excitedly, and I’m surprised to see that the others look equally as excited as he is.

“Seriously? We finally have a few hours of free time, and you want to go back to the house?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes,” Rival replies for everyone, sounding enthusiastic.

“What are we talking about?” Grey asks as he walks back into the room.

“We’ve got some time to kill, so we thought we’d go back to Farren’s place and start clearing it out and seeing what needs to be done,” Mayhem replies.

“That’s a great idea.” Grey smiles and then turns to look at me, “Now that Xerxes has told us that the house is actually sentient, you’re going to need to be really careful about who you hire to work on it.”

“Oh shit, I hadn’t even thought about that,” frowning, I reply.

Reaper stands up with a small smile, “You don’t need to hire anyone. I reckon that between us all, we have enough skills that we can get the house how you’d like it.”

My eyes widen, “Seriously?”

“Yeah, we all have various skills there’s no reason why we couldn’t get it done,” Killian replies.

“That would be great,” I reply. “I’m sure there’s a couple of things that we might need help with, but I want to respect the house as much as possible, and the fewer people that know about it, the better.”

“The only problem is going to be time, but I’m sure things will calm down at some point,” Zev says, as his eyes flash white for a second.

“If you guys really want to do this, then let’s go. I’m kind of wondering what other secrets the house and grounds hide,” I reply.

“Speaking of, I’m going to run and see if Xerxes wants to come too,” Loki adds as he quickly leaves the room, and the rest of us follow, heading toward the yard.

It’s not long before Loki joins us with Xerxes, clearly having filled him in on what’s going on, and we fly straight through the wards at my place and land in front of the house. When we all get out and approach the door, it opens by itself, and the lights inside the house, which I’m fairly certain didn’t work, turn on, letting off a welcoming glow.

“Well, that’s new,” I mutter.

“I told you that the house clearly likes you,” Xerxes replies. “All of you.”

Walking inside, I pat the wall gently, “Thank you, house. We’re going to be making notes on what needs to be fixed and all that sort of stuff. Don’t worry; we’re going to do it without magic, so we don’t mess with yours or change the original house. Is there anything that you would like us to start with?”

“Is she asking the house?” Zev asks, sounding slightly confused.

“It’s a wise move.” Grey replies.

“How is the house going to tell us what it wants us to start with?” Killian asks curiously.

Before any of us can guess what it could do, glowing silver arrows appear on the floor leading further into the house, and I grin excitedly, “I guess that’s how.”

Without waiting for any of them I take off at a sprint after the arrows wondering where they're leading. The guys very quickly follow behind me, and Poca appears ahead of me skipping along happily as Meri takes off from my shoulder, grows in size and then flies ahead with Poca.

I'm surprised when the arrows lead me to the kitchen.

"Huh, this is not where I thought the house would want us to start," Grey says from behind me as he follows me into the big space.

"Me neither, but if this is where it wants us to start then this is where we'll start," I reply.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I think I know what your house was thinking,” Rival smiles as he nods to something behind my head.

Spinning around, I can't help but chuckle at the heart in silver magic on the kitchen wall, “The kitchen is the heart of the house.”

“Well, let's get started,” Rival smiles as he pulls out a leather-bound notebook and a pen, “we're starting in the kitchen, obviously, so we need to know what you want it to be like and then we can work out what supplies we need.”

“While you guys are doing that, we're going to go and have a look around and see if there's anything here that obviously needs to be fixed,” Storm adds, winking at me.

After they've left, I glance around the empty kitchen, “You know it would be better if we had somewhere to sit to do this.”

As soon as the words have left my mouth, a solid wood table and two chairs appear on the dining side of the kitchen, courtesy of the house, and I have no idea how it's managed to do it.

“That is so fucking cool,” Rival mutters as we head over.

“Thank you, house,” I say gratefully.

Once we're settled, I can hear the guys walking around and laughing, and I have to admit that it's nice to hear the house full of people. When I bought it, I thought that I would be here alone, and it's only just occurring to me that I will never have to be truly alone ever again. It's an amazing feeling. A gentle touch on my hand brings me out of my thoughts, and my gaze collides with Rival's knowing one.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, it’s just nice to hear people in my home,” I reply, somewhat honestly, although I’m not giving him all the details.

“You know that if you let them when this place is done, they won’t be leaving ever. I can hear Loki picking out his room.” Rival replies and then studies my reaction closely to see if I’m freaking out.

Surprisingly I’m not, “You know that’s an idea that needs some more thought.”

The way his eyes light up tells me that he’s pleasantly surprised by my reaction, and he leans forward, kissing me softly before he pulls back, smirking at my shocked expression and then looking down at his notebook.

“Alright, so how do you want this place to look when you’re done?” he asks me.

I take a moment to get my breath back because damn can he kiss, and then clear my throat to answer him, “I want it to be as close to the originally built house as possible, but if it’s okay with the house then I’d like some modern conveniences and décor.”

Rival and I let out a shocked chuckle as the word *duh* appears in the house’s silver magic on the tabletop.

“Only you would get a sassy house,” Rival chuckles.

“Well it did already smack Loki when he tried to get into the safe in the hidden room.” I remind him.

“Yeah, I love this house,” Rival smirks.

“It’s amazing, and I can’t wait until it’s actually finished.” I reply and then add, “Alright, where do we start? I have some ideas of what I want to do, and I have a rudimentary knowledge of building things the traditional way and without magic, but that’s mostly because I love power tools. Although, I’m not necessarily what you’d consider safe with them.”

Rival’s eyebrows raise as his orange eyes dance with amusement, “So what I’m getting from that is you are never to be left alone with any of the power tools.”

I pout, making him laugh. “Fine, but if I am not allowed to play with them under supervision, then I will go rogue, don’t test me.”

“Deal,” Rival replies, then gets us back on track by asking, “Okay so we’re starting in here. I’m fairly certain that when it was first built, they didn’t have the magic run stoves that we do now, so it’s good that the house is happy to have some modern conveniences put in.”

“Yeah, to be honest, I’m more appreciative of the fact that it means we can have indoor plumbing,” I reply.

“Good point,” Rival replies.

We spend the next couple of hours talking about what I want to do with the house and making sure that the house is okay with everything that we have planned. Poca and Meri are still exploring the house with the guys, and I can hear them moving things and deciding what can be kept, repaired and then what needs to be thrown too.

Grey interrupts us as he walks in and says something. I have no fucking idea what he’s just said because he’s got his sleeves rolled up, his hair is dishevelled, a long strand of it falling out of his low ponytail and framing his, making his angular and gorgeous features stand out even more. With dust all over him and grime smeared across his forehead, his eyes are lit up with happiness and because I’m so used to seeing him so put together and pristine, this alternative version is having an interesting effect on me.

“Why is she staring at me like that?” Grey asks Rival as my hearing kicks back in, and I try to subtly wipe my chin in case I drooled.

Apparently, my brain still isn’t working properly because I can’t find the words to formulate an excuse in time and that leaves Rival to answer for me.

Sounding highly amused, he replies, “Fairly certain that she thinks you look so hot that it’s broken her brain.”

Grey’s eyebrows jump with surprise as he looks down at his dishevelled appearance and then back at me, his lips ticking up

on one side in the sexiest half smile that restarts all the dirty thoughts that I just got under control.

As he opens his mouth to say something, Storm walks into the kitchen, “What are you guys doing? We need to get back to the castle and prepare.”

“Wait, what?” I ask, my brain coming back online.

“Grey got a reply from the faction. They want to meet him today, and that doesn’t leave us a lot of time to get ready and cast the spell to find the cursed object.” Storm replies.

“Well, fuck. Alright, let’s go.” I reply as Rival picks up the notebook, and I say a quick goodbye to the house, promising that I’ll be back as soon as I can.

The flight back is quick, and when we all get out, Storm orders, “Everyone needs to go and get changed and arm up. Then meet in the library, and we’ll go over the plan.”

Before we all disappear to do what Storm asked us, Reaper asks Grey, “I don’t suppose that you can draw up the map of this place as well?”

Grey shakes his head, “No, he’s very private, and I’ve avoided going there up until now. I should have some old maps of the estates in my library, but I have no idea if Remiki’s estate is in there.”

“That should be okay, I might be able to adapt the spell so that we can use it to track the cursed object once we’re in the house, and if I’m the one casting, it will make it easier to control and be more precise,” Mayhem suggests.

“Alright, you can be one of the ones that go with Farren then. We’ll work out the rest once we’re ready to get going.” Storm replies.

Poca runs ahead of me as he excitedly makes his way to my room so that I can arm up. He always gets this excited when we’re about to go on a job; he loves the danger as much as I do. Meri, however, has clearly worn himself out playing at the house because I can hear his little snores sounding in my ear from where he’s curled up on my shoulder in his usual place.

The weight of him on my shoulder is rapidly becoming a comforting thing.

Once I get to my room I strip out of my clothes and pull on the supple leather trousers that I usually wear on jobs, teaming it with a soft shirt and then adding various weapons harnesses. I really wish I had more of my weapons with me, but we had no idea that we'd be away from the academy for this long. By the time I'm done filling my harnesses with knives, swords and my whip, I am exceptionally well-armed and feel a sense of peace flow through me. I always feel more relaxed when I've got a lot of weapons on me.

Staring at the pile still left on the bed, I decide to open up the small pocket of the Void that I use to store things and place the weapons in there, just in case we need them. Once that's done, I pause on my way out the door, and Poca stops with me, looking up at me curiously.

“You know, I think that thanks to my run-in with Astaroth at the last faction, I may have become slightly paranoid,” I tell him since he's looking at me like he wants to know. He nudges my hand and lets out a rumbling growl that clearly states his unhappiness at that whole situation.

I suppose it's unsurprising that I might be more wary now. I was not as prepared as I should've been to see a tormentor from my past, and from my breakdown after it happened, it's clear that it affected me. I guess I should be grateful that I'm not terrified to do another job, but then again, these sorts of things are a part of who I am, and I could never deny myself this. It would be akin to denying myself something vital like food.

I am grateful that I'm not doing this job alone though. My men are formidable in their own right; as a team, very few people would stand a chance against them, and that's not even taking Grey into consideration, and whatever the fuck he is.

Shaking off my thoughts, I pick up my pace and then head out of the door and rush to the library to meet the others. I have no idea how long I've been and I don't want them

waiting for me, especially since we're on kind of a time crunch.

I'm not the last to arrive, which I'm grateful for. Killian's eyes travel my outfit, heating as they do before he nudges Grey, who's standing next to him, searching through a pile of maps.

"What?" Grey asks, sounding impatient as he turns around, and when his eyes land on me, they heat just like Kill's did as he mutters, "Damn."

Kill's smile widens as he looks proud, "Our girl looks damn good dressed in leather and armed to the teeth, doesn't she?"

My own eyes widen slightly at the use of our girl, but Grey doesn't even bat an eyelid. He just nods and replies, "Yes, she does."

"You guys don't look so bad yourselves," I reply with a smirk. In truth, they look hot as fuck and lethal, and I think it's how deadly they both look which is turning me on the most. Strike that; I know that's the thing I'm finding most attractive about them. The image of them both stripped naked and teasing me together, driving my need to insane heights, flashes through my mind, and I vow that I will have them both at the same time at some point in the future. I think it would be a crime for that not to happen, mainly because, in my mind, they are incredibly good at working together.

"Are you okay?" Zev asks with a knowing smile.

I frown, "When the fuck did you get here?"

"You know I'd be offended that you didn't notice the rest of us arrive, but with the way that you were staring at Grey and Killian, I have a feeling that something a hell of a lot more interesting was on your mind." Reaper's smile is mischievous.

I shrug, "I don't know what you're talking about. I was thinking about sandwiches."

Poca and Meri make weird sounds that sound like their versions of laughter, clearly knowing that I'm speaking out of my arse.

Zev's eyes flash white, seriously!?! Is he going to get a vision about this? His eyes fill with need as he lets a smirk slip free.

"She was certainly thinking about a kind of sandwich," he grins, and it takes a second for the others to catch on to what he means before I'm suddenly the focus of eight heated gazes.

Loki practically prowls towards me, his eyes flashing red as one side of his mouth kicks up into a dangerously sexy smirk that flashes fang and gets me even more hot and bothered. His eyes briefly move over my head before landing back on me, but I couldn't look away from him if I wanted to, so I have no idea who he was looking at or why.

He bends slightly as he reaches me, grasps me under my thighs, and hoists me up. My legs wrap around him as my arms go around his neck, one of my hands weaving into his hair with a firm grip that makes him growl.

We meet each other halfway, his lips firm against mine, and before I can process what's happening right now, I feel a person pressing against my back, and from the size of them, I'm guessing Reaper steps up behind me, the warmth of his chest seeping through my clothes and setting my nerve endings on fire. One of his hands lands on my waist, as the other moves the shoulder of my jacket away, and as his lips caress my skin and a shudder of need works its way through me.

Loki's tongue dances with mine as Reaper nips and then soothes the bite with his tongue; my hips buck as I involuntarily let out a breathy moan. My moan is echoed by several growls and not just from Reaper and Loki, which somehow just manages to turn me on more. Especially with Reaper's growl vibrating through my back, the effect of it making my core pulse with need.

My hand clenches in Loki's hair as I arch back so I can reach my arm behind me and grasp hold of Reaper, my nails lightly scratch his neck, and he bites down on my neck in retribution, causing me to moan breathily.

A sudden bark from Poca has us pulling apart, and I glare at him for interrupting us. The cheeky fucker just rolls his eyes at me and snorts. It's then that I notice that Meri is curled up in a circle of fire on his back; I was so distracted by the guys that I didn't notice him move from my shoulder, although I'm glad that he did.

Still breathing somewhat unevenly, I glance around at the others in the room, wondering what their reactions to witnessing this is going to be. Thankfully, none of them seems pissed or annoyed; they all just look turned the fuck on, and that I can definitely work with. They also all look like they're trying to hold themselves back from reaching for me, and although I am incredibly intrigued to see how this would play out, now that I'm not distracted by Loki's tongue and Reaper's lips, I remember that we are under a time crunch right now and should be doing other things.

With this in mind, I clear my throat and wiggle until Reaper steps back, and Loki slowly lets me slide down his body. I have to force myself not to think about the feel of their hard as steel dicks as they stay pressed against me for a moment before they step back.

Fucking hell.

Clearing my throat, I say, "We should probably get to work."

Storm's eyes are still glued to me, and I watch as he swallows thickly, his horns sparking before he nods and then replies, his voice husky with desire, "Yeah, we should. Okay, Grey did you find a map?"

"Not yet. I was looking through them when we got distracted by Farren," Grey replies with a smirk.

Raising my eyebrow, I reply, "Oh sure, blame that whole thing on me. Technically it was Zev's fault."

Zev looks at me incredulously, "How do you figure that?"

"Before this devolves even more, maybe we should see if we have a map?" Kill suggests.

“I’m not sure what we’re going to do if we can’t find one. I know I said earlier that I should be able to lead us to it, but thinking about it more, performing the spell in the house will give off a fairly big magical signature which will raise suspicions and let them know that we’re up to something. We don’t want to risk that.” Mayhem replies, officially getting us back on track.

Storm crosses his arms over his chest, “If we can’t find a map here, then that leaves only one option for us; we’re going to have to search the old fashion way and go through all the rooms we can. Which is going to be incredibly time-consuming and much more dangerous.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Xerxes starts, and I instantly feel bad because I had honestly forgotten that he was even in the room.

“No worries, mate. Have you got an idea?” Loki asks him.

His pages start flipping as he replies, “I have a current and up-to-date map of Remiki’s stronghold.”

“What?” Rival asks, mimicking the shock that we’re all feeling.

“Why didn’t you say something before?” Kill asks him almost accusingly.

“Because it only just appeared in my pages, it wasn’t there before, or I would’ve told you all.” Xerxes replies firmly, leaving us no room to question him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Wait, so a new page just got added to you?”
Loki asks.

“Yes, it can happen from time to time, and before you ask, no, I don’t know who put it there.”

“At least that’s taken care of one problem. Can we see it?”
Rival asks.

Xerxes’s pages start to move rapidly until a page comes loose and floats on magic over to a nearby table. The page grows in size and is a lot larger than it was when it was in the book.

“I figured that it was safer to remove the page since you’re going to need to burn it for the spell.” Xerxes jokes, and I snort.

“Good call, dude.” Loki chuckles.

“I’ll get the spell started,” Mayhem announces as he pulls all the things he’ll need out of a bag that I didn’t even realise that he brought in with him.

“Wait, before you do that, we all need to take a look at the map. We need to know the best entry point for Farren and the others as well as escape routes for all of us, should something go wrong.” Kill interrupts.

We all gather around the table to look at the map, and I realise something, “My team are going to need to know where the object is before we can plan an escape and entry point.”

“Good point,” Reaper replies and then looks at Storm, “can you memorise it well enough that you’ll be able to guide them after we’ve burnt it?”

Storm nods, his face serious, “Yeah, I can do that. Team one will be the team with Grey, which will consist of me, Kill, Rival, Reaper and, of course, Grey. Team two will be Farren,

Loki, Mayhem and Zev. Looking at the map of the stronghold, team two should be able to hide the horses in the surrounding forest; they're fae horses, so at the sign of danger, they will escape and be safe. If that happens, we can call them back when we need them. Team one will approach the gate in the carriage as would be expected of a meeting like this. Unlike the first stronghold, Remiki seems to have all of his followers stationed on the other side of the forest, so the only thing within the walls is the castle, and its gardens, which will make it easier for team two to get in. From that point, each team is on their own. We will distract Remiki and his men for as long as possible in order to give you enough time to get the object and destroy it."

"As soon as I'm pulling on the last couple of threads on the spell, I can let Kill know through the bond so that you guys know to get out." I start and then add, "I will have to go into whatever room that object is in by myself in my partial Void form, just in case it's like the mirror and the Princes can see into the room."

"I don't like that," Zev frowns.

"Me neither," Kill adds.

"As soon as I get eyes on the object and know that it's safe for you to be in the room, then I will signal that you guys can come in. I don't want to risk any of you being seen. We need to stay off their radar as much as possible." I reason.

"Yeah, okay that makes sense, but they already know about you. Astaroth said they were looking for you, right?" Zev asks.

I sigh, "Yeah, he did, but I'm fairly certain that I killed him before he could inform them that he knew where I was or what I was doing." I reply, and then changing the subject, I add, "When I broke the last spell, all hell broke loose. They were all disoriented and went straight into panicked attacked mode as they realised that they'd been used and what they'd done under that influence."

"Remiki's followers are known to be more violent as it is, so I imagine that they're going to take this realisation worse,"

Grey warns us.

Mayhem turns to look at Storm, “Have you got the map memorised?”

“Yes, I have. We need to get going. We’re running out of time.” Storm replies.

Mayhem simply nods and then starts the spell, having already set everything up while we were talking, and we all watch as the map shrinks in size, the spelled fire eating at the paper’s edges until a single point is left. I then end up staring at Storm in awed fascination as he quickly explains the entry point that team two and I should take, as well as several exits that will work for most hypothetical scenarios as well. I can honestly say that I find him incredibly hot right now.

Grey

Everyone was quiet and focused on the way here, and although I know that it’s partly them preparing for the job, I also know that, like me, they’re worrying about Farren, the effect that Astaroth had on her was intense, and none of us wants her to experience it again. I don’t think any of us will take a full breath until we get through this and come out of the other side without any more incidents.

“What do we need to know about this guy? Why does he want to do business with you?” Storm asks, no doubt in an effort to distract himself.

“I’m very influential here, and I have a lot of pull over the more powerful supernaturals that reside here, supes that are powerful enough that they have no need for the protection of the factions. Remiki has grand ideas of changing the way that the Shadowlands are run, and of course wants to be the one that rules over it. He knows that there is no way that those of us not in a faction will allow him to do this, and that’s where I come in,” I start to explain.

“He wants you to convince your powerful friends and connections to join his faction or give him the support he needs in order to take over.” Killian interrupts.

I nod, “Exactly. In this meeting, I’m going to make him think that I’m considering it. There will be a lot of showing off, posturing and all of that shit. We are not safe there, and you will need to be on guard and be prepared for this to go tits up.”

“Got it,” Rival nods.

None of them seems worried despite my warning, and I’m beginning to understand that they like the fight and the danger as much as I do. It’s refreshing. Although I do wonder if they will feel the same if they ever find out what I am.

“From what you’ve said, I’m guessing that their reaction to realising that they’ve been controlled is going to be fairly negative?” Reaper asks me, although it seems like he’s asking for confirmation more than asking because he doesn’t know the answer.

I nod.

“And what about your high profile and powerful connections? Is it going to cause problems for you if they find out about this meeting?” Rival asks, the wheels in his brain turning.

“I don’t think that it will cause any issues. They all know me reasonably well and are more likely to be curious about my ulterior motives rather than thinking that I’m going to try and recruit them or that I’m personally getting involved with Remiki.” I try to explain it as best I can. The truth is that some of these people have known me for a lot longer than even they believe, its yet again another side effect of the silencing spell cast over me.

There’s no time for any more talking as Remiki’s stronghold comes into sight. Whereas Temperance’s stronghold is a mixture of strength, safety and comfort, Remiki treats his as a boot camp and training ground of sorts and even though the sun has already dipped behind the horizon, you can still see

arcs of magic beyond the walls and dark shapes darting through the air as shifters practice their attack moves and dives.

He's a manipulative asshole, there's no denying that, but he does have one of the highest trained followings, and I'd be impressed if it wasn't because they were forced to join his army mostly out of fear. Personally, I have found that an army fights better for you and is more loyal if they are there because they want to be and not because they're forced to be. As soon as one of Remiki's soldiers are offered a genuine chance of escape with no repercussions, I can guarantee that they will take it.

The worst thing is he actually thinks that they would stay loyal to him no matter what. His own pride and arrogance so blind to him that he can't even conceive the thought that his own soldiers would betray him, and that is one of the many reasons why I will never be on his side. That and he has absolutely no care or regard for the people that come to him for protection, and even after the people realise that he's not going to live up to his side of the deal, it's too late for them, they will be tortured and killed along with their families if they try to leave, or seek protection elsewhere.

He is a vile man, very nearly the worst faction leader in the Shadowlands. He's only beaten by the incomprehensibly maniacal demon shifter that runs the last faction that we have to infiltrate. He's the most dangerous because he has the brains and intelligence to back it up; he's sneaky, unbelievably clever but surprisingly, he holds a strong set of values. The most terrifying thing about him though, is that he's bored, and all that he's currently doing is just a game to him. He's unhinged, but once you have his loyalty, it is unwavering. He's the most dangerous because he used to be my best friend and closest confidant before the abduction and the silencing spell. If anyone could see through this glamour that's been forced on me, it would be him. I have avoided him like the fucking plague up until now simply because it terrifies me to think that he won't be able to see through it.

The crazy fucker was like my brother, and having official confirmation that I've lost him because he no longer recognises me would destroy a part of me.

Of course, I am also worried about infiltrating his faction because his temper is legendary; very few people can withstand it when he loses his shit, and if he finds out that those fucking weasels have been controlling him, he's going to lose his shit in a big way, I'm not sure I can protect the others from his temper in this form and that scares me.

I pull myself out of my thoughts as the carriage jolts when it lands just outside the gates of Remiki's stronghold, as the guards hold them open for us, granting us access through the wards. I turn to the guys and mutter almost under my breath, "No matter how badly provoked, do not utter a word, even if you are asked a direct question. Remiki believes that all soldiers should be silent and not to speak unless, under certain circumstances, he will do it to try and get a rise out of you so he can order his men to attack in the hopes that they will take you down and he will be able to show off how superior he is." I warn them and then add with a smirk, "Although it would be highly entertaining to see you all wipe the floor with his men with minimal effort, we need to keep a civil distraction for as long as possible to give Farren and the others time to get to the cursed object. Women are viewed as nothing more than slaves and broad mares here, and it would be incredibly bad if they found Farren in the main stronghold where only the men are allowed."

"That's fucked up," Storm replies angrily, although he manages to keep his voice at a level where only we can hear him.

Rival's face is dark, but he says, "Fortunately, Farren will be able to decapitate anyone who comes at her and will most likely enjoy it too."

Killian's chuckle is dark, "Too fucking right she will."

"She's also got Meri and Poca with her, not to mention the guys. She is extremely well protected," I add, for my own

peace of mind but also noticing that they relax slightly as well.

Everyone falls silent as the carriage comes to a stop at the base of the vast stone steps leading inside. I have a split second of panic where I realise that I didn't fill them in on any of the protocols that guards are expected to have, but I needn't have worried. They seem to have been trained in this kind of thing because, without any prompting from me, Rival and Kill stand up, moving toward the door and stepping out. Kill holds the door open as Rival stands opposite him, both of them staring straight ahead as Reaper is the next one to exit and walks a few feet away from the carriage before pausing and waiting for me to exit.

I can't help but glance at Storm, impressed, and he just inclines his head and smirks knowingly as he gestures for me to go ahead and step out. I smile briefly before I drop all emotion from my face as it becomes a blank and cold mask.

As soon as I've cleared the carriage, Killian and Rival flank me as Storm takes up the position behind me, protecting my back. There have been very few people over my many years of life that I have trusted to walk behind me and it comes as a shock that I trust him to protect me. Reaper remains ahead of us so that I am protected on all sides, as would be expected, and we all walk in silence as two of Remiki's soldiers lead us up the steps and into the opulent foyer. His followers are starving and living in conditions barely suitable for animals, and yet he can afford to have a gold fountain in the shape of himself in the middle of his entranceway.

Fortunately for me, I have become very well-practised in the art of ensuring my expression remains blank and doesn't show the absolute disgust I feel. We all remain silent as we're led through massive intricately carved doors into a lavish dining room. The table is big enough to seat forty and laid out with all manner of foods that would satisfy all the various dietary needs of the majority of the supernaturals that reside here. It's a show of wealth and power and one that doesn't impress me in the slightest. This is another reason why Remiki will ultimately fail in his goal. He doesn't know how to

change up his approach according to his audience. Whereas the show of wealth would work with someone else, for me, I'd take him a lot more seriously if he showed me the training grounds and showed his skills there.

That's where Khaos, the ruler of the last faction, will always succeed; he puts in the time and research to know his target, knows what would win them over, and knows their weaknesses. The difference is that Khaos is playing with them all, he's bored, and that's more dangerous than Remiki could ever hope to be.

In a show of power, Remiki doesn't stand when I approach the end of the table where he's sitting, which instantly rubs me the wrong way, purely because of the lack of respect he shows, he may be in charge here, but he needs something from me and should be doing everything in his power to convince me to do what he wants. This guy is fucking ridiculous, and I'm actually confused about how he's managed to gain this power.

"Grey," Remiki greets me as I take a seat, Storm and Killian standing guard behind my chair as Rival and Reaper stand further back, keeping their eyes on the room and the other guards in the room.

Instead of replying, I simply nod, a power play of my own that has the desired effect when Remiki frowns with disapproval. I wouldn't put it past him to try to drug me. He knows that I'm going to be a hard sell and would instead take the easy route rather than put the hard work in to convince me that I should work with him and convince the others to do so as well. With this in mind, I pick up the wine goblet that has been placed in front of me, and I subtly send out a small thread of my magic to test the drink for any kinds of poisons or sedatives, when it comes back clear of both I take a small sip.

Remiki swirls his own drink around in his goblet before he takes a sip himself and then raises his eyebrow, "I must say I'm quite curious as to why you have decided to meet with me now?"

Pausing because I know that not answering him as soon as he asks a question will wind him up, I then reply, "Well,

Remiki, you have been trying to get a meeting with me for over a year now. I feel that kind of dedication deserves to at least be heard. So here I am.”

His eyes tighten slightly as my words subtly hint at the fact that he’s been desperate in his pursuit of getting a meeting with me, he nods curtly and replies, “It is very much appreciated.”

“Indeed. What is it that you want from me?”

Remiki straightens out the cuffs of his shirt before he replies, “It’s more about what we can do for each other.”

“I’m listening,” I reply, pretending to sound intrigued but, in all honesty, I’m just downright bored. I miss being in these kinds of meetings and being challenged, having to think on my feet and unsure whether the outcome of the meeting will turn in my favour. This little meeting is reminding me of the time before, and I hadn’t realised how much I missed it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Loki

Getting in here was a little bit dicey, but not as difficult as I had assumed. There appeared to be more spells and wards to prevent people from getting out than there were to prevent people from getting in, which seems a bit backward and suspicious to me, but from what Farren was telling us on the way over here I shouldn't be surprised.

We haven't encountered anyone yet, and we're following the magic from the map, which means we're on the third floor. It's slightly less opulent up here, but there's not too much difference, and it's over the top, to say the least. This fucker clearly loves himself; there's a painting of himself at least every two metres, and I wish I were exaggerating.

"How much further?" I ask quietly, we haven't seen anyone for a long time and there's no sign of anyone on this floor anyway.

"It should be in the room at the end of the hall," Mayhem replies, as he nods to the large door that is bigger than the rest of the ones in this hallway and clearly holding something important.

"The arrogance of this fucker is insane," Farren mutters.

Zev shrugs, "People like him, who like to exploit others for their own gain, tend to be arrogant enough to think that they will never be on the receiving end of subterfuge or theft."

"I couldn't agree more. My father was the same way," Farren replies.

I watch curiously as Zev and Farren share a knowing look. I know that he had a vision about her, and I'm starting to realise that he most likely saw some of her past, if not all of it.

“Who the fuck are you?” someone calls out, coming out of a room just ahead of us.

I don't understand how it's possible that none of us picked up that they were in there. They must have some kind of dampening spell on the room. Three more guys follow out after them, and Farren wastes no time at all in immediately decapitating a burly shifter. Zev throws a punch at the Fae male approaching him rapidly; the speed that he manages to do it is impressive, I'm not entirely convinced that he doesn't have more magic than his visions, and I make a quick mental note to ask Rival and Grey to look into the Head Seers in the past and see if they had any other magic that they kept secret because I swear I just saw his eyes flash with literal flames and that's not normal. Nor is the speed and force that he's fighting with. It's also clear that he is playing with the fucker, prolonging the fight to make it last longer. While Mayhem fights a magic user, utilising his own magic to take him on, I move my focus from watching Zev to the guy that is charging me, he's a big mother fucker, and we really don't have time for me to play with him like Zev is doing with his opponent, so using my vampiric speed, I dodge around him wrap my arm around his neck tilting his head to the side to give me better access to his throat. I feel my fangs elongate even more, and I have a brief moment of indecision, simply because Farren has never seen me like this before, and I'm not sure how she's going to react to it. The last thing I want to do is scare her or make her wary of me. I can feel the fucker pinned to me building up his magic, no doubt readying a deadly spell.

I don't have a choice, and it's not like I can hide this side of myself from her forever, and I wouldn't want to.

My teeth sink into his neck, and although I'm tempted to feed, we don't have the time, and we have no idea whether these fuckers managed to warn anyone else that we were here, which means instead of feeding as I would like to do, I simply rip his throat out using my teeth and then, just to make doubly sure that he's dead I twist his head from his shoulders, dropping it to the floor and letting it roll out of the way of his body. Some supernaturals have the uncanny ability to piece themselves back together even if they've been beheaded.

The hallway is silent, and I'm aware that Mayhem and Zev are moving the bodies back into the room that they came out of so we don't attract any unwanted attention, but my eyes are too busy seeking out Farren to see what her reaction is to bother helping them. Her reaction is not what I thought it would be; she is watching me with interest and almost want, which doesn't make much sense to me, but so long as she's not looking at me in fear, then I don't care.

Although her reaction does bring up other thoughts that I had been trying to squash ever since I first smelt her blood on that very first day. She smells better than anyone I have ever smelt before, and I bet her blood tastes even better than she smells. I am aware of what that means, but I'm not sure either of us is ready to deal with everything that will come along with that, which is why I haven't told her what I suspect. I haven't even told the guys, but that's for a different reason. I'm reasonably confident that they have feelings for her and are drawn to her in the same way that I am, we all see how everyone else is feeling about her, including Grey and Zev, and yet we haven't had a conversation about it, one that is becoming increasingly more important.

Taking blood from a willing donor that you don't have to glamour and where there are feelings already is incredibly intense and can create a connection that wears off over time unless regularly triggered. However, it can also trigger a dangerously obsessive reaction in someone, and there are no signs beforehand that it will happen. You'll often find that vamps in relationships don't feed from their romantic partners and if they do, they only do it once a year to avoid the risk of triggering the obsessive side of giving a vampire blood. The only time when vamps feed regularly from their partners is when their partner is their mate. It strengthens the mate bond between them and the vamp won't actually be able to actively feed off of anyone but their mate once they've found them and tasted their blood. It's incredibly rare, and you're more likely to find what we call a true match pairing. It's not quite as intense as a mate bond, and the main difference is that the vampire in the pairing or group can still feed off other beings and creatures. It's also possible to get a true match pairing

with any kind of supernatural, however a true mate bond can only happen with another vampire. No one knows why; it just simply doesn't trigger the mate bond with anyone but another vamp. I am reasonably sure that Farren is my true match pair, and that's rare in itself a vampire only gets one in his lifetime.

As the small bit of blood that I ingested hits my stomach, I suddenly become aware that it's been a long time since I fed properly, something that is more challenging than it should be and something I'm going to have to fix soon.

Really fucking soon. Shit.

Thankfully, Farren starts talking and momentarily distracts me from my hunger as she reminds me why we're here.

"While you guys were finishing off your attackers, and Zev was playing," Farren starts and gives a surprised looking Zev a proud and admiring look, "I checked the room. We can all go in the spell is on a book, and I scanned it quickly. It's not sentient like Xerxes is, so we don't need to worry."

"Great, come on then," Mayhem mutters as he heads toward the door, "we need to get this done as quickly as possible."

"You're right. We have no idea if there are more people behind these doors," I add, following everyone through the door and then immediately stopping as it shuts behind me, "whoa, look at all this stuff."

"I know, there's some really rare fucking spells in here, not to mention all the gold and jewels," Farren replies as she makes a beeline for a book that's radiating dark magic.

"How do you know there are rare spells in here?" Zev asks with a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

Farren pauses to give him a smirk of her own and replies, "What? I'm nosey and you guys had the situation outside handled. I thought I'd see if they had anything worth liberating while I was in here."

Mayhem snorts, "And by liberating, you mean stealing."

"Of course, now shush, it's not easy to pull this complex of a spell apart. Guard my back," she replies, becoming serious.

“Always,” all three of us promise at the same time, and I don’t miss her lips twitching up into a smile as her eyes soften before she turns back around.

While her magic fills the room as she works, the rest of us spread out through the space, facing the single window and the door, just in case we get caught. Meri, I assume, is still curled up underneath her hair, but Poca comes to stand next to me, his body growing slightly as he becomes alert, standing guard with the rest of us. I really hope that it’s going okay with the guys, I wouldn’t mind a fight right now, but if we want to stay as under the radar as we can, then we really shouldn’t be drawing attention to ourselves.

“All done,” Farren says sooner than I thought she would, “I’m going to let Kill know that we’re done; they need to get out now before shit hits the fan.”

“Double check that they gave the orders to the Fae horses that they used to pull the carriage, just in case we need to take a detour and grab them,” I suggest.

She nods and goes silent for a few seconds, I feel a buzz coming from the bond that connects me to Farren, but I can’t actually make out any words.

“The horses are taken care of, and he says that everyone has just suddenly dropped, so they’re getting out now, and they’ll meet us back at the castle.”

Rival nods, “Let’s get out of here then.”

Instead of heading toward the door that we came through, she heads toward the window, pauses for a moment as I feel her magic surge and then the web of spells that was covering the window glows for a second before disappearing completely.

“Judging from how quickly everyone lost their shit last time, I suggest that we take the plan b exit,” Farren explains as she opens the window and launches herself out of it.

All three of us rush toward the window irrational fear rushing through all of us that she’s hurt despite the fact that she’s highly skilled and supernatural. We get there just in time

to see her slip into the Void while falling and then pop back out, landing in a crouch and looking up at us with an exhilarated smile, which I can't help but return as I launch myself out of the window after her, doing a flip to show off and landing in a crouch next to her. I turn my head, intending to say something witty, but I'm instantly caught off guard when her lips land on mine in a quick but passionate kiss before she takes off again, blending in with the shadows as she darts between the surrounding trees, making her way to the wall and our escape out of here.

"Lucky bastard," Zev chuckles before he takes off after her.

Mayhem slaps me on the shoulder on the way past, and I find myself the last one despite being the second out of the window. Using my vamp speed, I quickly catch up with them, reaching the place in the wall that we decided would be the best. I watch as Farren mutters a few words creating a hole in the wards, and then steps through the wall. Her magic fascinates me, and it does things that it's not supposed to. She has never mentioned her mother before, but I'm beginning to wonder if she's somehow gotten magic from both her mother and father, although that's rare.

"Is that going to stay open for the others?" I double-check once we've all followed her through and are heading through the woods. The guys may be meeting us back at the castle, but we all have the same exit.

"Yeah, and I've spelled it to shut after they've gone through and not to let anyone else through either. The only problem is that I've never done it before, so I'm not entirely sure that it's going to work." She replies, and I see her gnawing on her lip worriedly.

"I'm sure it will work. Your magic is pretty fucking amazing," I tell her honestly.

When she still looks a bit worried, Zev chimes in, "They'll get through fine, and no one will follow them."

She glances at him and asks, "Vision?" when he nods, she smiles, "Thank you, that makes me feel less anxious."

We're nearly at the rendezvous place where we're far enough away from Remiki's stronghold that we can call the fae horse back to us to take us back to the castle when Meri suddenly launches himself from Farren's shoulder, becoming bigger than I have ever seen him before and about the same size as Poca. Both Poca and Meri are instantly alert and focused back on where we came from. The rest of us freeze, sensing the danger now that they've both alerted us to it.

As the ground begins to shake beneath our feet, just a small tremor, Meri and Poca turn to look at each other; some sort of communication must be going on between them because Poca inclines his head to Meri and then turns, rushing back toward us and when we don't move he huffs and snaps his teeth near Mayhem

Mayhem jumps back as he exclaims, "Whoa, what the fuck?"

"He wants us to back up against the tree although he could be more polite about it," Farren explains, rolling her eyes and backing up against the tree.

When we all have our backs pressed up against the giant tree, Poca turns so his back is to us, guarding us against whatever it is that he and Meri have sensed. We all share a perplexed look, but the crunching of branches has our heads snapping in the direction that the creatures are looking in. It's hard to describe what the fuck walks through the trees, bending the trunks and snapping them completely as it forces its way past. It's fucking huge, almost reaching the tops of the trees and yet its steps are silent. It appears to have the ability to make its movements completely silent; even the trees that he's crushing aren't making a sound, and somehow that makes it a lot eerier than if it was making a sound. I think it's six legs and giant horse-like head with spikes covering the entirety of its body and face are probably not helping the ick factor at all.

Meri looks insignificant standing in front of that fucker, and I begin to question everything that we know about Maradrache. Maybe it's just a rumour that has been perpetrated to keep them safe.

“Fucking hell, that’s a freatrate,” Farren mutters under her breath, “I have never seen one anywhere but in the Underworld.”

“That’s not good,” Mayhem’s concern about this latest development is evident in his voice. “Don’t they like playing with their victims before they eat them?”

“Technically, yes,” Farren replies.

“Technically?” I question because I feel like she’s not telling us, and when faced with this giant and terrifying beast, I’d rather know everything I can about it than be left in the dark, at least; I think I do.

Farren’s eyes stay glued to the beast, which is just watching us all, sizing us up to determine who it wants to eat first, no doubt. It gives me the creeps.

“It does like to play, chase and hide, terrify its victims, which is bad enough, but then once it catches them, it consumes them slowly, taking chunks out of them but still leaving them alive. It may even let the supe escape, only to catch them again and start the slow torturous death all over again.” She explains.

“Holy fuck,” Zev mutters in disgust, and we all freeze, falling silent as its eyes land on him and then move to the rest of us. A snake-like tongue slithers out of its mouth as it appears to taste the air, it’s eyes lighting up with anticipation as it seems to taste something that he likes.

The Underworld creature takes a step in our direction, seeming to completely disregard Meri standing almost ten meters in front of us. Neither Meri nor Poca like him advancing as they both let out terrifying growls and Poca becomes bigger, so much so that he now towers over all of us, as his fur becomes engulfed in blue and purple hellfire. He’s fucking massive, and it says a lot about his strength when even the Freatrate pauses in his advance and looks at him with a slight wariness, his tongue snakes out again to taste the air before his gaze lasers in on Farren, and he seems to forget all about Poca and the threat he poses in favour of the meal he sees that Farren offers will give him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Farren

These Underworld beasts are fucking terrifying, not only because I never thought I'd see one outside of the Underworld but also because the fucking thing is eyeing me like it wants to eat me. Poca is as big as I have ever seen him and looking like a scary son of a bitch and that makes me weirdly proud.

I have seen one of these in action before, and there is no way in hell I want him to go up against it. If any of their victims ever survive, they are severely traumatised and end up having to be looked after for the rest of their lives. There's only been a few instances, but in each one, the victims have ended up taking their lives to escape the memory of the horror that they've lived through. They have a poison in their bite that can make their victims relive the torture that the creature put them through, so it never really ends.

I expect Poca to step forward and stand next to Meri, but he remains steadfastly guarding us. Something tells me that he knows exactly how dangerous these creatures are, but that's not surprising since he's a hellhound and therefore originates from the Underworld himself. He's just one of the creatures that can leave without any repercussions to his appetite or his state of being.

My attention switches to Meri as he roars, the sound sending a chill down my spine. In a split second, his magic engulfs him, and he becomes the same size as the Underworld creature, and suddenly the Freatrate takes notice of him, realising that actually he may be a threat after all. There is an almost joyful anticipation coming from Meri, and as the beast's attention moves from Poca and us to him, he tries to make himself look bigger and even more threatening, most

likely because Meri's magic starts to let itself be known, no longer being hidden from detection. The feel of it is intense and has all of the hairs on my arms standing to attention, I'd look at the others to see if they are having the same reaction, but I don't dare take my eyes off Meri. I know that he's supposed to be this crazy creature that's capable of killing everything in all the known worlds, but he's also mine, and I love him. I don't want him to get hurt, especially since I know the effects of a bite from one of these creatures.

The magic that surrounds Meri fills me with calm and strangely a sense of familiarity as well as I swear that new magic that's buried deep within my normal magic stirs slightly before falling back into its slumber.

Without any sort of warning at all, the Underworld creature charges Meri, and I barely manage to hold in my shout of warning. Distracting someone in a fight is a sure way to get them killed. Meri doesn't move, even as the ground shakes and the creature gets closer and closer to him. He suddenly disappears in a puff of magic, and I worry that the beast is going to run straight into us, but as its jaws snap mere meters away from us, he gets yanked back, and I catch a glimpse of Meri standing behind him with his strong jaws clamped down on his tail.

The creature screams in agony, and I'd assume that the scream of pain is because of the bite itself, but it seems to be in more pain than it should be. There is so little information on the kind of creature that Meri is, but it's widely known that they can kill with a single bite. Meri still has a tight grip on his tail, and showing incredible strength, he picks him up and swings him around, bashing him into the trees and flattening them, dazing the Underworld creature when he finally let's go.

While the creature is still dazed and struggling to get up, Meri bounds over and, without any remorse, tears the creature's leg off, causing blood to squirt in an arc that almost reaches us, which is damn surprising since we're standing so far away. What happens next is disturbing but impressive at the same time. Meri meticulously tears apart the creature bite

by bite, tearing its limbs off and launching them across the clearing that has just been made courtesy of him swinging the Underworld creature around.

“Fucking hell,” Loki mutters from beside me as we watch the carnage.

I just nod because I have no idea how else to reply to that.

Finally, the carnage stops, and Meri starts licking his front feet and cleaning his face. It’s super cute, which is an odd thing to think at this moment, I admit, considering the circumstances.

The creature is most definitely dead, so I move away from the tree slowly, testing whether Poca is going to let me pass. It will be a true test of whether I really am entirely safe around Meri if Poca does let me pass because that means he trusts Meri with me even after he’s just utterly decimated a terrifying creature.

Poca turns to look at me but doesn’t stop me as I walk past him.

“Farren, are you sure you want to approach him right now?” Mayhem asks, his voice quiet and cautious.

Glancing over my shoulder, I reply, “He’s not going to hurt me. Poca would never let me walk past him if he thought I was in danger. Besides, look how freaking cute he is right now. He needs to know what a good boy he’s been by protecting us.”

“Did you just call the fifteen-foot-high deadly Maradrache that we just saw rip apart a terrifying animal in its own right cute?” Zev asks incredulously.

“Yep,” I reply with a smile and then turn back on them, walking confidently toward Meri. He looks up as I approach and, if I’m reading him correctly, looks slightly wary, almost as if he thinks I’m going to fear him or reprimand him. As soon as I’m within reaching distance of him, I hold out my hand and wait for him to come to me, ignoring the ichor that still covers his face.

He tilts his head to the side slightly and then gently nudges my hand, and I try not to jolt in surprise as his voice sounds in

my head, sounding disjointed like Ryu's does, "Not scared?"

I smile as a clog of emotion rises in my throat, "Never scared of you, Meri. I know that you will never hurt me. Thank you for saving us, you were magnificent, and we couldn't have done it without you."

He starts this cute purring noise as his magic consumes him, and he shrinks to the size that I'm used to him being. He flaps his wings and then nuzzles his way under my hair to settle on my shoulder again. I'm not entirely sure how he manages to stay up there practically weightless, but I'm assuming that it has something to do with his magic.

Poca bounds over to me, still, his giant size although no longer completely on fire and I give the same praise that I gave Meri before I remember what happened just before the Underworld creature arrived and ask him, "Can you and Meri communicate?"

He turns his massive head to look down at me, dislodging my hand from where I was giving him chest scratches, and the only reason he did that was simply just so that he could roll his eyes at me and nod at the same time as if I should've known that.

"Smart ass," I mutter.

"I love how much attitude he gives you," Loki chuckles as the others all join us.

"Me too," I grin, "we better get going. Meri and Poca have stood down, so I don't think there is another one of those creatures around, but we have no idea if some of Remiki's men have decided to comb the forest."

"Good point, alright I think it's," Mayhem starts as he looks around, trying to get his bearings in the now destroyed and almost unrecognisable forest. "This way, maybe?"

I chuckle, "Hey Poca, can you lead us to where we're going to call the horses?"

Poca yips, shrinks his size back to what we're all used to seeing and then heads off in the opposite direction that Mayhem had suggested that we go, making the rest of us

chuckle. We don't get that far down the path that Poca is leading us until I hear a noise behind us, and I freeze as Poca does the same, and his ears perk up. The guys pause in their forward momentum, but when Poca doesn't start growling or go into defensive mode, I relax.

"Holy fuck have you guys seen what happened back there? It's total carnage!" Killian announces as he steps into view, the others moving through the bushes behind him.

Until the moment that I saw them all unharmed, I hadn't completely acknowledged how worried I was about them, which is why I rush toward Kill, wrapping my arms around him and kissing him firmly before I move to Rival, Storm, Reaper and Grey and do the same. Although I kiss Grey on the cheek instead, I haven't kissed him properly yet, and I don't want our first kiss to be a chaste one that is done in front of the others. I do let my lips linger though, and when I pull back, I try to communicate with my eyes my reasoning for it; when he nods slightly, I think he understands.

"That carnage was Meri," Zev tells them, sounding proud.

"Holy shit, is he okay?" Rival asks, worried.

I nod, "He's fine. All of that blood and the limbs were from the Fratrate that wanted to attack us."

"Fuck, they're sadistic fuckers," Grey mutters, his eyes wide.

"Meri was amazing; killed the fucker while Poca protected the rest of us and stood guard. The Underworld beast even paused when he saw Poca like he was questioning whether he could get through him or not." Loki tells them all excitedly.

All their eyebrows raise apart from Grey's as he frowns in contemplation instead, almost like something that Loki said doesn't make sense to him. He sees me watching him and completely wipes the look from his face as he suggests, "We should keep moving. They must have woken up by the time that we got to your exit, and they sounded pretty fucking aggravated."

“There were shouts and swords clanging. They lost their fucking shit.” Storm adds.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here then,” Reaper replies.

We’re silent for a while as we follow Poca, and thankfully, the path we’re taking is now looking familiar since we’re far away from the carnage now.

“I think we should check to see if we were correct and if the barrier has weakened,” Mayhem says into the silence.

“Good idea, the last faction is going to be the most difficult of them all, and if we’ve got this wrong and we really don’t have to go there, then I’d rather not risk it,” Grey replies.

I realise that I know absolutely nothing about the leader of the last faction other than the fact that he’s ruthless.

“We can go now?” Kill suggests.

I interrupt before anyone can say anything else, “It doesn’t make sense for all of us to go, and we already know that I can pass through using the Void, but no one else can. I’m not risking any of you, so I’ll use the Void to take me to the barrier and see if I can step through it. If I can’t, I’ll use the Void to take me to the other side and see if I can get through that way. If neither works, then we can assume that we were wrong.”

“I’m not keen on the idea of you going by yourself.” Storm says, and when I give him a look adds, “Even if we can’t get through.”

“I’ll go with her,” Zev offers, and I smile.

“There you go. I’ll take Zev, Meri and Poca can make his own way there like usual, and I’ll leave him guarding Zev at the barrier while I do my thing and take Meri with me, we all know what he is capable of, so we will be fine, and then we will meet you back at the castle.” I reply, not leaving any room for arguments.

“Fine,” Storm replies, not looking that pleased by the turn of events, his horns starting to spark.

“Great. Zev, don’t let go of my hand. I’m tired, so I want to get this done quickly.” I order him, and the others chuckle.

Zev immediately grabs my hand, threading his fingers through mine. It's amazing the sense of peace; I guess you could call it, that flows through me; it's the same feeling that they all give me, just a knowledge that everything will be okay.

Calling on my magic, I double-check that I've got a secure grip on Zev's hand and motion Poca to go ahead, he somehow always knows where i'm going to end up. I step into the Void, my whole being immediately wants to linger the longer that I'm here, but we don't have time for that so I hasten my pace not really giving Zev a chance to look around as I spot the door that will lead to the barrier a few feet in front of us and step through. For the first time, it seems like the Void doesn't want to let me go, and I have to fight it and myself in order to step through; it's concerning, to say the least.

"Wow, did you know you glow when you're in there?" Zev asks me.

I pause, "I do?"

"Yep, kind of like you do when you get super mad or when you start talking in a strange language that none of us understands," Zev replies with a comforting smile as he squeezes my hand.

"Huh, I guess that's new," I reply and then add, "Alright, I can hear my bed calling me, so I want to get this over and done with." Turning to look at Poca, I say, "Stay with Zev and guard him while I walk through the barrier."

Poca nods and moves to Zev's side as Zev smiles down at him and then looks back at me, his face becoming serious, "Stay safe. I will be mad as fuck if something happens to you, got it?"

His words make my heart beat a thousand miles a minute as butterflies swarm in my stomach. He said them with so much conviction that I step closer to him, and his head dips to meet mine as he kisses me like I'm his fucking air. His tongue moves against mine, and heat builds in my core; a spear of clarity hits me, and I realise that we aren't exactly in the safest place right now and we shouldn't be kissing like this. I think

that Zev realises at the same time because he kisses me wants once more and then steps back.

With a wry smile, he says, “Fuck, sorry, I lose myself in you.”

“Same,” I mutter. “I’m going before I get distracted again.”

He nods and moves to stand near Poca. I waste no time in approaching the border and hoping it doesn’t bounce me back on my ass, it doesn’t, and I end up on the other side; I have a quick look around just for curiosities sake and to see if anyone has posted guards outside the border, I don’t see any, but I don’t want to linger out here any longer than I have to. Since I managed to make it out this way, I am fairly certain that I won’t be able to get back in from this side. It appears that the first object breaking allowed people who travel via the Void or, I’m guessing, other means of astral travel could get in and out; the second object has allowed us to get out using the barrier, which means anyone can get out. This means that when we break the last object, it should completely destroy the spell holding the Shadowlands hostage.

Because I’m reasonably certain that I’m going to bounce straight off the barrier if I try to walk through it, but I need to test it just to make sure that we’re right, so I hold up my hand and push against the barrier just as I expected I meet resistance and there’s no way that it’s going to let me through.

I use my magic to pull myself into the Void and feel the same urge to linger, and if I’m being completely honest, it scares me. I spend even less time in it and step out in front of Zev, who grins, although his smile falls as he studies me.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?” he asks.

I realise that I must not have wiped my worry about the weird behaviour of the Void off my face before I step back out. I force myself to smile softly, reaching for his hand as I reply, “Yeah, I’m tired. Let’s get back to the castle.”

“Sounds good to me,” he replies, watching me with concern.

I really don't want to step back into the Void but we're going to have to use it in order to get back to the castle, we have no other means of transport, and if I call the Fae horses, then the guys are going to have loads of questions, and I really don't want to talk about it right now I just want to go to bed it's been a long fucking day. In fact, it's been a long fucking week, and not just because we've been non-stop, that I'm used to. I actually tend to get super bored if I don't have anything to do. No, I think it's the emotional stuff that is causing me the most turmoil because I have no idea how to fucking deal with it, and now the Void isn't fucking behaving itself. I just want to get back to the castle and my bed.

It's a really good fucking bed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

An idea suddenly occurs to me; I know the castle well enough now that I may be able to put some extra oompf into my magic and skip the walking through the Void entirely, just opening a door straight into the kitchen at the castle.

I'm not really sure that it's even possible; I haven't ever heard of it being done before, but my magic has never really done what it's supposed to do, and the gut feeling I have tells me that it may just work. I take a deep breath and call more of my magic than I usually would; I keep my mind focused on the exact place that I want to go to and imagine just taking a step forward and being there. Zev moves with me as I take a step forward, and I feel the reassuring weight of Poca pressed against my side, he must know that I'm trying something different, and that it won't actually require him to go into the Void.

"Well that's different," Zev mutters as we step straight into the kitchen, and the guys all turn to look at us questioningly.

My smile is huge, "It worked."

"What worked?" Reaper asks curiously.

"You got through the border?" Loki asks, and I guess it would be safe to assume that's what I was talking about.

"I have no idea about that, but I think she was referring to the fact that we didn't use the Void to get here," Zev frowns as he tries to explain, "we were standing at the barrier, she pulled a crazy amount of magic and then we took a step forward and we ended up here."

The whole room stares at me in shock. Well shit, I guess that it's rarer than I thought it was.

"Wow. Are you okay?" Grey asks me, "To do what Zev is describing takes a huge amount of power. I'm actually

surprised that you're still standing and coherent right now.”

Before I can reply, a huge yawn overtakes me, “I’m fine. I’m just stupidly tired, but then again I was before I brought us back here. I’m going to keep this short so I can go to bed. I can walk through the barrier, but I have to use the Void to get back, so we were right that breaking the objects weakened the barrier.”

“Okay, Darlin’,” Kill replies before anyone else can say anything, and he walks over to me, kisses me on the forehead and then turns me around to face the door, “go to bed before you start getting stabby.”

“Uh huh,” I reply sleepily and don’t even bother to say goodnight to anyone else as I trip walk down the hall and to my room, Poca propping me up so I don’t actually fall over.

Holy shit, I got stupidly tired really quickly, I think the amount of magic that I just used to bring us back really did take something out of me. I dazedly go through my bedtime routine, not really bothering to do much apart from go to the bathroom and then strip out of my clothes, until I’m only in my underwear and then crawl under the covers of the bed, which welcomes me like an old friend. I’m vaguely aware of Meri jumping off my shoulder and growing in size before he curls up next to Poca. The warmth of them both quickly lulls me into a deep and magic-replenishing sleep.

The next morning I finish getting ready for breakfast feeling a hell of a lot more refreshed than I did last night; I guess pulling the spell apart and then trying an entirely new kind of magic was just too much for me, and I need to remember to take it easier in the future. I don’t want to risk getting that tired and not having a safe place to sleep. That would be incredibly dangerous.

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts, and I call out, “Come in; I’m nearly ready.”

“Hey, Darlin’, I wanted to check how you were feeling? You went from tired to practically asleep on your feet.”

As he talks, he walks closer to me until he’s standing directly in front of me, his fingers tipping up my chin to look at him so he can study my expression while I reply so he knows if I’m being honest or not.

“I’m feeling much better now; I think I just overdid it,” I reply.

His fingers move up my cheek, brushing against my cheekbone as they move to tuck the hair behind my ear and then linger to stroke Meri, who was resting on that same shoulder and nudged his hand for pets.

Once Meri is satisfied, Kill pulls me into his arms, and I sink into the familiar embrace. For a long time, his touch was the only kind touch that I ever received. Now I get soft and caring touches from multiple people as well as give it, something that I never thought I’d be comfortable with anyone other than Kill.

I pull back slightly, and he looks down at me, his eyes curious, before I wimp out, I say, “Thank you for always being there for me, you kept me going, and I don’t think I ever could have survived what I did without you.”

His eyes fill with emotion as the softest smile I have ever seen graces his handsome features, he doesn’t reply, but his lips meet mine in a soft and emotion-filled kiss. As is usual, when we kiss, it doesn’t stay soft for very long; and he picks me up, his mouth never leaving mine as he turns us and slams me against the wall; I groan in pleasure. My nails dig into his shoulders as his tail strokes up the outside of my thigh and sends tiny zings of magic into it, making me arch my back in an effort to get closer to him. I desperately want fewer clothes between us, and even though there have been plenty of times before where there have been considerably less clothes between us, I get that same feeling that I got when I was kissing Mayhem and Rival, that we need to pause this, just for the moment and not take it any further. I’m surprised that my gut is reacting this way with Killian; I could almost understand

it with Mayhem and Rival, it was new, and we don't want to rush it, and there's the fact that I like the others as well that I need to take into consideration, but Killian has been there for me for years.

"I can feel your hesitation," Kill mutters with a soft smile; as he pulls back, he asks, "Gut feeling?"

I nod, "How did you know?"

"Well, although it appears I'm not getting as many visions now, I am still getting a few," he replies with a secretive smile.

"Ah, that explains it. I don't know why I have this gut feeling, but it's probably because I haven't exactly come to terms with how I'm feeling about you all, let alone seen how you feel." I try to explain.

"Farren, relax. I get it, and so do they, take as much time as you need. We've got other things to be focused on right now anyway." Kill reassures me and then adds with a cheeky smirk, "Having said that, I am crashing in here tonight, I need Farren cuddles."

"Deal," I reply, kissing him once more and relishing in the way that his hands clench on my ass. When I pull back, I add, "Alright, put me down. I'm hungry."

Kill rolls his eyes and grins as he puts me down. Once I've straightened out my clothes, I look around the room for Meri and Poca to see if they want to come with us; I'm surprised to see them both waiting by the door and Meri, the size of a large housecat again. I'm guessing that he must want to stretch his wings.

"I think they might be hungry as well," Kill suggests with a chuckle as they both bark and chirp in agreement.

Kill holds my hand the whole way to the kitchen to grab some food and meet up with the others. When we walk in, I'm greeted with an array of good mornings and kisses on my forehead and cheeks, apart from Loki, who kisses me straight on the lips. I don't know why I'm surprised; he tends to say

fuck it and just kiss me, and interestingly enough the others don't seem to mind at all.

“Here you go. I figured you'd want this,” Mayhem grins as he places a giant mug of coffee down in front of me.

“Thank you,” I smile as I take a sip and then ask, “Oh, does this have caramel in it?”

He smiles, “Yeah, I thought you could do with the extra pick me up after last night.”

After I thank him, the conversation starts up around the table while we all stuff our faces and fill each other in on the happenings of last night. It sounds like Remiki is a real piece of fucking work, and I kind of wish we'd fucked some more stuff up while we were there just to make his life a bit more complicated.

“Wait, you guys ran into people while you were outside of the room where the object was?” Storm asks, a lot more serious than he was a minute ago. When we nod, he asks, “Isn't there a chance that one of the Princes may have either seen you through their eyes or gotten word that you were there?”

I sit up straight, I have no idea why that didn't cross my mind before now, and I look at the others worriedly.

“We should be okay, we ended them fairly quickly, and I didn't sense any dark magic coming from any of them that would suggest that they were being used to see their surroundings,” Mayhem announces, putting me at ease slightly.

“We only have one faction left now anyway, and then after that, we can get back to finding the other parts of the key before the Princes do.” Rival points out.

Since Grey has already had some pretty interesting things to say about the last faction we all turn to look at him to see if he has any input at this point, only to find him frowning and not paying attention to what is being said at all, which is odd for him.

“Grey,” Reaper mutters, and once Grey looks at him, he asks, “Are you okay?”

Grey frowns slightly and then straightens out his jacket and looks around at us all as if he’s contemplating whether or not he can say anything. Finally, he asks, “Do you ever feel like your skin is too tight?”

We share a confused look, but it’s Storm who answers him, “Only when I have had my glamour on for too long. When I have to hide my wings and my horns for an extended period of time, then I feel like that.”

“Yeah, I’m the same,” Kill replies, “although, for me, it feels like an itch that I can’t scratch.”

Mayhem shrugs, “I don’t have to use as much glamour as those two do, I only really need to change my colouring, and unlike them, we don’t have to travel to the earth realm as often as they do because they’re royalty, but I can’t fucking stand it, any longer than a couple of hours and I feel like I’m going to burst out of my skin, I fucking hate it.”

Grey grimaces as if he can sympathise with them all before he mutters, “Try having it on for years.”

“What the fuck?” Loki exclaims.

“You’ve had your glamour on for fucking years?” Reaper asks, sounding horrified by the idea.

Rival looks perplexed as the wheels in his head start turning, “That would mean that you are in full glamour right now?”

Grey doesn’t confirm or deny it; he simply stares at Rival, urging him to get to the conclusion on his own before Rival reaches that conclusion though Zev does.

“And judging from your silence, I’m guessing that it has something to do with the silencing spell that was put on you?” Zev asks.

Grey again just stares, and I’m going to take that as a yes since it’s the same reaction that he gave Rival, and if it weren’t

true then he could have easily said no. His silence is actually deafening.

“I have never heard of a silencing spell that strong before,” Rival mutters, sounding intrigued.

“I wonder if Xerxes knows something?” I ask.

“He might, but it could be like the map of the second stronghold, and he won’t actually get the information until it’s the right time.” Storm replies thoughtfully, while Grey just sits there looking miserable.

I hate it, and I wish there was something that we could do about it.

Zev’s eyes flash white, and he smiles, “I didn’t see anything, but I got the general sense that it won’t be forever. You’ll be able to be your true self eventually.”

“Thanks, man, I know that. I just don’t know when it’s going to end. Most of the time I can ignore it but then there are times like today when it just gets too much.” Grey says.

“I’m sorry, man, that sucks,” Loki says, sympathy saturating his tone, “I don’t do earth realm visits. I can’t cope with being glamoured.”

“Thanks guys, anyway, what were you guys discussing before I derailed everyone?” Grey asks, clearly wanting to change the subject.

“The last faction,” I tell him with a smile.

If possible, Grey’s expression darkens even further, as he replies, “The leader of the last faction is called Khaos and he by far lives up to his name, he’s ruthless and incredibly intelligent. I’m unsure whether it would be a good idea to try to sneak in and use the same approach as we have done for the last two factions. By now, he no doubt knows about what has happened at the other two factions and will be expecting it.”

Storm sighs as he rubs a hand over the back of his neck, “More complications, fantastic. You clearly know at least some information about him. I don’t suppose that you have an in with him too?”

Grey pauses as his eyes tense, and it almost looks like he's trying to tell us something, but he seems to give up and says instead, "No, unfortunately, Khaos keeps to himself, and I don't really have much more information on him, just that we need to be incredibly careful."

Killian nods, "Got it."

The guys carry on talking, and I really try to pay attention, but I'm struggling; there's something wrong, I feel weird, but I can't quite put my finger on why. Of course, I may still be recovering from overextending my magic yesterday, but this feels different. I don't feel tired; I feel dizzy, and my head feels like I've had a few too many glasses of fae wine. I jolt as pain suddenly pierces my side, and then confused I lift my hand up to my nose, frowning harder when it comes away covered in blood.

What the fuck is happening to me?

Another spear of pain travels down my arm, and using far more effort than I really should need to, I lift it to find a slice down it, I have no fucking idea how it got there. I'm sitting at the fucking table; for fuck sake, my mind becomes even more groggy; I feel unconsciousness rapidly approaching, and I really hope I don't hit anything important when I go.

Killian

Loki is sitting next to me, so when his head suddenly whips around, I quickly follow his look just in time to see a bleeding Farren take a sideways dive off of her chair. The only thing saving her from smacking her face on the floor is the quick thinking of both Meri and Poca.

"What the fuck is going on?" Storm shouts, clearly panicking.

Loki and I rush around the table just as Rival and Mayhem gently lower Farren to the floor so that Poca and Meri can move back.

Reaper's face creases with concern, "She's bleeding."

"A lot, I can smell it," Loki replies.

"How?" Grey questions as he appears to search the room, looking for whatever could have attacked her.

"I've got no fucking idea," Zev replies, clearly upset that he didn't see this coming.

Storm is clearly freaking out and not currently able to take charge, and although I fucking hate this, because of the nature of my work and Farren's, we are both used to seeing each other injured and because of this, I have a slightly more level head.

"Alright, Loki, see if you can heal what you can. Everyone else back up a bit and give him room to do his thing. Storm," I snap to gain his attention, and when he looks at me I add, "you need to comfort Meri and Poca, they need to understand that we're trying to help so that they don't try to hurt us."

"Yeah, I can do that." He replies and starts to talk with them without taking his eyes off Farren.

Once I know that he's not going to lose his shit, I turn back to Loki, only to find his hands glowing brightly over Farren but she's still bleeding. In fact, we all watch in horror as another slice opens up across her cheek, and she starts to look scarily pale.

Loki shakes his head, his hands trembling,, "I don't know what's wrong. My magic can't fix it."

"Fuck," Mayhem curses, grabbing fistfuls of hair as he stares at her with a helplessness that we all feel.

I'm at a loss at what to do next, but I do know that we can't just leave her bleeding on the kitchen floor. Fortunately, I'm not the only one who thinks this, and Grey speaks up.

"Let's get her to her room and make sure she's comfortable, and then we can figure out what to do next," Grey suggests.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Killian

Reaper wastes absolutely no time in scooping her up off the floor and cradling her in his arms, Ryu is so close to the surface that Reaper's form keeps shimmering, but I know that there is no need to worry that he's going to lose his control and hurt her. His need to protect her is far stronger than anything else. We all rush after him as he practically runs to her room and carefully lays her on the bed, taking her boots off so that she's more comfortable, although, with the amount she's bleeding, I highly doubt that she's going to be comfortable any time soon.

"More slices and wounds opened up while we were bringing her up here," Loki mutters, sounding pained.

"Are you okay with this? Do you need to leave?" I question him.

He looks at me like I'm fucking crazy for suggesting that he leave Farren before it clicks why I asked him that, and he replies, "No, I'm fine. I just fucking hate seeing her this way, and I can't fucking help her; I don't understand why I can't help her."

Before I can reply, to even try to reassure him that something else is going on right now, and whatever happens, we know that he tried his best. Grey interrupts everyone's, panicked, muttering.

"I think old wounds are opening," he starts, and we all freeze as we turn to look at him, hoping for more of an explanation. He moves forward and very carefully lifts her shirt, exposing the last wound that the Void healed. "See, I know for a fact that the Void healed this."

"Fuck," Reaper curses harshly. "This is really fucking bad."

“The Void has healed her when she’s been on the brink of death multiple times. If all of that is going to be undone one incident at a time then,” Rival starts but can’t quite bring himself to say what we all know will happen if she’s exposed to those wounds again.

Sudden and violent wind blasts through the room and I suddenly become alert, my eyes immediately moving to Zev. Just as I had suspected, he’s in the middle of a vision, but unlike any of the ones he’s had whilst we have been here, this one seems to be a hell of a lot bigger, closer to the vision he had in the gym back at the academy.

His hair is pulled from the low ponytail he has it secured in and whips around his head. As his feet lift up off the floor and his eyes glow bright white, everyone watches him closely while still trying to keep an eye on Farren’s worsening condition. It concerns me greatly that she hasn’t woken back up from where she passed out earlier and that she keeps bleeding.

When the wind suddenly dies back down, Zev is unceremoniously dropped to the floor and lands, one knee bent and his head bowed forward. Before any of us can even open our mouths to ask him what he saw and how we can help Farren, he jumps up, his eyes almost wild until they land on Grey.

“We need Monty; now, he’s the only one who knows what’s going on with Farren and how to help her. If we don’t get him here now, then Farren is going to die,” Zev says grimly.

Grey’s eyes widen, “Fuck, it’s going to take me a while to get into town to get him, and even then, I’ve got to convince him that he actually needs to come, and that could take days with how difficult Monty can be.”

“I resent that,” the disembodied voice of Monty sounds throughout the room, and we all stare at each other.

“Am I going crazy, or did you guys just hear Monty’s voice as well?” Reaper asks.

“I heard it too,” Mayhem replies.

I can't help but startle slightly when Monty suddenly appears right by Farren's bedside. He looks down at her with worry and affection that I don't feel he usually shows.

"How did you know we needed you?" Rival asks, always curious.

Monty turns to look at him, straightening out his burnt orange silk patterned suit that he's somehow managing to pull off, "Farren is very important. She needs me, and I'm here."

His explanation is irritatingly vague, but then again, I guess we should just be grateful that he replied in the first place. He could have quite easily just ignored Rival's question.

"Well, how do we fix it?" Storm asks impatiently.

Monty gives him a harsh look but clearly decides to let Storm's rudeness slide this time as he replies, "She hasn't gone into the Void enough. She is a part of it, and it is a part of her. Nipping in and out, even if it's once a day, is not enough to sustain them both. She needs to be going into the Void for at least an hour a day, more than once and for a consistent amount of time, not just travelling through, or it will have dire consequences for them both."

"But she was cloaked in the Void for a while yesterday and then travelled through it too," Loki replies.

"Boy, are you not listening? She needs to stay in the Void for at least an hour a day twice a day, or this will keep happening. As you have all rightly guessed, all the wounds that the Void has healed for her are reopening."

"Look, I know this is important information, but how the fuck do we fix her right now?" Reaper asks impatiently.

"We need to wake her, and she needs to go into the Void and stay there. If I'm honest, I'm surprised that her magic hasn't already pulled her in," Monty explains.

Not wanting to waste any more time, I stride over to the bed and gently sweep her sweaty hair off her forehead as the others all move closer. All of them are moving restlessly and staring at her with fear and concern etched into their features.

I take a deep breath. I know that waking her is going to cause her pain, but I also know that the only way to ensure that she doesn't die is to wake her and get her to pull herself into the Void. I hold onto that as I call out her name.

"Farren, you need to wake up, Darlin'," I say firmly.

"Come on, Love, wake up, and we can help you," Loki adds. "She has the bonds closed down tight. I can't feel anything."

"She does it whenever she feels pain or has a big emotion," Storm replies insightfully, his eyes on Farren as he adds, "Come on, Farren, wake up."

He says it harshly enough that it does the trick, and she begins to groan as she comes to.

"Holy fuck, why do I feel like I've been trampled by like a billion fucking horses," she moans, and there's a collective sigh of relief that only lasts for a mere second before she hisses in pain, and her breathing becomes laboured.

"Farren, listen to me. You need to go into the Void," I tell.

"Let your magic guide you, Farren and do not try to fight it. I promise you that it will be okay," Monty interrupts and judging from the look on his face, it's clear that he knows something else about this situation.

Farren doesn't need to be told twice, and without any of the usual fanfare, she simply disappears from sight.

"Now what?" Grey asks tensely.

"Now you wait, and might I suggest making her bed clean for when she does come back?" Monty suggests he has a condescending smile on his face, but the tightness around his eyes is a dead giveaway that he's actually concerned about Farren and her wellbeing. I'd ask him why and what else he knows if I thought he would actually answer.

"Do you have any idea what we can expect? How long will she be gone?" Reaper asks, his form still wavering as Ryu is so damn close to the surface.

Monty nods, “Yes, it’s likely that she will be in there for a long time. Not only does she need to heal, but the Void does as well. It was weakened by her absence. She may pop in and out, and she will probably be reasonably dazed.”

“Okay, let’s sort her bed out then.” Grey announces, “I assume that she will appear back here.”

Monty nods, “Yes, that is correct. I will know if you need me again. Please give her this when she wakes. She is getting stronger now, and it is imperative that she listens to my warning and goes into the Void regularly. As I have already said, if she dies, then the Void dies too, and that would be incredibly bad.”

Monty hands an envelope to Loki, who is standing closest to him, and then simply disappears. I have no idea how he fucking travels, but he’s powerful as fuck and clearly has powerful friends on his side.

“More questions than answers,” Zev mutters.

“Always is. Let’s sort this out before she pops back. It will give us something else to focus on as well.” Storm orders.

Farren

My whole body is just a ball of unending pain, seemingly coming from absolutely every-fucking-where. I couldn’t tell you what part hurts the most, but I can tell you that I’m bleeding, and it’s fucking bad. I hear what the guys are saying to me, and when Monty tells me to stop fighting it, I know I need to listen. Monty doesn’t get involved in things that he doesn’t deem incredibly important.

It’s with that thought in mind that I let go. I stop fighting the urge to go to the Void, although I hadn’t even realised that was what I was doing until Monty mentioned it. As soon as I let go, my magic pulls me at a rapid pace towards the Void, and the relief that courses through me as I land on the soft ground

of the Void is so fucking intense, and coming not only from me but also from the Void itself, that I pass out again.

“My poor daughter, I promise that this will all become clearer eventually, but you do have some trials to get through first. Stay strong, daughter,” the voice that I have heard sporadically throughout my life speaks to me.

“Who are you?” I ask, almost desperate to know who she is and why she keeps helping me.

“I’m a friend.” She replies, and even I can tell that’s not quite the whole truth.

“Why does that not seem entirely true?” I question and then wince when I realise that I probably shouldn’t have done that, even though I’m passed out right now, so I should, in theory, be safe. This woman is clearly extremely powerful, and I shouldn’t be talking to her like she won’t end me simply because she has helped me in the past.

There’s silence while I worry that my question has overstepped before she sighs heavily, “For fuck sake, you know I have never been good at this sort of stuff. Look, all I can tell you is that there’s something bigger and more complex than you could even imagine going on, and you’re in the middle of it, sweet girl. I will help and give you hints when I can, but my hands are essentially tied. All I can tell you right now is to listen to your gut always. It won’t steer you wrong, and remember that you are strong enough.” She finishes fiercely, and I can’t help but believe her, and although I want to ask more questions, I don’t.

“Thank you,” I reply to her.

“Trust your men, too,” she adds, and I can hear the amusement in her tone.

“They aren’t my men,” I retort.

She chuckles, “Sure, they’re not. Remember, not everything is as it seems.”

With those parting words, I am thrust back into consciousness, and I realise that, thankfully, I wasn’t out for very long at all, and I wake back up to find myself already

feeling better than I did. I still feel incredibly sore, and some of the deeper cuts and worse injuries are still healing, but I am conscious. It frustrates me that I still cannot put a name to the voice. I guess I should be grateful that I can remember it this time because I know on a soul-deep level that I have spoken to her more often than I remember. I do always find it amusing how she manages to stay calm and all-knowing up until a point and then gives up and starts speaking like one of the guys or I would speak.

As always, I am just going to have to trust what she has told me and that she is on my side.

I'm feeling well enough now that I sit up on my elbows to have a look around and see where I am within the Void. I jump slightly, aggravating the wounds that are still healing, when I finally do look around and see that I am surrounded by so many Void creatures, most of which I have never seen before. There are a few familiar faces mixed in, mostly Void beasts that I saw with Laikynn; just like me, none of the creatures surrounding me looks like they're on top form. However, they are looking a hell of a lot better than I am, and I take comfort in that.

I also realise that I can see a hell of a lot more than I have ever been able to before, so much so that I really am beginning to think that the Void is not just a place in between that Void users can use to travel to other places. No, I can see the vague outline of a landscape, and I can hear running water, and if those things exist here, then this can't be an empty place in between. There are creatures here, for fuck sake, creatures that don't exist anywhere but within the Void. I don't know why it has never occurred to me before that the creatures that live here can't possibly be lost creatures or warped lost souls. They are born in the Void, and if they're born here, this place is so much more than I thought it was than anyone thinks it is. The thought of what it could be is almost too monumental for my mind to comprehend right at this moment, not while it is still healing. Still, I vow to look into it, especially since it seems like I'm going to have the time now; I heard what Monty said while I was still out, it was the only thing that I did hear, but I

know that I need to come into the Void at least twice a day and for at least an hour each time.

It means I'm going to have time to explore and see if I can figure out exactly what the Void is.

A small and panicked whine brings me out of my thoughts, and I look around at all the creatures, worry instantly consuming me. That didn't sound like a happy whine; no, that whine was one of pain. They all watch me curiously, none of them reacting to the whining that is getting more distressed. I can't just leave the creature, and I struggle to my feet, my body achy and sore, still healing from not being in here for too long. Taking a deep breath I follow the sound of the crying creature and hope that this isn't some kind of trick. My magic hasn't warned me of any danger, and surprisingly all of the creatures that were surrounding me open up a path between them so I can walk, yet they still don't seem to be able to hear the crying, which is confusing and worrying all at the same time.

"Farren," a familiar booming voice calls out and I pause in my momentum, turning to find Laikynn approaching rapidly. "One of the little ones sent word that you arrived and were in bad shape, are you okay? Did you not realise that you needed to visit regularly?"

My eyebrows hit my hairline at his question, "No, I didn't, but I know now, and I also know that my distance has a negative effect on the Void as well, and I promise you and all the other creatures that live here that I will not spend that much time away again."

Laikynn nods and replies warmly, "Thank you, but we are all concerned about you. You are not fully healed and yet you are walking. They do not understand why?"

I frown as I carry on walking but answer him honestly, "Can you not hear that?"

"Hear what?" Laikynn asks, walking alongside me and sounding just as confused.

“The crying, there’s a creature nearby, and it’s hurt or something; it’s crying,” I explain.

Laikynn’s voice turns calm and knowing as he replies, “Ah, I’m sorry, Bellator Regina, that is not a gift that any of us have been blessed with.”

I don’t bother questioning what he called me because all of my senses have gone on high alert as the cries of pain have become a lot weaker than they once were, and I get the feeling that I’m running out of time. I pick up the pace and start to sprint towards the treeline just up ahead; later, I will marvel that there are treelines in here and shrubbery and plants and that it has never been light enough for me to see before. In fact, the darkness has been so all-consuming that if it weren’t for the glowing doors signifying my exit point, I wouldn’t even be able to see my hand right in front of my face.

There’s no time to think about any of that now as my instincts urge me forward.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Laikynn keeps pace with me as I rush forward, and I realise that the rest of the creatures have now disappeared, most likely deciding not to follow the crazy woman talking about, hearing distressed cries.

“They are faint, but I can hear them now. You are right. Something is extremely hurt.” Laikynn suddenly announces.

I slow down as I reach the base of one of the trees and finally find the creature that is making the sound. It’s unlike anything that I have ever seen before. Its body is about the same size as my forearm and furry, and it has huge leathery wings with wicked sharp claws on them. Its face is cute as hell with huge ears, and it kind of looks like a bat from the earth realm, apart from the fact that it is a deep purple and it’s not entirely solid. The edges of the creature are wispy and smoky, almost as if I could wave my hand and the breeze would disperse it entirely. I’ve only seen a creature with wispy edges in the Void once before, and that was after Grey got stuck in the Void; the creature was different; the only thing they have in common is the wispy edges.

“Oh my,” Laikynn mutters, awe in his tone that I don’t have the time to question.

The creature opens his eyes having heard Laikynn, and I am utterly shocked to see pure gold ones staring back at me. His breathing is laboured, but he still tries to move back away from us, injuring and weakening himself more.

I hold my hands up, “Please don’t move. I promise neither of us will hurt you. I want to help.”

I am so unbelievably relieved when it stops trying to move away and watches me cautiously instead. I can see the light fading in its swirling gold eyes, and I begin to panic. Looking over him as closely as I can, I can’t see any visible injuries. I can’t let him die, I just can’t, and because of that, I do

something that I wouldn't usually do with a creature that is completely unknown to me. I reach forward and lay my hand on its chest. It tenses slightly, obviously unsure what my intentions are, but when I just slowly and carefully run my fingers across the fur on his chest, he relaxes, and starts to close his eyes.

“Unbelievable.” I vaguely hear Laikynn mutter.

Please, please don't let him die. I can't accept that I was drawn to him, that I heard him, and yet I cannot save him. I beg internally although I don't know who the fuck I'm begging. I watch as his chest stutters, and with the panic that I'm going to lose him within seconds, I call on my magic, I don't have healing magic, but I still call on it, I reach deep inside my pool of magic, and I order it to heal the creature before me, to make him whole again and restore his life force. My magic surprises me as it rushes to do as I have asked it, and I watch in fascination as my black and purple glittery magic envelops the wispy creature, and its breathing evens out, its eyes popping open to watch me with caution.

As soon as my magic dissipates, having done what it was supposed to do and saved the bat-like creature, I lean back, feeling exhausted and acknowledging that I probably shouldn't have used my magic while I was still healing. I fall back onto my butt leaning against the tree as I try to keep my eyes open so I can make sure that the creature is okay. He flaps his wings and slowly gets to his feet before realising that he's okay and getting excited; he starts to chirp and squeak as he flaps his wings and does this cute little dance.

When his eyes land on me, they fill with affection and then concern as he slowly walks over to me with his wings folded behind his back and nudges my cheek with his cute little nose.

I smile as I cautiously stroke the fur on his chest and then look behind him to see a wide-eyed and open-mouthed Laikynn watching us, “Laikynn, I'm going to pass out now. Make sure he's okay, please.”

I stay conscious just in time to see Laikynn nod in confirmation and the creature squeak in alarm as I once again

tip sideways and pass out. At least this time, I land on a soft bed of moss.

When I stir awake, I realise that I'm in my room, I briefly remember other times when I woke up here and back in the Void, but it really took it out of me healing that creature, Oryn, the name comes to me and vaguely remember him telling me that's what his name was before I passed out again.

I kind of don't want to move just in case I end up passing out again, I have no idea how long I've been slipping in and out of consciousness and in and out of the Void, but I get the feeling that it has been a while. I also want to go back to the Void to check on Oryn and to make sure that everything is back as it should be over there now, but for the same reason, I stay still. I don't want to pass out again. Breathing deeply, I start to relax since I have been awake for longer than the previous times; I also become aware that I am not in bed alone and, in actual fact, I can sense them all in here, and all of them are asleep.

My heart skips that they've all stayed with me, and I can't even begin to imagine how worried they must have been when I suddenly dropped and then started bleeding. Of course, my bladder suddenly starts to scream in protest before I can really relax and enjoy being surrounded by my men. I need to get up, and I hope like fuck I don't pass out again on the way to the bathroom because I have a horrible feeling that I'm going to wet myself, and that is an embarrassment that I don't want to live through.

Slow sitting up, my bladder needs are forgotten momentarily when I realise that Poca, Meri and Oryn are curled up in a giant pile to the left of me, the sight of them all together fills my heart with happiness, and I love that Meri and Poca have already accepted Oryn as one of them. When Poca opens his eyes and looks up at me in relief, I reach out and stroke between his ears.

“Thank you for accepting him. I don’t remember much; did I gain another protector?” I ask him barely above a whisper. Poca nods in response, so I ask, “What did the guys think when he suddenly showed up, with his wispy edges and unusual look?”

Poca snorts quietly once and then simply winks at me before he closes his eyes and seems to go back to sleep.

“Fine, don’t tell me, you brat,” I mutter, and I swear that he does his version of a chuckle again.

I slowly try to scoot to the end of the bed so that I can get up, trying not to wake up the pile of creatures that were on one side of me and Zev, who was lying on the other side of me, with Loki behind him. As I get to the end of the bed, I take a quick glance around at the others, and I’m surprised to see that it looks like they’ve all been here for a while. There are empty mugs scattered around and trays of empty dishes from where they’ve eaten in here, and I’m starting to think that I may have been out of it for longer than I thought I was.

Shit, we’ve got so much to do with the last faction; this is the last thing that we needed, me taking an extended fucking nap.

I ready myself to stand, worried that I’m going to collapse since I’ve been out for a while. Surprisingly as I stand, I find that I feel stronger than I think I have ever done, my magic is even humming happily under my skin, and I sigh with relief. Now that I’m not worried about passing out on the way to the bathroom, I quickly pick my way over my men and various obstacles as I let myself into the bathroom.

I have never been so glad to pee in my whole life, and I’m actually surprised about how long I pee for. I’ve finally finished, and I’m feeling a hell of a lot better than I was. My only problem now is that I’m fucking starving.

“Farren!” I hear Kill call for me sounding almost frantic.

“Has she gone back into the Void? She stayed out for a lot longer that time. I thought we were finally done with it,” Reaper replies, sounding defeated and tired.

I don't want them to be panicking about where I am, and I can't stand the defeat that's in their voices, and as the others all join in with their opinions I pull open the door.

"Farren!" Loki exclaims, seeing me immediately and rushing toward me, lifting me as he wraps me in his arms and peppers kisses wherever he can reach.

"Holy shit, am I happy to see you up and awake," Kill exclaims as he plucks me from Loki's arms and squeezes me tightly.

"How long was I out for?" I ask them all as I'm passed around for hugs and thoroughly enjoying it, "I vaguely remember slipping in and out of consciousness, but I don't remember much."

Since I'm currently in Grey's arms, it's him that I end up looking at to answer me, but he pauses before he tells me, and I brace myself for the answer.

"You've been in and out of consciousness for two days," Storm interrupts before Grey can answer me. I spin around in Grey's arms to stare at the rest of them.

"Two fucking days?" I exclaim, and when they nod, I add, "Well, fuck. I need to eat because I'm fucking starving, but then we need to get planning. Did you guys decide how we're going to approach getting into the last faction?"

"Are you sure you're up to jumping straight back into it?" Mayhem asks, his brows furrowed slightly.

I nod, "Yeah, absolutely, I actually feel amazing, but I definitely need to eat."

"Alright, give me a few minutes, and I'll grab us all some food," Grey says, heading toward the door.

"I'll come and help," Kill offers.

"Me too," Zev replies as he follows them out.

I make my way to sit back on the bed and reach my hand out, alternating between stroking Poca, Meri and Oryn, and I can't help but smile when Oryn nudges my hand with his cute little nose and asks for more pets. He hasn't spoken again, but

I'm guessing that might be because we're here and that he may be like Laikynn and can only talk in the Void.

"Farren, what the fuck are you doing?" Rival asks, sounding confused.

I frown, but when I realise that Storm, Mayhem, Loki, and Reaper are all looking at me in the same manner, I reply, "I'm stroking Meri, Poca and Oryn."

Reaper's eyebrows hit his hairline, and he asks, "Who the fuck is Oryn?"

Mayhem moves from the chair that was pulled up next to the bed and sits on the edge of the bed instead as he looks at me concerned and suggests, "Maybe you should get some sleep, being unconscious isn't really like resting and I'm starting to think that maybe you need some actual sleep."

I resist the urge to smack him, barely, and question, "Are you telling me that you can't see Oryn?"

They all shake their heads as Loki replies, "I only see Meri and Poca."

Reaper pulls a strange face and takes a deep breath inhaling through his nose; his eyebrows dip slightly as he tilts his head to the side and inhales again, "I can smell something that isn't familiar to me, I picked it up earlier but it was so faint, and I was so worried about you that I didn't think much of it."

"So she's not sleep deprived and losing it?" Storm questions him, and I flip him the finger.

Something occurs to me, and I poke Poca until he looks at me with highly amused eyes, "You knew they couldn't see him. You could've fucking told me; I think Mayhem nearly had me bloody committed."

"I did not," Mayhem replies, sounding indignant that I'd suggest it.

"So you've gained another follower," Loki comments with a wide smile.

His smile looks slightly off, and it prompts me to study him closer as he and the others discuss this latest development of

mine. He's got the slight impression of bags under his eyes, and he honestly looks exhausted despite the fact that he was snoring happily not that long ago. I don't know how long he managed to sleep for, so he very well could just be tired, thanks to the worry that I've put him through in the last day or so. The thing that's worrying me though is that none of the others look as affected as he does, and it's making me worry that something else is going on. I'm going to have to keep an eye on him.

"Who's got another follower?" Grey asks as the others make their way back into the room, either carrying trays or making sure that the door is open enough that the other food trays that are being floated in behind them, courtesy of Grey, don't get stuck.

I'm unashamed to admit that as soon as a tray of food is placed down in front of me, I don't even bother trying to work out what I'm being served as I practically fall on the food in my haste to eat it as quickly as possible. I knew I was hungry, but I'm not even paying attention to the guys as they explain about Oryn, and I'm vaguely aware that I'm being asked questions that I'm ignoring entirely in favour of stuffing my face. Once I finish everything on the first tray, a second one quickly replaces it, and I think I smile gratefully and mumble around a mouthful of food; thank you, but then again, I'm so distracted that I can't be sure.

Finally, I feel full, and I lean back on the mound of pillows behind me, taking notice of everyone else in the room since I first started eating. I can't help but snort in amusement at the look on their faces; each of their expressions is varying degrees of shock and awe.

I shrug, "Sorry guys, I guess I was hungrier than I thought."

"I'll say, damn Farren, that was freaking impressive," Zev mutters, making me laugh, and the others join in.

"Loki said that you have a new follower?" Grey starts and adds, "That's followed you from the Void, and that only you can see and Reaper can smell?"

I nod, “Yeah, that pretty much sums it up. He was dying, and I used my magic to heal him. I then passed out because technically I should’ve been healing and not using my already struggling magic, and then from that point, I only remember bits and pieces. He and Laikynn stayed with me the whole time.”

“I have no idea how to respond to any of that,” Reaper mutters gruffly, staring at me like he’s wondering what the fuck I could possibly say next.

“Your magic healed him?” Grey asks, not sounding as surprised as the others look but more curious. I think he’s beginning to put something together, but whether he will ever be able to tell me or not is an entirely different question.

“Yeah,” I reply simply.

I want to tell them my theory about the Void, but I want to go back a few more times to really affirm my idea before I bring them in on it, and besides we have something more important that we need to deal with right now.

“Interesting,” Grey replies, and when everyone gives him a searching look, he simply shrugs.

Storm smacks his hands against his legs, gaining everyone’s attention as he stands up, “If everyone is finished, and Farren is certain she’s up for it, then I think we should get rid of the food trays and head to the library so that we can do the spell to work out where the cursed object is in the last faction and make a plan to get in there and break it.”

“You guys have a map for the last faction? That surprises me considering the reputation of them,” I ask.

Reaper smirks, “Xerxes came through for us again.”

“Nice.” I reply with a proud smile and then look at Storm, “I am definitely up for getting straight back to work but I do need to have a really quick shower, so I’ll meet you all there in like ten minutes?”

Storm nods as his eyes soften slightly, “That works. Take as much time as you need.”

Before any of them gather up any of the food trays, they all come over to give me tight hugs before heading out of the room. Reaper is the last one to give me a hug, and he pulls me right up onto his lap, tucking his head into my neck and breathing deeply.

“We didn’t like that one bit,” he mutters.

“I’m sorry,” I reply softly, running my fingers through his hair and making him shudder.

“Not your fault, never again,” Ryu’s voice comes through, and I squeeze him tighter.

“That was kind of a contradiction but I promise that I will try my hardest not to do it again.”

“Good.” Is Ryu’s blunt reply and it makes me smile.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

As soon as the door closes behind Reaper and I'm left alone in the room, I waste no time at all in jumping up and rushing to the bathroom. Now that I've fed myself copious amounts of food, my other needs have made themselves known, and I am feeling absolutely gross. My arms and legs have been cleaned of all the blood that covered them, but the guys obviously wanted to remain respectful, which I appreciate and didn't clean anywhere else. Now that my stomach is no longer mad at me because I didn't feed it for two days, the need for a shower is practically screaming at me.

I know I spend longer than ten minutes in the shower, but I also know that the guys won't mind, especially since I don't take the piss with it and spend hours in there like I want to.

An envelope on the bedside table catches my attention, and I quickly make my way over to it, tearing it open when I see my name on the front of it.

Farren,

By now, you should be feeling a lot better. I have told your men, but I feel the need to tell you as well you need to go into the Void at least twice a day for at least an hour each time, or this will happen again. You are gaining strength, which means both you and the Void need you to spend time there, or the consequences will be deadly. I am sure that you are starting to have some suspicions about the Void, and while I cannot give you as much information as I would like to, I can tell you to explore the Void thoroughly. I think you will be surprised at what you find there.

See you soon, dearest,

Monty

As usual, Monty is as vague as he is informative. I am fond of Monty, and I always have been; as soon as I first met him, I

felt a kinship with him, but right now, I have to admit that there is a part of me that would love to torture some information out of him. I swear I hear the tinkling sound of distant laughter as I think that, but my life is so weird at the moment that I decide to ignore it instead of adding it to the pile of shit that I have to deal with right now. It's starting to feel a little bit overwhelming, so I'm going to focus on one thing at a time, and right now, that's getting to the library so we can go over the plan and hopefully get to actually doing something because I can feel my magic buzzing under my skin, wanting to play.

I place the letter back on my bedside table, and then as I turn to look at the bed with the still sleeping animals on it, I ask, "Are any of you coming with me, or are you going to get better acquainted with Oryn?"

To my surprise, they all get up, Meri moving to my shoulder and Poca and Oryn stretching as one takes to the air and the other one heads towards the door. I guess that answers that, then. I really should be feeling weak or tired or something, but I am so full of energy that I think it's a damn good thing that we're going on a mission imminently.

Much to my amusement, halfway there, Oryn starts to swoop and dive at Poca, who barks playfully and, in doing so, ends up getting Meri involved. I watch happily as they race off down the hallway, heading in the direction of the library and leaving me behind.

It makes me really happy that they all get on, but I have no idea if Oryn is planning to stick around or just wanted to stay around while I was in and out of consciousness and then got curious about what was happening. The thing is, I have no idea what kind of creature he is. This means I don't know what he likes to eat, the conditions he needs to live comfortably, not to mention things like his weaknesses and how dangerous he is. Without knowing any of these things, I'm going to be constantly worrying about him. Maybe I can ask Xerxes to see if he knows what kind of creature Oryn is; since he won't be able to see him apparently, I'll have to try really hard to

describe what he looks like and hope that I give a good enough description that he can identify him correctly.

As I turn the corner heading down the wide corridor that leads to the library at the end, I practically run into Loki; he catches me as I bounce off his chest and looks down at me with concern.

“I saw Meri and Poca racing down the hall, and I was worried that something had happened to you, so I came to check,” he explains, his thumbs rubbing my arms gently.

I frown as I reach up my hand and gently cup his cheek, “I’m fine, but are you?”

He stills, especially as I gently run my fingers over the bags under his eyes, bags that I swear are darker than they were even thirty minutes ago when we were in my room.

When he still doesn’t answer, I become even more convinced that something is wrong, and I ask, “Loki?”

He pulls away from me and runs his hands through his hair, gripping it tightly as he leaves them there and starts pacing; I watch him worriedly. His teeth have elongated, and his eyes are practically glowing. He looks like he’s struggling with something, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say that he was hungry. He’s behaving like a hungry vampire, a really fucking hungry vampire, but that doesn’t make any sense.

He finally starts talking as he paces, glancing at me every now and then, “I don’t work the same way that normal vampires do.”

“Because you can heal, and no other vampires can?” I ask, hoping for some clarification.

He shakes his head, “Not just that. I don’t know why, but I can’t survive on bagged blood, and I can go longer between feeds than a normal vampire too, two weeks or so. I need blood from the vein in order to survive.”

Realisation sets in, and I ask, “Why the hell didn’t you say something sooner? How long has it been?”

“My last proper feed was at the academy just before we left, I got a mouthful or so when I killed that guy a few days ago at Remiki’s place, but it wasn’t enough.” He glances over at me, still moving somewhat agitatedly, “I thought we’d be back at the academy before it became an issue.”

“I’m assuming, since you’re struggling, Grey has informed you that you won’t be able to feed from anyone in the Shadowlands, the majority of residents protect themselves from the vampires, and all the vamps only drink from donated bagged blood.”

“I know. I can’t drink from the guys though, because of the complications that could cause and because it’s a very intimate thing. I could feed from an animal that will get me by and curb the cravings somewhat.”

I hear what he’s not saying, so I finish his sentence for him, “But you wouldn’t be at full strength, especially because you haven’t fed from a supernatural or human for a while?”

Loki looks at me and nods before he says, “It will be fine, but I am going to have to figure something out after this last faction, or I’m going to end up in a lot of trouble.”

A thought occurs to me, and I let it marinate for a second, seeing how my instincts react to it. When there’s no negative feeling in response to it, I suggest, “Feed from me?”

Loki whips around, stopping dead and staring at me as he exclaims, “What?”

“Feed from me. We already know that the last faction is going to present the most problems, we need you there with us, and we want you at full strength. If you only feed from me once, then it shouldn’t trigger the obsessive thing, and I don’t have a bad feeling, so I think I would be okay anyway.” I try to explain my reasoning, but I’m not sure I get my point across very well.

Using his vampire speed, he suddenly appears in front of me, placing his hands on my face as he searches my eyes, no doubt looking for any sign of hesitation or worry.

When he finds none, he glances away briefly before looking back at me, “You obviously know enough about vampires to know about the obsession that can take over a person if they’re fed on and don’t have the gene to resist it, but do you know anything else?”

I pause, he’s fishing to see if I know something specific, and I wrack my brain trying to think of everything that I know about vampires, and then it clicks; I push away the hurt that tries to bubble up because it’s entirely irrational. Answering his question, I say, “Yes, I know that the only people guaranteed not to be affected by the vampire’s venom and potentially develop a dangerous obsession are a vampire’s true match pair and a vampire’s mate, which can only be a vampire.” I force myself to add at the end because I need to hear it out loud, because I really fucking like him, and I need to be reminded that one day he may very well find his mate.

“Good, you know. Before I agree to your incredibly generous offer, I need to tell you that I think that you are my true match pair,” he senses the moment that I freeze at his words and holds my face slightly firmer as if he’s afraid that I’m going to try and run away from him, I don’t really know what I’m feeling right now, but it’s not that. He rushes to continue what he is saying, “I am not telling you this because I expect anything from you, so please don’t panic. I am telling you because it means that you do not have to worry about any adverse effects. True match pairs don’t experience any of the potential issues that normal donors can. Please say something.”

I nod, not that it really makes sense to do so, but that just seems to be what I find myself doing. I smile, “Okay, thank you for telling me. I was going to feed you either way, but it’s reassuring to know that I won’t be going any crazier than I already am.”

His eyes widen slightly, and I’m reasonably sure it’s because he was expecting a different reaction from me entirely. I lean forward and kiss him softly before moving back again and tilting my head to the side to expose my neck. I thought I might find this part difficult, making myself

vulnerable for him, but surprisingly I don't, not even a small amount. Loki pulls me closer to him as he moves us so my back is against the wall, and his body covers mine in the most thrilling way.

His nose brushes up the side of my neck as he inhales, and I shudder at the sensation as I try to repress a moan. I'm finding this a hell of a lot more of a turn-on than I really thought I would. His lips brush my neck once, and my hand's thread through his hair as he does it again, and then I feel the fleeting sting as his teeth pierce my neck before desire quickly chases the pain away, except it's not just desire, and the longer he drinks, the more that desire fades into the background and other emotions start to come forward.

I feel safe, wanted, needed, and so incredibly cared for. This is Loki, my Loki, and it's no secret that I have feelings for him. He understands me in a different way than the others do, and he always manages to make me feel like it's going to be okay, no matter what the situation. He reminds me not to take everything so seriously, and I cherish him for that. My magic stirs, and in my mind's eye, I watch in fascination as my bond with Loki starts to glow and becomes stronger, as our magic reaches for each other along the bond lines, intertwining and making me feel euphoric and giddy with the power of the connection.

Somehow, I feel stronger the longer that Loki drinks and my need starts to take over all of the other feelings. When he pulls back from my neck, having drunk his fill, I know that he wants to check that I'm okay, but all I can think about is his lips on mine, the fact that they have flecks of my own blood on them makes absolutely no difference to me and his eyes widen as I pull his mouth to mine, kissing him almost desperately. I moan as his tongue dances with mine, and it's echoed by the rumble of a growl coming from his chest. The vibrations of his growl tease the already taut peaks of my nipples and push myself harder against Loki.

Our frantic kiss starts to slow, becoming languid and seducing and making heat pool between my thighs as my pussy clenches and practically begs for him, the needy bitch.

Pulling back, Loki rests his head on mine, staring into my eyes as we both struggle to catch our breath, “Love, as much as I want to take you right here, right fucking now. The first time that I have you writhing underneath me in pleasure will not be under the influence of the bite.”

I nod, that makes sense if I’m honest, although if my pussy could it would be pouting in disappointment right now. My smile is broad as I reply, “I get that, I’m not happy about it, but I understand.” I tease and then add seriously, “Did you get enough? How are you feeling?”

His smile stretches across his face as his eyes twinkle with affection, and he replies, “I feel fucking amazing. Honestly, I have never tasted anything as exquisite as your blood, and I’ve never felt this strong either. I can feel my magic buzzing under my skin, and I swear our bond grew stronger as well?”

“Yeah, it did. I think we might be able to talk through our thoughts now like I do with Killian.” I reply and grin excitedly as I add, “I know what you mean though. I thought I’d feel weak or dizzy or something. I have just lost blood, but I feel even better than I did before, and that’s saying something because I felt pretty damn awesome before.”

Loki’s face fills with relief, “Thank fuck for that. I am absolutely certain that you are my true match pair. Are you sure you’re okay? Vampire bites take longer to heal than normal wounds, so I can heal it?”

I frown slightly as I reach for the puncture marks on my neck, “I don’t want you to heal them. I like that they’re there and what they mean, but we do need to get to the library, and it’s probably a good idea to heal it, I suppose.”

Loki’s eyes heat at my words, and he leans forward, kissing me until I’m breathless before he pulls back and replies, “I love that you want to wear my mark, but you are right. This time, I will heal you.”

I nod and then smirk wickedly, “And next time, do it somewhere that’s less likely to be seen so easily.”

Loki's eyes widen as he groans, "Love, you are going to be the death of me."

Grinning, I reply cheekily, "I think you'll find that it's quite the opposite actually."

His deep chuckle echoes around the hallway and fills me with warmth. I could honestly listen to that sound for the rest of my life. I love all of their laughs, but Loki's just makes you want to join in, even if you don't know what's so funny.

"Well played," he replies, and then gently tilts my head to the side and wastes no time at all in licking my neck and making me gasp in surprise at the sensation of his tongue over the sensitive bite marks.

"Whoa, I swear that went straight to my clit," I mutter when he pulls back, and he makes a choking sound, "Shit, sorry, that was supposed to be an inside thought."

He shakes his and takes my hand in his, threading his fingers through mine as he leads us down the hallway and to the library to meet the others. I guess that he really couldn't think of a reply to that one.

"Hey guys," Killian smirks as we enter the library and see that they've already got a map of Khaos's stronghold laid out on the table and Xerxes flapping around above where they're gathered.

Mayhem is preparing the spell ingredients, and I'm glad that they didn't wait for Loki and me. Speaking of, with the way they are smiling knowingly at us, they are all well aware of what just transpired in the hallway. Thankfully none of them brings it up.

"We're going to do the spell, and then we'll decide how to get to the object and break the spell that is controlling them. Once that's broken, then the border should be open, and we will be able to find the last pieces of the key and secure it." Grey explains.

"Then we can see what else the Fae realm has planned for us." Reaper smiles, looking excited.

Chapter Thirty

As the conversation starts back up and Mayhem sends people to collect the last of the ingredients needed for the spell, Loki steps away to see if he can help, squeezing my hand in reassurance before he lets go, and I glance around, looking for Poca, Meri and Oryn, and finding them all curled up on the colossal rug in front of the fireplace, once again snoozing in a heap and looking cute as hell.

While the others are all busy, my thoughts start to spiral slightly, and before I can fix my expression, I realise that Storm is watching me closely. He frowns slightly, glances at the others to make sure that they're all busy, and then walks over to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder as he pulls me in close, and kisses me on the forehead in such a gentle and affectionate gesture that I almost melt into him.

"Thank you for doing that for Loki," he mutters quietly, sincerity in his tone before he adds, "Now, why do you look so worried? Did you not like it? Do I need to smack him?"

I grin, "No, of course not. It was my idea. It's just I feel a bit weird."

"Bad weird?" he asks, sounding concerned.

"Not in a 'he took too much blood kind of way' more, an I really fucking like you all, and it doesn't feel weird to do something like that with Loki and then be standing here underneath your arm, but then that's complicated in itself because of the warrior bond and the weird bond of mine that seems to have connected to some of you, and I know if given the chance would connect to the others as well."

Storm doesn't answer straight away but instead steers me further into the library and away from the others before he moves me so I'm standing in front of him and ducks so he can look into my eyes.

He kisses me in the sweetest most gentlest way despite what I just told him and fills my stomach with butterflies.

“Farren, you are overthinking this. I truly believe that everything is going to work out how it is supposed to. I can also promise that none of us mind in the slightest that you like the others too. I, for one like seeing you with them,” he smirks, and then adds seriously again, “Trust yourself and stop second guessing everything, or you’re going to drive yourself crazy.”

I move up on my tiptoes to kiss him gently in thanks; as his wings wrap around us both, making me feel safe and secure, I mutter, “Thank you, I never thought it would be you that would be reassuring me when I have a girly meltdown.”

“Oh, I’m going to tease you for this at some point, but I needed you to hear me first,” he smirks, and I smack his chest lightly, although I can’t help but smile.

“Fine, I’ll give you that one,” I reply.

“Storm, Farren, we’ve got the location,” Rival calls out.

Storm sighs and reluctantly lets me go as we head back out of the shelves and towards the others.

“The cursed object is kept in what appears to be the main ballroom,” Grey tells us with a frown.

“Okay, so what’s the plan then?” Zev asks.

“I don’t want us splitting up here, Khaos is far too dangerous, and I’m not risking it,” Grey replies firmly, his eyes flashing with memories, and I can’t work out if they’re happy or sad. All I do know is that they’re heavy.

“So we go in, prepared to fight. We try to sneak in, which hopefully Farren will be able to help us with?” Reaper asks, looking at me.

I make my way over to him and wrap my arm around his waist just because I can, and I miss him. His arm goes around my shoulder and holds me tightly.

Answering his question, I say, “Yes, I think I can get us all into the stronghold using the Void, and then once we’re all

inside the walls, we should be able to sneak in using our various skills. I can then pull apart the spell as I have done at the last two factions, and then we get the hell out of dodge.”

“Could you not use the Void to get us straight into the ballroom?” Killian asks.

I shake my head, “No, that would be too complicated. There could be wards or spells guarding the room that we could trigger if we use the Void to get straight in, and it could be a trap. Grey said that Khaos was clever, so there’s a chance that he’s heard about what has happened at the other two factions and has put extra security in place.”

“Along that same line, the princes could have also added extra security to the place since they absolutely know that something is going on. We’re going to have to be extremely careful.” Rival adds, looking excited by the challenge rather than worried.

“Sounds like a good time to me,” Kill grins and Reaper high-fives him as Loki and Zev bounce on their toes and share an excited look. The others all look just as thrilled by the challenge, and Grey chuckles.

“You know, I have never met a group of people who like a dangerous challenge as much as I do. It’s refreshing,” he comments.

“We’re all not quite sane, mate,” Loki smirks, “you’ve just never met your brand of crazy before.”

Grey’s smile widens, “Very true.”

“I say we go now and get this done?” Storm questions, and when he’s met with huge smiles, he returns them with his own smile and says, “Go and arm up then, and we’ll meet back here so that Farren can transport us into Khaos’s stronghold. Does that work Farren?”

“Yeah, that should be okay. It would be better if I could have a visual of what the place looks like, mostly because I’m transporting so many people at once, and I don’t want to leave anything to chance.”

Storm frowns, “I should be able to draw you up a rough sketch from memory. Will that work?”

“Perfect,” I reply, and as everyone else leaves to arm up, I stay behind and watch him draw. What he calls a rough sketch is actually stunningly detailed, and he shows real talent.

“Don’t you need to go and arm up?” he asks me after I’ve spent a full five minutes just staring at him. He doesn’t even bother to look at me as he asks me this just carries on drawing, with a smile playing around the edge of his mouth.

“Nope, I armed up before I left my room. I was hoping this would be the outcome of the meeting,” I reply with a shrug.

“Of course you were,” he replies drily and then he adds quietly, “I’m armed too.”

I try to hide my smile as I think of a retort but he doesn’t give me the opportunity as he moves the piece of paper he was drawing on over to me. “Wow, this is amazing. If this is what you consider scribbling, then holy shit, I’d love to see it when you actually try.”

To my utter shock, his cheeks tint ever so slightly pink, and I find it utterly adorable.

“Is it enough for you to be able to get us inside?” Storm asks, ignoring my compliment entirely.

I nod, “Absolutely.”

“We’re ready,” Zev announces cheerfully as they all walk back into the room, having armed up surprisingly quickly.

“Great,” Storm replies, standing up, “Let’s get going then.”

Poca, Meri and Oryn all gather around us, having woken up from their nap and clearly deciding they’re coming with us. I’m surprised, to say the least, that Poca is readying himself to come with us, but maybe having met a creature from the Void he’s actually willing to try and travel through it. I give him a reassuring pat, letting him know that I’m proud of him for trying.

“I’m going to try and get us there all at once. I’ve never tried moving this many people through the Void before, so it

might not work, and if it doesn't, then I'll have to do it the usual way, which will take longer. Everyone, hold on to the person next to you and don't fucking let go. I'm not searching the Void for any of you. Well, I will but that's beside the point," realising that, thanks to my excitement I've started to ramble, I don't bother saying anything else as I call on my Void magic and put some extra ompff in it, enough that I'm hoping that I can get us all through.

As I step through into the Void, my creatures going ahead of me and holding Storm's hand, which is then holding on to Rival's and so on so that we're all linked, I am reasonably surprised that I pull it off, and my magic doesn't seem to be tired which is a damn good thing. I'm aware when Oryn splits off from the group and heads further into the Void, and I guess that this was all just a bit too much for him to handle. I know I'll see him again and that this isn't a goodbye. Poca stays glued to my side the entire time, his whole body tight with tension.

"Wow, Little goddess," Grey compliments as we step through the Void and onto Khaos's grounds, "I really thought you were going to have to make several trips."

"Thanks, I think," I mutter, repressing my smile as he realises what he's said, and his eyes widen before he opens his mouth to apologise and then, seeing my smile, flips me off instead.

"Alright, let's focus and get inside," Storm orders and the rest of us become serious. "It's going to be easier to get to via the main doors, which isn't ideal, but we're prepared to fight. Farren, you need to get to the object and break the spell as quickly as possible."

I nod. I know the plan.

I have to admit that I am surprised that we haven't run into any guards. I didn't sense any wards when I brought us here too, which is also strange, especially for someone who is supposed to be so incredibly intelligent.

It's suspicious, to say the least.

Much like the other strongholds, this one is also a vast castle, surrounded by an impossibly high wall that I'm assuming usually has wards on them. Unlike the other factions though, Khaos doesn't have his people either staying inside the warded walls or cast off to one side; in fact, I'm not even sure there are many people here at all.

"How many followers does he have?" I ask quietly as we make our way through the trees and towards the main entrance.

"I think there were around forty, including himself, and they all live in the castle with him. His is by far the smallest faction but incredibly powerful." Grey replies, his black, red-ringed eyes scanning our surroundings suspiciously.

As we all get to the edge of the treeline, I expect to see some soldiers guarding the front entrance at least, but instead, there are none, and the huge door is left standing ajar. An uneasy feeling starts to stir in my gut.

"Somethings not right," Reaper mutters, sniffing the air for hints of what is amiss.

Everyone draws their weapons as we share a serious look, although there is an undercurrent of anticipation too. Storm takes the first step out of the safety of the treeline, Meri and Poca flanking him as the rest of us all step out after him. Nothing happens, no one approaches, no alarms go off, and we aren't attacked.

I hate going into anything completely blind when I know that something is most definitely off, so I step into the Void and open a Void door for the ballroom where we know that the object is. I keep myself cloaked as I peek through it to see what we're up against. As I suspected, all forty of them are armed to the teeth and waiting in silence for us. I don't see anyone that could be considered in charge though. Towards the back of the vast ballroom, and just to the left of the long table laid out with food, some of it is still covered by cloche's, which is odd and arrogant of them to assume that there will be enough of them to eat that giant meal after we're done. Regardless, next to the food table is a pedestal with a golden

goblet embedded with jewels perched on top of it that even through the veil of the Void, I can feel the dark magic emanating from it, and I'm comfortable in assuming that's the object that the princes are using to control this last faction. For some reason, it's kicking off a hell of a lot more dark magic in order to control these supes, much more than the objects that were controlling hundreds of supernaturals. It would appear that Khaos has an extraordinary amount of really strong supes here.

Well, that's going to make this even more interesting—time to go.

“Where the fuck did you go?” Mayhem practically hisses as I reappear next to them, and they all look really worried.

“Sorry. Listen they are all waiting in the ballroom, all of them are facing the doors though. I suggest that we use the Void and appear behind them; it will give us an element of surprise, and I think it will also bring us closer to the object that I need to pull the spell apart on.” I explain.

Killian nods, “Good idea. They think they have the element of surprise right now, so it's going to throw them off and give us an advantage if we show up behind them.”

“Everyone in agreement?” Reaper asks.

When everyone nods, I pull open the Void, everyone links hands, and we step through. Poca once again coming through the Void as well, although he doesn't look very happy about it. As soon as we step through the other side, all of the men start fighting viciously as Poca dives through the crowd doing his bit to kill as many as he can, and Meri swoops through them, nipping them and instantly poisoning them.

Grey sticks close to my side as we watch the others dive straight into the battle, and the once quiet and still ballroom erupts with a cacophony of noise.

“I'm going to watch your back as you pull the spell apart, I suggest you hurry though Little Goddess, Khaos isn't in here, and that can't be a good thing,” Grey tells me quickly, an undercurrent of tension in his tone.

“I’ve got this,” I reply, as I locate the goblet and start to make my way over to it.

A Fae woman spots my trajectory and, using magic, sends a flurry of vines in my direction. I slice through them all easily enough and then pull a dagger from my belt and launch it in her direction as she tries to ready another spell. The dagger strikes true and hits her straight in the eye, dropping her immediately, and I push forward.

Grey gets left behind me slightly as several supes decide that he needs to be dealt with at the same time. I know that he can handle it though, and so I push forward. Sure enough, he gets to the object only a few seconds after I do, and I raise my eyebrow as I look over at him to find him covered from head to toe in blood splatter. He shrugs with a smile as he swings his sword and effortlessly takes off an approaching attacker’s head.

“Watch my back,” I tell him, and he nods, fire in his eyes as he scans the room.

I allow myself a brief moment to find my guys and smile as it looks like they’re having the time of their lives. The enemies’ numbers are dropping rapidly, and there’s enough space in here that Ryu has come out to play and is having a whale of a time playing with his victims before he ends them.

Now that I’m reassured that they’re all safe, I focus on pulling apart the spell. As I suspected, this one is more complex than the others, but thanks to my practice at pulling apart the others, I find the parts that I can tug on with my magic and unravel the rest of it fairly quickly. The spell fights me, and I put some zap into my magic so that when the threads of the spell try to attack me via my magic, it gets a sharp shock of its own and also helps to pull apart the string of the spell.

With a final tug and then a quick blast of my combined magic just to make sure the spell finally disintegrates, letting out a shockwave of magic that is unlike any of the others. Those that were still alive in the room, and there weren’t many, suddenly increase their fight tenfold. Confused and mad

as hell as they become aware that they're fighting for something, but they're unsure what it is.

I practically dance through those that are left, my sword singing through the air as it burns with my magic and slices through those who try to approach me, I take a few hits, and a couple of swords manage to make slices on my skin, but they're so small that they are inconsequential and by the time that I make it over to where a couple of my guys are fighting the very last people alive, I have left a path of destruction in my wake.

"I don't think I will ever get tired of watching you fight," Grey whispers in my ear, the low tone sending a delicious shudder down my spine.

I turn to look at him, deciding to be honest, "You're mine, Grey, just like the others. You're mine."

His eyes widen, and I take advantage of his momentary speechlessness and press my lips against his, our magic clashes rushing towards each other and intertwining as he growls deep in his chest, pulling me closer as our tongues fight and dance. The Bond snaps into place between us and glows brightly before dulling again, and I can sense that there's something being held back on both of our sides.

Our kiss is fast and hard. We are in the middle of a battle, for fuck sake, but when he does pull back, his face is lit up with happiness, and he says gently, "I hope you know that you are it for me, I have never felt about anyone the way I feel about you, and I desperately hope that you can remember that if the spell ever gets lifted."

"I know who you are, where it matters. I promise that nothing will ever change that." I reply honestly because I can't think of anything that could ever change my mind.

My magic warns me of something fast approaching, and I turn rapidly, casting out a net of my magic and catching the fireball that has a built-in trigger that would have exploded on impact. I tut as I realise this, glare at the person who threw it at me, and they stare in horror as I smile wickedly and throw it back. They are unable to catch and reabsorb it since I've

wrapped it in a layer of my own magic that they aren't familiar with. I also weaved my magic so it would contain that spell and not hurt any of my men.

“Fucking spectacular,” Killian mutters, and I smile proudly.

Loki is fighting the last of the supes left alive, and I watch as he loses his sword, grabs a cloche off the table of food, unceremoniously dumps the pastries off of it and then, using his vampire speed and strength, grabs the cloche top in one hand and the base in the other and brings them up either side of the attacker's head, smashing them together as hard as he can. The cloche edge must have been sharpened because the body of the guy drops to the floor as Loki rights the platter, holding the cloche on top.

“It sliced right through the fucker's neck!” Zev exclaims.

Grey smirks, “Khaos believes that everything should be ready to be a weapon.”

I narrow my eyes at him, about to ask how he could possibly know that about Khaos, when Loki distracts me.

He gets down on one knee, the cloche still in his hands, and wiggles his eyebrows at me, making me giggle as he reveals the head sitting on the platter and says dramatically, “For you, my princess.”

Trying to hold in my laughter, I curtsy and reply, “Why thank you, kind sir, how very generous of you.”

Loki chuckles as he starts to get up and discards both the platter and the head. However, Ryu is watching me curiously; his massive dragon head tilted to the side before he bounds off, looking determined.

“Where's he going?” Zev asks curiously as he comes and stands next to me.

“It's Ryu, fuck knows,” Mayhem replies with a chuckle.

“Oh shit really?” Rival exclaims as we all watch him go to his pile of bodies and gather several of the heads in his mouth.

He trots over to me, looking incredibly proud of himself as he drops them on the floor by my feet.

“I got you more heads,” he says, and the guys must hear him this time because they all burst out laughing especially as Ryu gives Loki an ‘I won’ look.

I step over the heads and stroke his nose gently, “Yes, you did. Thank you, Ryu.”

“As amusing as this is, I didn’t see Khaos in here, which means he’s somewhere else and getting angrier by the fucking second that he’s been controlled. We need to leave right fucking now, or he’s going to blame us, and there will be no fucking convincing him otherwise.” Grey interrupts urgently.

Storm’s smile drops slightly as he takes in Grey’s expression, “Good point, let’s go.”

We all start to make our way out of the vast room littered with the dead, and I trail behind slightly, my shorter legs not as capable of reaching over the various obstacles now littering the floor as the others get to the door, a tingle of immense magic prickles the back of my neck, and my own magic blares its own warning.

I manage to call out to the guys intelligibly just as I feel a clamp go around my magic, rendering it useless as I feel the sharp sting of a blade touch my neck, glancing down I also see one pressing against my stomach as a tall and broad body stands behind mine and holds me immobile.

Fuck.

Rival

Farren’s yell has us all whipping back around to see what’s wrong, and none of us is prepared to see someone that I recognise from my research as one of the princes holding her hostage and wide and dark grin decorating his features. Almost as one, we all race forward, but before we can get much closer, the prince flicks his fingers, and we find ourselves completely immobile, Poca and Meri as well. I try to call on my magic, but it doesn’t respond

like it's been knocked into a deep sleep that I can't even wake it from.

Fuck.

I can glance around just enough to see that Grey is almost entirely obscured by Storm and Killian, and I know that they've done that one purpose so that the Prince doesn't become aware that Grey is here as well. We all know that would be bad. Grey, however, doesn't look pleased by it at all, and if he was able to move, I am certain that he would be pushing past them, trying to take the attention off of Farren.

"Let her go," Reaper growls darkly, having changed back just as we were leaving because Ryu wouldn't fit through the door.

The prince laughs at Reaper's words, "I don't think so, you see, we've been looking for Farren for a really long time." We watch in helplessness as he drags the knife against Farren's throat, blood beading along the slice. "No one escapes the Underworld. There's something special about you, and we want to know what."

As he speaks, I can feel a different power force slowly start to rise, but it's not one I recognise. Meri and Poca are a cacophony of growls that sound truly terrifying as their anger is practically palpable.

The Prince ignores them entirely as he sniffs Farren deeply, "You're powerful, too powerful." He glances up at us all, no doubt seeing the anger and pain on our faces that we can't help her. All emotion bleeds from his eyes as he grins and announces loudly, to Farren, "You'll be easier to interrogate when you're dead. We'll find out all of your secrets then."

We all watch in desperate horror as he slices her neck, her eyes going wide with shock and pain before they both disappear from sight, leaving a bloody puddle in their wake. The spell holding us hostage breaks, and we all collapse to the floor. I hear the screams of pain and anger coming from some of the others, but I can't help but stare. My heart feels like it's being shredded, completely and utterly destroyed; she can't be dead, surely? She just can't; none of us can handle that.

Poca is howling with grief, his anger almost as strong, and Meri is spitting fireballs every five seconds, destroying what's left of the room. The whole room is in absolute chaos, that is, until the very ground starts shaking, lightning flashes outside the windows, as rain pours and the winds howl. We all glance around the room only to find Grey glowing and looking murderously angry.

More and more magic builds around him, a staggering fucking amount of magic, more than I have ever felt from a person ever before. It's an insane amount of magic.

"Is that because of him?" Storm yells, asking me since I usually know these things.

"Yes, I think so," I reply.

"Fucking hell, look," Reaper exclaims.

Grey is calling on a lot of his magic, and it's making his glamour waver, which means we're getting a glimpse of horns, wings and just a giant fucking size, except every time his glamour flashes, it shows us something different that doesn't fit, with the other things.

"I think he's trying to break the silencing spell," Mayhem mutters.

"He's going to kill himself," Zev warns worriedly.

The ground starts to shake harder, and Grey lets out an almighty roar, one that I feel in the depths of my soul, magic explodes from him as he manages to shatter the extremely strong silencing spell that was holding him in check.

"Fucking hell," Killian mutters.

Grey grits his teeth triumphantly as he stands up from the crouch, "She isn't dead. I'd know if she was dead, and she's not fucking dead."

"How the fuck could you possibly know that?" Storm asks, and I know that in about two seconds, he's going to seriously regret talking to him like that.

"Because he's fucking Hades," I manage to gasp out.

*Chaos Unleashed (Black Onyx
Academy) Book 3*

by Nikita Parmenter

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter One

Storm

I can't have heard Rival right? Hades? God of the Underworld that Hades?

"You're fucking Hades?" Loki questions, thankfully sounding as sceptical as I am, "Hades, king of the Underworld, the one that's been fucking missing that Hades?"

Grey, or Hades, nods his head, "Yes."

"She's not dead?" Zev asks, a desperation in his tone that we all feel and just breezing past the god of the Underworld thing. To be honest, right now, I'd rather know how sure he is that Farren is alive because it didn't look like that was possible.

Grey shakes his head. "No, as King of the Underworld, I feel every soul that passes. I know the names of everyone, and she is not dead. Yeal made it look that way to stop us from going after her."

"We can go after her?" Killian asks a thread of hope in his tone.

"Fuck yes." Grey replies.

"I'm going to need more of an explanation?" Rival asks because, of course, he needs more information.

"Well, this journey is not going to be easy. We will have time to talk, but I also need to explain some things before we go, and we can do that back at the castle."

"Let's get going then," I say, aware that my cheeks are still damp, thanks to thinking we had lost Farren. "Let's go and get our girl back."

Because that's what she is. She's ours. We all love her, and we would all die for her.

My head whips towards the door as a powerful magical presence makes itself known and is heading in our direction rapidly.

"What the fuck now?" Mayhem curses.

"Ah fuck," Grey curses, which makes this whole situation even more concerning than it originally was, which is saying something, because that presence storming towards us rapidly is fucking terrifyingly strong and angry, and I say that while in the presence of Mother fucking Hades who is a god!

To be honest, the power level is close to Hades, but it's not entirely on the same level. I think what makes it concerning is the fact that whoever it is that's kicking off that amount of power is angry as fuck too.

"Ah, fuck?" Loki asks, looking at Grey incredulously, "We have a freight train of power, angry power heading straight for us, and your first reaction is a far too casual; oh fuck?"

Grey smirks, looking slightly amused, before he says, "Just let me deal with him. It would probably be best if you all stood behind me until I've had a chance to talk to him."

"Normally, I'd argue that we are more than capable of standing next to you and not behind you in this situation, but this time, I'm not arguing," I reply, already feeling on edge and desperate to get going so we can save Farren. Looking at the others, I order, "Everyone behind Grey, now."

I didn't really need to order them since they're all making their way behind a rather imposing-looking Grey as he lets a little more of Hades out to play.

I'm not going to lie, he's intimidating as fuck, and I'm pretty fucking glad that he's on our side.

Whoever is kicking off the enormous amount of power must be just outside of the door, but Loki thinks it's the perfect time to lean forward and ask, "Should we call you Grey or Hades? I'm confusing myself in my own mind, and I need something to stick to."

I could smack him, and I will do so for his timing, but I have to admit that I'm doing the same thing, and switching between both names, it would be nice to know exactly what he would like to be called, although I could've waited until after we've dealt with the powerhouse coming for us.

"Hades," he replies, "it's been far too long since I've been able to use it. It's nice to hear my true name spoken. Now, stay quiet and stay behind me, he's fucking mad."

"No shit," Loki scoffs and then promptly snaps his mouth closed when the rest of us glare at him.

What feels like death is quickly approaching, but even so, I feel the pressure in the air change as Poca suddenly growls, stops his pacing, and then just disappears. I think we all know where he's decided to go.

"Can he reach her?" I ask Hades because he's the only one who can possibly know the answer.

Hades shakes his head, although his eyes stay on the door as he replies, "No, he won't be able to crossover unless he's escorted, dead, or extremely powerful."

"So he's about to come back super fucking angry then," Rival mutters.

"Not the angry I'm worrying about right now," Reaper mutters.

"Me neither," Zev agrees, tensing as the massive powerhouse gets even closer.

Fuck.

The giant doors to the hall blast off their hinges, and not only that, but they disintegrate into dust. I finally get a good look at the supernatural behind the massive amount of power as he walks through the gap left by the exploded doors. His black and blood-red wings are arcing above him, and his eyes are blazing, but so are his hands as hellfire dances over his arms like old friends.

"Hello, friend," Hades greets him sounding far too relaxed for the fucking situation.

“Seriously?” Loki hisses. “That’s how you’re going to greet the most powerful high demon I’ve ever encountered; who’s charging at you because we’ve decimated his army?”

“Whoa, Friend? What do you mean, friend?” Zev hisses, completely ignoring what Loki has said as he adds quietly, “I didn’t fucking see this.”

Hades chuckles, clearly finding us freaking out more entertaining than any of us are finding the situation.

When the giant and extremely powerful demon just carries on blazing toward us, Hades sighs,

and I feel his magic grow even more, which I didn’t think was possible before I can question what he’s doing, it becomes evident because the freight train of power pauses in his steps.

“Hades?” he questions.

Hades just nods his head, drawing back some of his power which I’m damn grateful for because fucking hell it is intense. I thought he was strong before, but his power level now is literally off the fucking charts.

“It’s been a long time,” Hades replies, emotion in his voice. It’s evident that these two are close, or at least they used to be.

“I’ll fucking say, where the fuck have you been?” the high demon practically demands as he strides toward Hades, and we all take a step back just in case.

I mean, they seem friendly, but if something kicks off, none of us are strong enough to be in the middle of it.

“It’s a long story, and it’s one that I suggest we have back at the castle. We have a rather pressing matter that we need to get to. Are you in?” Hades asks him.

The higher demon grins, his smile sharp, “Of course I fucking am. Want to introduce me to the men who fought beside you and decimated mine?”

His immediate agreement instantly tells me just how strong of a friendship they have. This demon didn’t need any more information about what the problem was or what involvement was required from him; he just agreed, and I don’t think it has

anything to do with the fact that Grey, I mean, Hades, that's going to take some getting used to. I don't think that his immediate agreement has anything to do with the fact that Hades is King of the Underworld because of the way he so casually spoke to him.

I do tense slightly at the way he asked that question. I mean, we have just killed his men, and now that he's mentioned it, he's reminded me that the whole of the Shadowlands is terrified of him, and from what we have heard, for good reason.

Hades quickly introduces us and then gestures to the higher demon as he says, "And this is Khaos, my righthand demon and leader of my armies."

It actually hadn't occurred to me that the freight train of power could be Khaos, and I think the only reason that we managed to convince him that he doesn't need to smite us on sight is that he recognised Hades' power if it hadn't been for that I'm confident that we would be dead. I think we would've been screwed if he couldn't have released it.

"Well, shit," Kill mutters, "that explains a lot."

"Former leader. Nice to meet you all. If Hades calls you friends, then I have no reason to doubt the kind of supernaturals you are," Khaos starts, his eyes flashing with knowledge as he starts bouncing on his toes.

Like Loki, I get the feeling that he struggles to stay still; however, I think it may be even more extreme than it is with Loki.

"I have a question," Kill starts, and I know exactly what he will ask. I would stop him since Khaos is extremely powerful, and it wouldn't be wise to piss him off, but I want to know the answer too, and if I'm honest, I'm not getting any bad feelings from Khaos.

"Go ahead?" Khaos asks, curiosity in his eyes.

"You don't seem bothered that all your followers are dead? Or, more specifically, that we killed them." Kill phrases his

words like a question, but it's not really. It's more of a statement.

Khaos shrugs, "Because I'm not. By the fucking way, one of those motherfucking pussy arse princes managed to control me?"

Hades clears his throat, "Yes, brother."

There is caution in his tone that instantly has us tensing again. We all feel it as Khaos's power starts to grow, and I remember just how formidable Hades said he was. His wings unfurl, showing their impressive wingspan, as his body engulfs in hellfire, colours that I haven't seen before.

"Er, Hades," Loki starts, "maybe you want to fix that? He's pissed as fuck."

Before Hades can say anything, at this point, I think it would be difficult to reason with him anyway; Poca reappears. He takes one look at Khaos, and I expect him to disappear again because to be honest, if I could, I would in this situation. Instead, I swear he sighs.

"Did Poca just roll his eyes?" Mayhem mutters incredulously.

"Pretty sure he did," Reaper replies, the growl of Ryu slightly evident in his tone.

We all watch in shock as Poca grows in size and stalks toward Khaos. He jumps in front of him with a bone-shaking growl, and I step forward, wanting to rescue him from Khaos's wrath. Farren would be heartbroken when we got her back if Khaos had killed him, and murderous. We will be getting her back.

It turns out that my interference isn't needed though as Khaos is once again pulled up short.

His head tilts to the side as he studies Poca, and then he grins, kneeling down and giving Poca some love. Even Hades looks confused.

"Cerb, my old friend, I almost didn't recognise you. What are you doing up here?" Khaos asks, only adding to our

confusion.

“Wait, Cerberus?” Hades questions.

My eyebrows hit my hairline as Poca sighs. Magic covers him and obscures him from view, and when we can finally see him again, I am shocked at his appearance. Standing in front of us is the three-headed dog from all of the legends, and he looks formidable. His swirling patterns that were built into his fur and that glowed when he was in his hellhound form are now swirling with the different colours of hellfire. It looks impressive, and he is kicking off a hell of a lot of power.

“You know what, I don’t even want to go there right now,” I say and then add more urgently, “Can we please go back to the castle and discuss how we’re going to rescue Farren?”

“The princes took one of yours?” Khaos asks, violence flashing in his eyes.

“Storm is right. Come on, let’s head back.” Hades says and then clicks his fingers; just like that, we’re back at his home, in one of the massive drawing rooms.

“Dude, please tell me you couldn’t have done that the entire time?” Loki asks.

Hades shakes his head, “No, I could only move me. I wouldn’t have been able to move all of you.”

“Is the silencing spell completely lifted?” Rival asks curiously.

Hades thinks about it for a second, no doubt checking in with his magic to see, “I think so, but I’m not going to know for certain until someone asks me something, and I can’t reply.”

“Can we please get to Farren now?” Zev practically begs.

That swirling pit of unease hasn’t left my stomach, and the more I think about her being in the Underworld, the more worried that her being alive isn’t going to be the case for much longer.

“You said that if she ran into someone from the Underworld, then it would be very bad for her?” Kill

questions.

“Yes, and that’s why we need to get going as quickly as we can,” Hades replies, “They will have taken her back to the castle, and there are most likely still Helliers there that tortured us last time. They will remember her; she put up one hell of a fight, and the princes were particularly interested in her. When we escaped, we didn’t exactly do it quietly, and Helliers don’t forget.”

“Wait, are these my Helliers?” Khaos asks, anger in his tone.

“Not yours any longer, friend. They don’t hold your values now,” Hades explains.

“Whose Farren? What were you doing in your own prison?” Khaos asks.

“Here,” Hades says simply and touches Khaos’s forehead for a brief moment.

Khaos’s eyes widen as he studies Hades, “Well, that was certainly unexpected. I couldn’t see Farren in your memories, but I understand what she means to you and what she’s been through. I also understand that I owe her a debt for saving your life.”

Hades looks confused, “What do you mean you couldn’t see her? I showed you with no barriers.”

“You did? Well, I couldn’t see her,” Khaos replies, not seeming to be too bothered by it. “So, that’s how you broke the silencing spell on you?”

Hades shrugs, “Yeah, apparently nothing I nor any of the other very powerful supes I know ...”

Mayhem interrupts him, his eyes widening, “Shit, you mean Gods, don’t you? You know, Gods and Goddesses.”

“Of course, he does,” Khaos confirms before Hades can, “most of them aren’t worth knowing though.”

I’m not the only one who just stands and stares because, really, what the fuck are we supposed to do with that information. It’s not only confirmation that the gods actually

exist, which is something that everyone has begun to question over the last century or so, but it's also confirmation that there's one in front of us, one that we consider a friend.

"Holy shit, you're a God," Loki mutters, awe and shock in his tone.

Hades rolls his eyes, "Yes, but still me, and right now, the woman that we all love is quite probably being tortured and in grave danger. She can die down there, and since she hasn't turned up here, I'm assuming that they've blocked off her access to the Void somehow, and we all know that isn't good for her."

Fuck he's right.

Reaper says, "So, we're just coming straight out with it now that we love her?"

I catch Zev's smirk as he shrugs and says, "There really is no point in denying it, is there?"

Surprisingly, no one does, and although it's been a kind of known thing, no one has just come outright and said it. I'm surprised that I'm okay with it. I don't feel jealous or angry that they have feelings for her too. I know that relationships like ours are relatively common, but for some reason, I've always thought that it's a recipe for disaster and there has to be resentment and jealousy. In retrospect, it's probably because of the way my father treated his wives, including our mother.

As I look around at my family, which now includes Hades and Zev, I realise that none of those feelings are showing on any of their faces.

"I think maybe we should keep what we've just realised to ourselves for a while. Farren is skittish," Zev says, and we all realise at the same time that it's more than just a suggestion. "So, when we get her back, let's not tell her we all love her immediately."

No one has any problem agreeing with him, and I see the surprise flash in his eyes when we don't ask for details. I don't think he's going to get used to us not begging to know every little thing he sees any time soon.

“I don’t love her,” Khaos says with a slight smirk, his feet bouncing and his wings moving agitatedly behind him.

I feel like he always needs to be doing something, and this conversation is something that he is finding hard to reconcile with the Hades that he knew. He seems shocked as he looks at Hades, expecting him to deny it. Hades just smiles at him, which seems to confuse Khaos even more.

Zev’s chuckle gains everyone’s attention, and he smirks at Khaos, “Give it time, mate. Everyone gets enchanted by Farren.”

This time, I have no idea whether he’s saying that because he knows something or because it’s simply the truth.

“Guys, we can figure it out later. I’m assuming that now Hades did whatever the fuck he did when he touched Khaos’s forehead that he is caught up?” I ask. We’ve wasted so much time talking, and we need to find Farren.

“Yes,” Hades replies. “So, what you need to know is that the princes have taken over the Underworld. They used to be my best advisors millennia ago, but they have been getting more and more power-hungry until they managed to find a spell strong enough to disguise and capture me. They drained my power regularly enough that it kept me weak, especially since they had already weakened me. They wanted access to my vault. I never gave it to them.”

“Well, they sound like a bunch of giant dicks.” Loki says very matter of fact.

“They’re extremely powerful and power hungry, and Farren is in their hands. I can only assume that they’ve taken her to try and find me,” Hades replies, fear and anger warring in his eyes.

“It’s not your fault,” Mayhem tells him. He then quickly switches gears, his voice dark and filled with promise; he adds, “I am going rip those princes limb from fucking limb.”

“I like them,” Khaos grins.

“I thought you might,” Hades chuckles.

Zev's eyes flash white and then fill with surprise, "It's a good job that you like us." He then quickly changes the subject, "But back to Farren, how do we get her out?"

Chapter Two

Storm

“Well, as we are, we aren’t strong enough to take down the princes and their armies. That will take time, and we don’t have that,” Khaos replies.

“How do you know that they have armies at their disposal?” I ask.

“Because without Hades there, they will have control of his armies, and because of the number of Helliers that were in the memories that Hades showed me.”

I nod, “That makes sense.”

“So, what you’re saying is we need to sneak in?” Loki asks and then adds, “Please tell me that you guys know a way that we can sneak into the Underworld without dying because I’m fairly certain that if any of us die, Farren will find a way to bring us back and kill us again.”

“That would be counterproductive,” Khaos points out, and Loki just shrugs. “If I’m being honest, I’m not actually sure that there is an entrance that we can use that won’t be heavily guarded by any of the princes’ followers.”

My heart sinks, “What are we going to do then? Use one of the ones you do know of and just prepare for a fight?”

“I could do with a fight,” Rival grins, his darker side showing and earning him an intrigued look from Khaos.

“Those of you who have a connection with Farren, have you tried to communicate with her? Can you feel any of her emotions?” Mayhem asks.

“I tried,” Loki says, and from the disappointment in his voice, I can already guess what he’s going to say next. “I

couldn't find her at all."

While Kill says that he can't sense her either, I check in on my own connection with her, although I'm reasonably sure that if Kill can't get through to her, I'm not going to be able to either; he's got a much stronger connection with her than Loki or me, he's had it for far longer.

"Neither can I." I confirm, "So there's no way for us to know if she's okay, or help her, or even know exactly where she is."

"We'll figure it out," Zev says firmly. "We need to try to work out how we're going to get into the Underworld first."

"Just a suggestion, but why don't we ask Xerxes? He knows things that he shouldn't, and he's ancient; maybe he knows a forgotten way that we can get in?" Rival suggests.

"That's probably a better idea," Hades agrees. "It's my realm, but it has been for such a long time that I doubt that I remember all of the entrances."

"Let's go then," Loki says, looking at us all expectantly.

We all quickly make our way to the library. Poca, and I'm going to carry on calling him that because one name change is enough for me, runs ahead of us. He's gone back to his one-headed, power-concealing self, but he's a lot bigger than he usually is and still visible. He's clearly filled Meri in on what happened because he's sitting on Poca's back and looking ready to kill. I think we should all just be grateful that he's still mini and hasn't grown in his worry for Farren. It's evident in both Meri and Poca's body language that they are incredibly worried about Farren.

I find it interesting that although Khaos has given Meri a few curious looks, he hasn't asked any questions about him. Although to be fair, he's had quite a lot thrown at him, and I imagine any questions that he has about Meri are pretty far down his list.

"If Poca is really Cerberus, then how did he appear to Farren as a puppy?" I can't help but ask. Poca glances back at

me and rolls his eyes like I've asked a stupid question, although I don't see why.

“He can appear however he wants to; he obviously decided that Farren needed him as a puppy and not his three-headed self. He is also allowed to come and go as he pleases. I was outed from the Underworld decades ago, and when I left, Post was still at the gates as far as I was aware. The only person who's really going to know what happened and why he went to Farren is Cerb himself, and I doubt he'll share. Cerberus is incredibly powerful, and no one should be able to touch him; not only that, but he's ancient, older than even I am,” Hades explains, “if he doesn't want to tell us where he's been or why he's done something then that's the end of that.”

“Wow, do you think Farren realises?” Loki asks.

Hades shakes his head, “I don't think so, I didn't recognise him, and he's been my friend for a long time.”

“I recognised him, but if what Hades is saying is true then I most likely recognised him because he was pissed as fuck that one of the princes had managed to take Farren, and so his glamour slipped,” Khaos suggests.

Poca barks in agreement and seems to confirm what Khaos is saying.

“I guess that means you're right,” Rival replies.

“Hold up, you said no one should be able to touch him,” Khaos suddenly says, “does that mean that she can?”

Hades nods, “Yes, she cuddles with him. I don't know how, but we can all touch him as well, and I don't think that it's because we could have the whole time that we've known Cerb or because he's weaker here.”

Zev's eyes flash white, and he smiles, “It's because of her and our connection to her. If we weren't connected to her, we wouldn't be able to touch him.”

Khaos's eyes widen, “That's incredible.”

“She is, mate; you don't know the half of it,” Hades tells him.

We all fall silent as our minds turn to the incredible woman that could be experiencing fuck knows what right now.

Something else occurs to me and prompts me to ask, “How exactly are we going to get in? I don’t mean, what gate are we going to go through? We can ask Xerxes this: I mean, how are we, who aren’t Underworld natives or dead, going to get through? We’re trying to stop the princes from opening the gates. I assume they’re talking about the main gates, although you obviously know of other ways you can get in. From what I understand, only certain beings can come and go as they please.”

“You will be able to get in and out because you’re with me,” Hades replies simply as we finally get to the library.

“Can the princes get in and out as easily as you can?” Mayhem asks curiously.

“Not as easily, no. It will take a toll on their bodies and, most importantly, their magic, but they can get in and out; they will just need to rest and recharge their magic.” Khaos adds.

“So, in theory, if we were to want to take them out then the best time to do it is when they’ve travelled out of the Underworld?” I ask curiously.

Khaos’s eyes light with interest as he inclines his head, “Yes, in theory, that would be the case.”

“Good to know,” I smirk. “Right, let’s find Xerxes and see if he knows a way to get into the Underworld without alerting the Princes.”

“I heard my name?” Xerxes says, flapping into view, “Did everything go okay at the last stronghold? I was worried.”

“Well, fuck me,” Khaos says as he catches sight of the flying book, “Do you know how rare he is?”

Kill nods, “We’ve been informed he is one of the creatures that Farren has found and that has stayed with her.”

“One of them?” Khaos asks, intrigue in his eyes.

“We can explain while we travel,” Hades says, clearly impatient now. As he turns toward Xerxes, he swipes a hand

through his hair and explains, “We need your help. Farren was taken to the Underworld, and for obvious reasons, we can’t just pop in; we need to be as careful as possible so they don’t know that we’re there; otherwise, our appearance could trigger them to kill Farren.”

He hasn’t put it like that before, and hearing him say it now sends a fresh wave of urgency and fear through me.

Xerxes’s pages move agitatedly, “This is not good; she should not be in a different realm, not yet. She’s not ready.”

“What does that mean?” Reaper asks, his arms folded over his chest and his eyebrows raised.

Everyone’s attention is on Xerxes, but mine is on Zev; when Xerxes first spoke, he had a slight frown on his face, but it’s suddenly cleared almost as if he’s remembered something, and now, if it’s even possible, he looks even more worried than he did before.

“We really don’t have the time,” Zev says, the urgency so strong in his voice that he has everyone tensing, “Xerxes, we need to know how to get in. Do you know of a door that isn’t likely to be guarded by any of the Princes’ followers and isn’t too far away from the castle where she is being held?”

“How do you know that she’s being held at the castle? How do you know that there is a castle?” Khaos asks.

“He’s the future head, Seer,” Hades tells him rather flippantly. “And the castle was mentioned earlier.”

It’s apparent that he isn’t going to get any more information at the moment, so Khaos just keeps quiet while he watches us all closely. We’re definitely throwing a few things at him that he hadn’t expected.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t,” Xerxes starts, but before he can finish, his pages start flipping rapidly as they glow, “it appears a page has just been added.”

“What does it say?” Zev asks impatiently.

“It’s a map,” Mayhem replies as we all gather around the page where Xerxes has stopped and take a look.

“There’s nothing else on there, so I’m assuming that the glowing gate is where we’re supposed to get in?” Loki asks and then adds curiously, “Is it actually a gate, or is it just depicted as such for easy understanding?”

Hades’s lips tick up into a smile as he replies, “It’s not an actual gate. Fortunately for us, I do know where this is.”

“Let’s go then,” I say, desperately wanting to get going. “Is everyone armed? We’re undoubtedly going to need as many weapons as we can carry.”

“I can transport us all to the gate, but then I’m going to have to take you through one at a time when we get there,” Hades explains, looking slightly worried, “Xerxes says that the gate is safe for us to use, but there’s no guarantee that between us leaving here and getting there that it still will be.”

“I will go through first and check the other side. It will also help to have someone who knows the Underworld and their various customs and laws just in case we do come across someone while you’re moving people across,” Khaos offers.

“Good idea,” Mayhem starts and then adds, “although, I’d imagine that if the princes are as bad as you and Hades have said, then they have most likely changed the laws, and you need to be careful as well.”

“That’s a very good point; I dread to think what kind of archaic and harmful laws they have put in place in our absence,” Khaos replies.

“Is everyone ready?” Hades asks, getting us back on track. When everyone nods their heads, Hades simply smiles.

“Good luck,” Xerxes says.

One second, we’re in his home, and the next, we’re in the middle of a forest in some unknown location. To be quite honest, I don’t even know if we’re still in the Fae realm, and I don’t want to waste time asking.

“If you wouldn’t mind?” Khaos says, looking at Hades. I’m momentarily confused until Hades waves his hand, and a literal door appears only a few feet in front of us, embedded into one of the enormous surrounding trees.

“Whoa,” Loki mutters, “it’s glowing.”

Khaos smirks as he wastes no time striding toward the heavily and intricately carved door and simply opening it; behind the door is a swirling gold and black abyss; in a move that Farren would love, he salutes us with a smirk and then just steps into it.

“Well, I guess that’s it then,” Rival states, looking a bit apprehensive about stepping into the unknown, in an entirely different realm, and one that we’re not supposed to see until we die.

“I’m going to try and do this as quickly as possible, but as I said before, I can only take one of you at a time. If I take more than that, my power is going to flare, and it will be like announcing to the Princes that I’m in the Underworld and have my magic back.” Hades explains quickly.

With no discussion, Hades grips Reaper’s shoulder and walks him through the door, disappearing from sight and making me nervous. I really don’t like us being split up, even if it’s only for a few minutes. Not only that, but Reaper is on the other side in the Underworld, which is an unknown to us, and with Khaos, who is another unknown. My magic isn’t negatively reacting to him; in fact, it’s curious and far too calm about his sudden presence if you ask me, but it is allowing me to trust him a small amount, that and I trust Hades, my trust in Hades was easier because Farren trusted him, and that was good enough for me.

With each one of my brothers that goes through the gate to the Underworld, I get twitchier. My wings move agitatedly behind me, but then I don’t think they’ve really stopped moving since Farren got taken. I can’t get the picture of her bleeding and slumped from my mind and whenever I focus on it for too long, my magic rises, wanting out, it wants to destroy the fucker who hurt her and I have to use all of my strength in order to keep it contained. As soon as I find the fucker, Prince of the Underworld or not, I’m going to fucking rip him to pieces, have Loki put him back together, and then do it all over again.

“Are you okay?” Zev asks me, pulling me out of my murderous thoughts; when I raise my eyebrow in question, he smirks, “You’re floating, and your horns have a raging ball of red fire between them.”

I look down, surprised to see that he’s right and my wings have lifted me into the air, I gently lower myself to the ground as I realise that the others have already been taken through and it’s only Zev and I left.

“I was just thinking about what I’ll do to the fucker that took her and every fucker that harms her.”

Zev’s face becomes serious as his eyes darken, just as he opens his mouth to reply though his eyes flash white, “Shit, Wraith’s incoming.”

That’s the only warning he can give me as we suddenly find ourselves surrounded by four Wraiths.

I grin, my smile dark and dangerous.

They’re going to wish they hadn’t come for us. We’re both itching for a fucking fight.

Both of us draw our weapons, and I call on my shadows as I watch Zev dive head-first into the fight; he’s a damn good fighter, and I know that there’s no need to worry about him. As I find myself being circled by two of the Wraith’s that have decided to come for me I realise that there’s something different about them. I spin out of the way as a stream of black fire that is unmistakably hellfire.

Shit, that explains why I didn’t immediately recognise the kinds of supes they are. They’re from the Underworld, and this is the second set that we’ve come across, we need to figure out how they’re coming across and whether they’re turning into Wraith’s here or in the Underworld and then coming into the realms. I thought that Wraith’s didn’t exist in the Underworld, but Hades has been gone for a long time now so there’s a really good chance that things have changed, the princes could have discovered a way to turn Underworlders into Wraiths.

I swing my sword at the one attacking me while I use my shadows at the same time to attack the other Wraith, who has

turned into a creature that I have never seen before; all I can really take in right now is sharp teeth and lots of them. It takes me barely any time to dispatch the first Wraith, despite him trying to roast me at any opportunity, and his head thumps to the floor satisfyingly, my blade slicing cleanly through his neck.

Turning my focus to the creature, I switch tactics so that my shadows are no longer just distracting the Wraith, and instead, I use them to flood in through the mouth, nose, and eyes of the creature; I stay back as I watch the Wraith start to panic as it inhales more and more of my shadows. When he's inhaled enough, I give the command, and the creature literally bursts into thousands of tiny pieces.

"Nice," Zev comments as he wipes his sword off in the grass.

"Thanks," I reply. I have to admit that I'm impressed at how quickly and efficiently he took out the Wraiths; it just goes to show how seriously he takes his training at Black Onyx.

I do think that he has something else going on that maybe he doesn't even realise. With everything that's been going on, I haven't managed to talk to him about it, and I don't think that's going to change any time soon, but it is definitely something that we need to look into, you know since we have all of this spare time.

"What the fuck happened here?" Hades asks as he steps out of the portal behind us. Before we can answer though, he strides forward and nudges one of the bodies; frowning, he asks, "Shit, they're all from the Underworld. This is a big fucking problem. After we've saved Farren, I'm going to need to figure out how exactly they're getting here and whether they're turning into Wraiths because they should be here or if something is changing because they shouldn't be able to turn into Wraiths at all."

"Not by yourself. We will help, but Farren is our top priority," I reply, and he nods readily, clearly in agreement.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Hades replies. “We better get back through the door, we have no idea if there are more heading this way.”

Chapter Three

Storm

Hades' words make my wings shuffle uneasily behind me, showing my distress. To be honest, I don't think I'm going to feel settled again until Farren is safe and with us. I feel hollow, like she has literally taken a part of me with her, and quite frankly I have no idea how I'm remaining calm or calm adjacent. I'm by no means actually calm; I think that would be impossible in this situation.

I refuse to lose hope that she's going to be okay and that we're going to find her. As soon as I do, I'm going to lose my shit, and goddess help anyone or anything who is near me when that happens.

"Hang on," Zev says as his eyes flash white, "we need to move the bodies further into the tree line or dispose of them effectively enough that there is no trace of them left behind. If we don't, more supes are going to become aware of this entrance, and that could have more catastrophic consequences than good ones."

"Shit, you make a good point," I say, my horns joining my wings in their agitated movements and lighting up with fire; we really need to get going.

"No problem, I can use hellfire," Hades suggests as he moves over to the one closest to him.

"Will that get rid of their magical signature as well? There's not too much in the books about hellfire," I ask, although me not knowing if there's anything in the books isn't saying much. I read enough to pass my classes and defeat my enemies; I don't go in-depth like Mayhem.

“There’s a reason for that,” Hades smirks and then adds, “but yes, I have control over all of the hellfires, and I can use one that will ensure that there is no trace of their existence here.”

My eyes widen, and Zev looks impressed as he says, “We’re going to have to have an in-depth conversation about everything we don’t know but should know, but right now, we need to get going. I haven’t had a vision, but I have a sense of urgency riding me right now.”

Hades nods and lifts his hand, but before he does whatever the hell it is that he is going to do, he frowns and moves toward the body that’s closest to us. He bends down and then uses his magic to move the shirt away from the body’s neck.

“What is it?” I ask curiously, seeing a strange marking I didn’t spot before.

“It’s the mark of one of the Princes and makes the Wraith’s appearance here in the Fae realm even more concerning.” Hades replies with a deep frown. He quickly goes to each body, and sure enough, they all have the same mark on them. “Fuck.”

“We need to get rid of them now,” Zev says urgently, “I’m sorry, but we’re running out of time, and it’s going to be too late in a minute.”

Hades nods, and without any fanfare, he simply clicks his fingers as green flames engulf all of the bodies, destroying them within seconds.

“Impressive,” I say.

“Thanks,” Hades says, “we’re going to have to keep an ear out in the Underworld to see if there are any whisperings about the Wraith’s. I don’t like this at all.”

“That’s easy enough to do,” I reply. “Take Zev first, and I’ll keep an eye out for any more Wraiths; he can fill them in about what happened on this side while you come back for me,” I order, my eyes already on the area around us.

“Are you sure? I can take you both through at the same time,” Grey, I mean Hades, asks me.

I glance back and see the worry creasing the skin around his eyes, as Zev nods in agreement looking concerned.

“Yes, I’m sure. You said that it could trigger something and let the princes know that you were in the Underworld. We’ve gotten this far, and I really don’t want to risk anything delaying anymore.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Hades orders, clearly not happy about leaving me behind but knowing that I’m right and if we risk taking me through at the same time, we could compromise how quickly we can get to Farren and a few moments could be all it takes to have the Fates spin things out of our favour. I refuse to allow that to happen.

I turn my back to the door, or at least the area where Hades and Zev disappear because there’s not a door there. I figure that even though they’re in another realm, my team will still have my back, and I don’t have to worry about anything coming through the portal. My biggest threat is most likely going to come from in front of me. Hades kicked off a fuck load of power then, and if there are any more Wraith’s nearby then they would have been drawn to it.

I can’t help but try the link that I have with Farren to see if I can feel anything at all from her. My agitation grows when I can’t, and I wish that we knew more about this strange link that we share or even what it is; it’s not the Warrior Bond because it’s so much stronger than that, and it’s different, more intimate. I also know that it’s not the Centre bond, from how it’s described in books, what we’re taught, and how it feels. It’s still not quite what we have. It’s another one of those mysteries that I’m not sure we’re going to be able to look into until after the games, and with this taking as long as it is, I have no idea how long it’s going to be until we have the time to look into it.

Movement at the edge of the treeline snaps me out of my thoughts and I tense, readying my shadows. They come quickly and feel stronger than ever but I pull them back when I realise that it’s simply a rabbit. No more getting distracted by the many mysteries we’ve got going on.

Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately considering how on edge I am, there are no more Wraith's and it's not long until I feel the magic start to build in the air again, letting me know that someone, hopefully Hades, is going to walk through the portal imminently.

"Did anything else happen?" Hades asks me curiously as I turn to greet him.

I shake my head, "Unfortunately not. Come on, let's go."

He smirks at my response and then grips my shoulder. We take a step, and I feel the familiar sensation of the portal enveloping me. It's definitely not my favourite way to travel.

When my foot hits the floor, though, we're in the Underworld, and I take a moment to just look around at my surroundings. This is not somewhere that I'd ever thought I'd see, at least not without being dead first. We're getting a rather unique look at the Realm and seeing parts of it that even those who die won't get to see.

Where we've stepped into is a cobbled alleyway sandwiched between two stone-built buildings. Like most alleys, it stinks of piss and rotting food; I don't have a wide view through the opening of the alley, but from what I can see, it looks just like any small town. The only difference that I can see so far is the supernaturals that walk past the end of the alley; they're harsher somehow. I watch curiously as a supe with two tails, cloven feet, and a mouth of sharp teeth that take up most of its face moves across the end of the small alley. I have no idea what it's called, and in all honesty, so far I haven't seen many that I could name. It brings up a concerning point, and I turn to Hades.

"How badly are we going to stick out?" I ask.

"I told you that was going to be what he was worried about," Kill smirks, crossing his arms over his chest, his tail wrapped around his waist.

Hades grins, "We shouldn't, although I'm going to have to put my glamour back on while we're in the towns, I can't risk being recognised and it getting back to the Princes."

“Does that mean we should call you Grey again?” Loki asks.

“Probably for the best, at least while we’re around other supes,” Hades replies.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Mayhem blurts out, and when we all turn to look at him adds, “I was getting confused; I keep almost saying Grey and then having to switch, and it’s driving me nuts.”

Khaos decides to chime in at this point, “Maybe it would be better to ease them into the name change, especially with them being here. They’re the only supes that will ever see this side of the Underworld, and I’ve got a feeling that we’re going to need them firing on all cylinders.”

Hades nods, “Agreed, you can all call me Grey again, we need to make sure that no one realises that I’m here anyway.”

His glamour falls back into place but quickly recedes again before once again covering him and staying in place.

“Is everything okay, old friend?” Khaos asks, looking concerned.

Grey shrugs, “It feels a lot more restrictive than it did, and when I pulled it on the first time, it made me panic. Like I wouldn’t be able to remove it, like when I was compelled to keep it on, I just had to check.”

“I think that’s understandable, dude,” Rival replies, “you had the choice taken away from you, and before that, you were held prisoner as well.”

“Who put the glamour on you in the first place?” Mayhem asks.

“A goddess told me that she did it, ” Grey replies. “I’m just starting to see that she had a good reason. Although when she first told me, she led me to believe that it had something to do with what happened when the Princes held me prisoner, and I’m now wondering whether it really was her who put it on me, things that I haven’t noticed before are starting to make me question the truth of what I’ve been told.”

“Fucking hell. If it was her, she must have been pretty fucking strong,” Reaper observes.

“I’ll fucking say, which one of the dicks supposedly did it?” Khaos asks, seemingly pissed on Gray’s behalf.

“One of the Fates.” Grey surprises me when he answers, I felt almost sure that he wouldn’t bother or give some vague answer.

“Well, you know that they don’t do anything for no reason, and that reason is not likely to make sense to us. That includes lying about whether it was her that put the glamour on you,” Khaos sighs, seeming to accept the defeat of finding out the reasons behind Grey being forcefully glamoured and having the silencing spell on him as well.

“Wait, the Fates are goddesses?” Zev asks and then adds, “Not just a theory or vague notion but actual gods? Who I’m only now realising are a lot more tangible than they were to me recently.”

“Oh yeah, the Fates are goddesses, sisters, actually. They’re alright as far as the gods go, but tricky fuckers,” Khaos replies before Grey can.

“Wow,” Loki mutters and there’s not really much else that he, or actually any of us can say to that.

“This is fascinating, but if I’m judging what little of the sky that I can see correctly, then it’s night here. Shouldn’t we find somewhere to rest and get a plan together?” Mayhem asks.

“Where can we stay? Do they have b&b’s here?” Loki asks.

Grey and Khaos share a look before Khaos speaks up, “I have a place where we can stay, but we need to get moving. It’s right on the edge of town but thankfully in the direction of the palace, so we can set out early.”

“Do we really have to get some rest before we go and find her?” Reaper asks, his eyes shifted to Ryu’s, and I know that he’s likely to be right on the surface until we can find Farren.

I nod, answering him, “Yes, we’ve had a long day, and we’re in an unfamiliar environment. When we set out, we want to make sure that we’re at our best, and we don’t want to make mistakes that could slow us down and mean that it takes even longer to get to Farren.”

“We know that you make sense,” Reaper says, speaking for both Ryu and himself, “but we don’t like it.”

“None of us do,” Grey agrees, his expression grave.

Khaos’s head tilts to the side as he studies Grey curiously, and I wonder what he’s seeing in Grey that is so different from the Hades that he knew.

He doesn’t say anything about it, though, as he simply moves through the rest of us, “I’ve already sent Cerb ahead to make sure that they know we’re coming and to prepare some rooms for us.”

“You mean Poca?” Loki questions.

Khaos nods, “Yes, he was getting far too anxious waiting here. It was best to give him something to do.”

“Good idea,” Rival agrees.

“Follow me,” Khaos orders us all.

I have to admit that I’m feeling ready to go and get our woman, but I know that I need to take my own advice. No matter how hard it is, I will be of no use to Farren if I’m tired and can’t control my magic properly.

You better stay fucking strong, Farren; we’re coming for you.

Farren

My eyes are sharp on my surroundings, my back against the cold stone wall. Unfortunately, I am far too fucking familiar with this damn cell. I’m in pain, but that’s the least of my fucking worries right now. In

fact, the pain is familiar, it's helping to keep me grounded and to keep the panic at being back in this place at bay.

Barely.

He brought me here after slicing my throat, I'm not dead, but it hurt like a fucking bitch. He's playing with me by simply leaving me here. I know he is, and I'm surprisingly a hell of a lot calmer than I thought I'd be. Which is a good job because I need to keep my wits about me so I can escape. I've done it once, and I will do it again.

I have already tried the same little hack that I used last time to escape after the voice told me, but they clearly figured that out because it didn't work. Thinking of the last time I was here makes me think of Grey, which automatically makes me think of the other guys, and a pang of pain pierces my nearly pierced heart. I can't reach them through our bonds, and the pain of not knowing if they're okay and of needing them is not something that I'm used to dealing with or dealt with last time, and it certainly adds another dimension to this whole situation.

I wouldn't say I like it.

Stupid feelings.

In order to distract myself from my spiralling thoughts about the guys I try to get into the Void again, only to hit a proverbial brick wall. I have tried every ten minutes to get into the Void since I arrived, and I haven't been successful. Each time I try, it gets more and more painful when I hit the wall that's stopping me from entering it. I don't know how long I've got before I get really sick. I didn't have this problem last time I was here, and I can only assume that it was because I wasn't as connected to the Void as I am now. It's a worry that I don't have the time for and a bridge I will cross when I get to it.

I need to move. I've been crouched against this wall for far too long, and my legs are starting to cramp. I can't risk being presented with a chance to escape and tripping over my own feet because my legs have gone numb; that would be a really stupid way to die and one that I will make sure that I never live down.

Not that I'll live because I would've died tripping over my own feet, and then I'd be trapped here forever because the dead never leave the Underworld. This may be a happy forever for those that deserve it but I will be in the burning for eternity side, and I have enough bad memories of this place that it will be hell even if by some miracle I don't end up in that side.

For fuck sake, I chastise myself internally as I yet again go off on a tangent that has no real bearing on the situation at hand.

The wound on my throat is healing a lot slower than it should, thanks purely to the kind of blade that the fucker used, but it is healing and has healed enough that I can at least breathe a little bit easier. I can't stay still any longer. I have no idea how I'm going to get the fuck out of here. I start to pace, missing Poca immensely, as he always loves to pace with me. The best that I've come up with so far is that I need to wait, bide my time, and hope that they slip up, either while they're taking me to be tortured or monologuing about something because all of them are pathetically predictable in that sense.

The plan is simple and hinges a hell of a lot on luck, which can be hit and miss with me, so there's no telling whether this is going to work in my favour or not. I don't stop pacing. Movement feels better than staying still; I can almost trick myself into thinking that I am being productive and not stuck in a damn cage.

Again.

I have spent a good portion of my life in a fucking cell, and I am so over it. I will burn them all when I get out of here. That's completely irrational and impossible to do, but thinking about it makes me feel better and also allows me to push back at the panic that's trying to drag me under. I can panic later.

I start to go over things that make me calm, like my weapons, which always calm my nerves. I flick through each of these images, studying them closely and allowing them to calm me. I'm entirely unsurprised that all the guy's faces appear among my usuals.

Chapter Four

Farren

I have no idea how long I've been pacing, but it must have been for a while because my wound has healed. I'm now just left with a phantom ache that probably won't go away any time soon. The stiffness of my blood-soaked clothes is really starting to piss me off now, but the reality is that it's the least of my problems.

That point is amplified as I hear heavy footsteps echo down the dark, damp corridor that leads to my cell.

A sharp shudder of fear runs down my spine. This is going to hurt, and it may kill me. I know I pissed them off when I escaped the first time, and they'd want to torture me on that premise alone, but I have a feeling that they want me for more than that, although I can't for the life of me figure out why. Unless I was sent to kill someone that they loved, but I don't think the evil fucks are capable of loving anyone, except maybe Azreal; he's always seemed slightly different than the others and never participated in anything else that the other Princes put Grey and me through.

"Oh, Farren," Dagon sings, his voice grating on my nerves.

I stop pacing and turn to face the bars of my cell; they're spelled, and it's impossible to touch them without being in excruciating pain. Pulling my shoulders back, I push all thoughts out of my mind and blank my expression as I sink into that dark part of me that thrives on blood, pain, and fear.

The familiarity of it brings me peace, which I'm aware it really shouldn't.

The eldest prince comes into view; I knew he'd be the first to visit; he's incredibly impatient.

Dagon's green-tinged skin doesn't detract from his good looks, which he uses to his advantage all the time to get supes to trust him before he gets what he wants from them and then ends them in the most gruesome ways possible. To me, he just looks like a fuck boy.

He is strong though, I'll give him that, and he's built like a fucking house. I mean, he is ginormous, and although I am not entirely sure what species he is, as he is native to the Underworld, I at least know that he is part Demigod, which is why he is one of the Princes of the Underworld. I don't really know much about the hierarchy here, especially since Hades disappeared, but I do know that the princes are at the top.

"Nothing to say to me?" Dagon asks, his reptilian slit eyes narrowing at me. "Could it be? Are you actually going to cooperate with us? That would be a shame."

I don't move; I don't even allow my face to twitch, let alone make an expression, despite how much I want to sneer at him and curl my lip in disgust. There's no point, he doesn't give a shit. In fact, he would be proud beyond measure that he was getting to me.

"Nothing?" he tuts, seeming disappointed. "How about this? I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to tell me what I want to know."

I scoff, "Oh, and if I tell you whatever it is that you think I know, you're going to just leave me alone and not torture me?" I roll my eyes, "Please, I'm not falling for that shit."

He smirks, happy that he managed to get a response from me, "Oh, I'm going to torture you either way, but if you tell me what I want to know, then your torment will be slightly shorter, and the time before one of us visits again will be slightly longer."

There's only one thing that stands out to me regarding that threat, and it prompts me to ask, "Visit?"

Dagon's eyes flash with dark joy, "Oh, we're not risking allowing you out of this cell. Besides, you know we don't need

to be in there with you to inflict the pain that will get us the answers that we need.”

I raise my eyebrow, not allowing the pit of dread that’s opened up in my stomach to show outwardly. How the fuck am I supposed to escape if they’ve found the way I escaped last time and rendered it useless, I don’t have Grey with me to help this time, and now, they won’t let me leave this damn cell. It makes it nearly impossible to fucking escape, and I’m being generous when I say nearly because it is damn impossible to escape under these circumstances.

He tilts his head to the side, “No response? Ah well, no matter, it means that we can get back to the fun stuff.”

He doesn’t even bother to ask a question as the first wave of his magic charges me, slices open up all over my body, and blood instantly soaks my clothing. I don’t know why, but he never slices my clothes when he does this, instead choosing to allow his magic to pass through that barrier and simply cut my skin to ribbons.

None of me is spared, not my legs, torso, or even my face, as blood drips down into my eye. It’s absolute agony, but I allow the part of me that thrives in the dark and in pain to come forward, the part that likes watching the blood drip through my fingers as the life drains out of the eyes of one of my targets that deserved their fate.

My dark.

When it’s evident that I’m not going to give in to his sick wants and scream or beg for mercy, he sighs and pulls his magic back.

“I suppose I should ask you a question,” Dagon sighs like I’m inconveniencing him. “Where is he?”

I steel my spine, my voice coming out steady and unaffected as blood starts to pool around my feet from the multiple wounds, “Who?”

“Hades!” he growls; he obviously thinks that I’m playing him, but I have to admit that answer threw me through a fucking loop.

My lip lifts in confusion as my eyebrows furrow, “How the fuck should I know where he is? Besides, isn’t it a bit careless of you to lose your god?”

“He is not my god; he’s weak and unable to make the decisions that will better the Underworld and allow all of the Underworlders’ free reign in the other realms.”

“Whoa, hold up. I’m not even from here, and I know that it would be bad to let the born Underworlders into the other realms. Not just for the natives of those realms but for the Underworlders themselves, too, ” I point out, unable to stop myself from being dragged into the psycho-babble. It occurs to me that they must not be able to follow through with their plan because they need something from Hades himself, but how they plan to make a God do their bidding when they are merely demigods, some of them mixed with other supes, is a question that I’m not sure I want to know the answer too, but I sure as hell hope that they aren’t capable of it. He just stares at me, a calculating look in his eyes and a smug smile twisting his lips. It clicks, “You’re banking on that, aren’t you? There’s more to your plan, but you need the Underworlders to have free reign first.”

Anger flashes through his eyes, instantly telling me that I’m on the right track, but unfortunately, anything else that I may have been thinking about flees my mind as another round of pain attacks me from all angles. This time, he’s added a poison to his strikes, and liquid fire burns through my veins. Just when I think I can’t take another second of it and the sweet relief of unconsciousness may take me, he stops, pulling his magic back.

It’s by sheer fucking stubbornness that I stay standing, the pool of blood around my feet growing larger by the second.

“Where is Hades?” Dagon growls.

I steel myself against the pain and reply through gritted teeth, “How the fuck would I know?”

“Wrong!” he replies gleefully as yet another round of pain attacks me.

The only reason I haven't slipped in the ever-expanding pool of blood at my feet is because I haven't moved them, so the blood hasn't been able to get under the soles of my boots. I refuse to move them until I don't have a choice. He carries on torturing me, switching it up every now and then and even healing a few of the worst slices or clearing my body of the various poisons that he uses before he starts all over again.

I can feel my magic, far off in the reaches of my soul and behind so many barriers that I can't actually get to it and use it to fight back. The magic in this cell only allowing my healing ability to come through and even then not allowing it through enough to heal me completely, but just enough to keep me alive.

It's fucking angry though, angrier than I have felt it before, and its growing, pushing against the binds of the spells that hold me in a way that it didn't before, and I wonder if my ability to pick apart spells has grown enough to combat the ones that are binding my magic and this cell.

The pain must be getting to me because this cell has layer upon layer of spells put on it by creatures a thousand times stronger than I could ever hope to be, and there is simply not even a slither of a possibility that my magic could break free, or even start to pick it apart when it's locked down by it. Even if I wasn't trapped in the spells and I was trying to free someone else from them, I wouldn't be capable of doing it; my ability simply isn't that strong.

If it were, then I could've picked apart the spell that holds Grey hostage and stops him from telling us everything that he wants to. It didn't even occur to me to try simply because I know I'm not capable of that.

Finally, Dagon's latest round of torture ends, and this time, my knees crash to the floor in the pool of blood, my legs unable to help keep me up anymore.

He tuts, and through the one good eye I have left as blood is flowing in rivulets over the other one, I see him tilt his head and look at me curiously. "We've been at this for hours and your resolve hasn't cracked even for a second, it makes me

wonder if you in fact did escape with him or if he just saw an opportunity and took it.”

I don't move, mostly because even the tiniest of movements make my body scream in pain, but also because I don't want him to see my reaction to his words. Surely, he means someone else; he doesn't mean Grey because that would mean Grey is Hades. My thoughts are interrupted when he claps loudly, and I barely have time to suppress a flinch.

“No matter, I'm getting hungry. We'll pick this up later on; I'm sure one of the others will be along to see if they can get some information out of you; after all, it's not just Hades that we want to know about. Isn't it exciting? You're just full of mysteries, and I, for one, can't wait to take them apart piece by piece.” By the time Dagon's finished talking, his voice has turned dark and threatening, and it's clear he plans to find out whatever he wants to know by literally taking me apart, piece by piece.

As if to back up his words in case I was stupid enough not to believe him, his magic whips out one last time, severing the middle finger on my left hand; the act is so sudden that I scream; I can't help the pain is intense. Over my scream, I hear him chuckle as I pull my hand to my chest and hold it tightly; I watch as he uses a rush of magic to incinerate my finger as it lands on the floor, leaving nothing but ash behind. If looks could kill Dagon would be dead a thousand times over by now and in the most imaginative ways that I can think of. Unfortunately, he can't see my look of death and instead makes his way back down the row of empty cells, whistling happily.

I hold my body stiff until I'm certain that he's disappeared, and then I force myself to move out of the puddle of blood and over to the corner, putting my back against the wall to keep me upright and so that I can see if any of the other princes make an appearance. Swiping blood from my eye with my good hand so that I can see out of both of them, I then use both my teeth and my good hand to tear a bloodied strip off my shirt. It's not ideal, but it's better than nothing. I have no idea if my magic is going to be able to get through the barrier well

enough to grow me a new one. Since he incinerated it when it dropped to the floor, there's no chance of me securing it and hoping that it's good enough to encourage the magic to repair it.

Especially since there is so much that the minimal amount of magic that can get through the barrier needs to heal, I know that my finger will be too much. I've regrown limbs and fingers before, so unfortunately, this isn't new to me. It's only been left for a few days maximum, and then it was a struggle to grow back, so I have no idea if I will be able to grow it back at all.

Like everything at the moment, that is the last of my worries. I wrap the gap where the finger used to be tightly, hoping it will be good enough to stop the bleeding and hoping that my magic is at least strong enough to heal the open wound left in my fingers absence. I need to try and get the fuck out of here, before I can do that though, I need to rebuild my strength and although I don't want to, the best way for me to do that and for me to heal the wounds is by sleeping. I pull my hand up to my chest, cradling it and letting the comforting burn of anger wash over me, I'm going to take more than his fucking finger when I get out of here, and unlike me, I will have him begging for death.

My deadly thoughts bring a smile to my face as my eyes slip closed in what will hopefully be a quick but healing sleep. I can't afford to sleep for too long.

I know that I'm dreaming simply from the fact that I hold one of my familiar blades in my hand, the weight of it reassuring and comforting. I know that these are blades that I have stored in the Void, which I absolutely do not have access to right now. Unfortunately, it appears that I am still in that fucking cell and I'm still soaked in blood, missing a finger and in pain, I can move better than I could when I was awake

though and I'm hoping that means that my body has begun to heal as well as it can.

I imagine I'm going to have a fair few more scars from this. Healing scars will most likely be too much for the magic that can get through the spells that are holding it at bay.

Movement to the right of the cell has me tensing, ignoring the pain that it causes, as I drop down into a defensive crouch, my sword aimed in the direction of the noise. The only thing that stops me from attacking blindly is that the noise came from inside the cell, and I know that the princes aren't stupid enough to come in here with me. I may be practically magicless at the moment, but I'm deadly without my magic, and they know that I'd have their heads the second that they entered the cell.

It's for that reason that I pause.

"What the fuck?" a low growly voice asks as he looks around the cell. "Why the fuck am I in the cells."

His apparent familiarity with the cells piques my interest, but if I'm completely honest, his giant feathered wings have me captivated, along with his power, which feels immense and stronger than almost anything that I have felt before as it wraps around me gently, consuming me in a warm embrace and taking my pain, healing what my magic can't.

His eyes snap to my corner, but he frowns, squinting as if he's trying to see through heavy downpour and can't. "I know you're there; I can feel your pain, although my magic appears to want to help, not cause more." He seems incredibly confused by this but continues, "Step into the light so I can see who intrigues my magic and whether I should end you for it."

I can't help the chuckle that escapes me, although his words confuse me; as far as I'm concerned, we're standing in a lit cell. I may be standing slightly in a shadow, but there is no reason why he wouldn't be able to see me.

His eyes widen at the sound of my laughter, but he doesn't say anything. It is almost as if he's waiting for me to make the next move.

I decide to humour him and take a couple of steps forward, amazed at the lack of pain that I feel in doing so, his magic is healing me, and what's weirder is that my magic is allowing it and in fact, welcoming it.

Chapter Five

Farren

My magic is prickly at best, and the fact that it's simply allowing his magic to heal me and behaving like a purring kitten while doing it is weird as fuck, and it makes me wonder if some of those spells that are holding it hostage are actually changing its personality. Although, I didn't notice anything before now and I would have.

I'm putting it down to us being in a dream; I mean, it's not like he's real. He's too sinfully and darkly delicious to be real.

"Come into the light?" he asks, just as gruffly as he demanded the first time.

That settles it then, he can't see me.

"From where I'm standing, I am in the light," I reply.

His eyes widen at the sound, and I don't miss his throat bob as he swallows thickly. Well, that's a curious reaction to have. The tattoos covering his large arms writhe and move, prompting me to get closer. As soon as I try to take a step though I hit a brick wall and the shock sends a fresh wave of pain through my body, his magic has been healing me, but I am so damaged that it's barely scratched the surface.

Winged and tattooed hisses sharply as he also tries to step forward and has the same thing happen to him, "You are in immense amounts of pain, how can you speak with such an even tone?"

I figure since he can't see me and therefore harm me, and because we're in a dream, I may as well answer him honestly, and since my body is exhausted and hurting, I allow myself to slide down the wall and plonk my arse on the floor. His blazing eyes follow my movement but I know he can't see me. He

confuses me when he looks slightly panicked for a second before the clank of my sword and my heavy sigh seem to relax him again. He surprises me when he takes a seat on the floor as well, not worried about the grime and making his giant figure only slightly less imposing than it was a second ago.

I sense that if he were real, he would strike fear into everyone that he meets. He's got an unhinged feel about him, which quite frankly just intrigues me more, and it makes me smile that my mind has created someone unhinged to keep me company.

It makes sense. I mean, it's not like I'm completely sane.

"It's not the first time that I've been in this much pain, and I highly doubt that it will be the last. I learnt a long time ago that it pisses them off more if I don't react. Plus, I'm too stubborn to show that they're actually hurting; I will bend, but I will never break."

The corner of his lips tilts up slightly and is gone before it's really there. "Strong." He then carries on, "My magic seems to want to help you, and I don't like it."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, my magic is allowing it, and I don't like it either."

"Hmm," he replies, the hum strangely soothing.

"What's your name?" I ask him since he doesn't appear to be going anywhere, and I don't know what the purpose of this dream is. I'm not stupid enough to think that I'm going to wake up even close to as healed as I am right now, but it is allowing me to feel a modicum of relief for now, and for that reason alone, I want to prolong it.

"H," he replies, and I instantly know that he's given me a fake name for whatever reason; he also looks puzzled by this but asks, "Yours?"

"Ren," I reply; if he's not going to give me his real name, I won't give him mine.

I find it amusing that even my subconscious wants to keep shit from me.

He smirks, "I'd say it's nice to meet you, but for some reason, I don't like that you're in pain, and usually, I couldn't give a fuck."

"Charming," I reply with a chuckle.

He chuckles and says simply, "Always." We're quiet for a moment before he asks seriously, "Why are you in pain?"

"Torture."

"Do you deserve it?" he asks me.

I pause, "I think that the answer to that is complicated. There are things that I have done in my life that would warrant my torture, but for this instance, I would say that, no, I don't deserve it. I haven't got the information that they want. Having said that I wouldn't give it to them if I did, they are the fuckers who the information needs to be protected from."

He's silent for a moment as he thinks over my confusing reply; speaking softer than he has since he got here, he says, "I think you're wrong. I don't think you deserve to be tortured. We've all done things to survive that we wouldn't do under any other circumstances."

Taking a chance because it's my dream, and what the fuck is he going to do? I reply, "You sound like you're speaking from experience."

He sighs, his whole body slumping, and for the first time since he appeared in my dream, I feel like I'm seeing behind his mask. He's damaged and maybe a little bit broken, but he so fucking strong; for some reason, I think that he's had to be strong for so long, and no one has actually been there for him.

"It's a part of my job," he replies, "a job that I love, but until recently, one that I thought I had failed at."

"I get that," I reply. "What did you do?"

"I was an enforcer of sorts," he replies, and I know that there is a lot that he's leaving out."

"Me too," I reply.

"You were?" he asks, sounding surprised at my reply.

“Of sorts,” I grin, knowing he can’t see me.

He chuckles quietly, the sound somehow soothing the frayed edges of my soul, “Touche, Ren.”

For some reason, my made-up name on his lips gives me a sense of comfort that I didn’t expect. This whole interaction is weird as hell, but then again, I don’t really expect much else from my subconscious.

“You’re hurting,” I blurt out, some instinct making me say it even though I had decided to keep that innate knowledge to myself.

He tenses his head, slowly turning in my direction; his eyes search the area that I’m sitting in but never really lock on me, letting me know that I’m still shrouded in darkness for some reason.

He looks away from me, but not before I see a touch of fear and a whole lot of confusion in his eyes. I’m reasonably sure that he’s going to ignore me after that tactless accusation I practically hurled at him, so it surprises me when he doesn’t.

“I’m lonely,” he says, “I’m not alone. I have people that I consider friends, some old and some new, but I’m lonely. It would take a very special woman to not only understand me but accept me. I’m just a bit bloodthirsty, and I love chaos, among other things.”

“Until recently, I thought something similar, but I’m now starting to believe that the right person is out there for everyone. Sometimes, they’re just in the weirdest places.”

“Hmm,” he replies, not really committing to what I’m saying, but that’s okay. I wouldn’t have believed me either. “I think I’ll just stick to fucking and killing.”

I burst out laughing, sending pain ricocheting around my body, but it’s so worth it.

“Careful,” he growls.

I tilt my head curiously, “Can you feel my pain?”

He hesitates but nods, “Yes, my magic is still trying to heal you despite the fact it’s hitting a brick wall for some reason.

Why aren't you healing yourself? Do you not have the ability?"

I sigh, "I'm in this cell. It's embedded with layers upon layers of spells that suppress and trap my magic. They've also wrapped my magic itself in spells. They don't want me to die, at least not yet, so they've allowed a small amount of my magic through to heal, just enough to keep me alive."

The muscle in his jaw pops as he clenches his teeth, "You sound far too calm about your impending torture and death."

I shrug, not that he can see, but then decide to answer honestly; he is my imagination, after all, and if I can't be honest with myself, then who can I be honest with?

"I am terrified," I start, "and I'm angry as fuck that this is how it's going to end for me. Just when my life was starting to look better, I'm going to die."

I watch as his throat bobs as he swallows back emotion; his voice is barely above a whisper as he replies, "You sound certain that you're going to die."

This time it's my turn to swallow back the knot of emotions in my chest, as I whisper brokenly, "I am, the odds are impossible."

I haven't admitted it to myself yet, but it's true.

He makes me jump as he suddenly powers to his feet, "No, I will not allow it."

Unfortunately, I can't reply because I feel my body being pulled back into wakefulness. Sadness consumes me.

"Thank you for being a bright spot in my dark; I will never forget the reprieve that you gave me," I will my words to reach him, and his head whips in my direction, the widening of his panic-filled eyes the only thing that I see before I'm painfully catapulted into consciousness.

I groan. I can't help it. I hadn't realised quite how much pain that H's magic had taken from me in my dream, but I almost wish it hadn't because the flood of it now is close to unbearable. I have to take a few deep breaths, allowing the pain to flow through me so I can get used to it again, my tolerance heightening. I understand that my brain lowered my pain levels in my dream in order to help me, but the pain waking up almost wasn't worth it.

H's concerned face flashes through my mind's eye; I take it back, it was worth having that dream to see H, and I hope that my subconscious decides to allow me to dream of him again; he offered a level of relief that I didn't think was possible in this situation.

I have no idea how long I've been asleep or even whether it's night or day as there are no windows in here, but there's not a prince or Hellier standing outside of my cell, so I can't have been asleep for that long, I groan as I shift slightly, my hand still cradled to my chest, although it looks like it's thankfully stopped bleeding. I'm hoping that the small amount of my magic that can get through the binding spells is enough to ensure that I don't get any sort of infection from the multitude of wounds that I am now covered in.

A sudden buzz of magic has me tensing, and I force myself to stand, preparing for another round of torture and impossible questions to answer. Not that I'd answer them anyway, I know firsthand how evil these fucks are, and I would die before I gave them the information that they wanted. My thoughts remind me of what I admitted to H, but I quickly shy away from the reminder. I know how this is going to turn out, but I'm not as comfortable admitting it during my awake moments.

My eyes scan the area outside of the bars of my cell as I force myself to stand in the middle of the room and away from the safety of my corner. I frown when I can still feel the buzz of magic but can't see anything; it makes me feel a hell of a lot more nervous than if I could just see what was about to attack me. I really wish I had a couple of my weapons, or Poca or Meri, or the guys, or hell, my fucking magic.

I learned a long time ago that there was no point in wishing for shit because it never came true.

There's another surge of magic, and I reflexively drop down into a defensive crouch, even though I know in the long run it won't do fuck all to help me since the princes are all too cowardly to come in here and give me a fighting chance.

"Xerxes?" I whisper, as the familiar shape of him appears in the room.

"Farren?" he replies, "Goodness me, look at you."

I decide to ignore that because I know what I most likely look like, and I don't wish to dwell on it since it's only going to get worse, "What are you doing here?"

"I think I was sent here," he replies, not sounding too sure, and then adds, "This happens sometimes; I get sent where I'm needed."

"Who do you get sent by?" I ask curiously, keeping my voice quiet as I sit back down.

Now that I know that it is friend and not foe, I can allow myself to relax a bit, as I need to try and gain as much strength back as I can before the next round of torture. I'm actually healing faster than I thought I would, and although my mind tries to tell me that it's because of H and his help while I was dreaming, I know that would be impossible. I think it's far more likely that I'm stronger than I was when I was here the first time.

Xerxes comes closer and settles on the floor in front of me; I have to admit that it's nice to have a friendly face or er book to talk to.

"One of the gods, although I never really know which one has sent me and I don't think they all have the ability to utilise me. I must also have some kind of say in it because I wouldn't want to be out of your care. So if they tried to send me to someone else, I wouldn't appreciate it in the slightest." He explains.

"Wow, I don't really know what to say to that. I mean, that means that one of the gods has sent you to me, which means

they know who I am, and that's kind of terrifying. I'm going to breeze past that and ask something instead."

"Fair enough," Xerxes replies, sounding somewhat amused, but there's also an underlying tone of worry, and I'm guessing that's because of what I look like and the situation that I'm in.

"Did you see the guys? Are they okay? Did they get out of the castle okay?" My string of questions brings the worry I have for them to the forefront of my mind, and up until now, I had been successfully blocking it out. "I can't feel them through the bond, and it's panicking me."

"They are okay; they are panicking about you, although they know that you aren't dead," he replies.

I frown, wincing slightly when it pulls open the cuts on my face. "How could they know that?"

"They ..." Xerxes response gets cut off, and he makes a frustrated noise, "Apparently, that isn't something that I'm allowed to tell you. The fates insist that you find out on your own and at the right time."

"That's stupidly frustrating, but at least the fates allowed you to tell me that they're okay and they know I'm not dead. That's better than the information that I had a few minutes ago." I reply, knowing that I'm lucky to have the information that I do, "What can you tell me?"

Xerxes magic fills the air again, and I wait as his pages start to glow before they flip open, each page-turning rapidly until they finally stop moving and I look at the page that they've stopped at, reading through it thoroughly to make sure that I don't miss any information I have no idea if the words are going to disappear after I've read them or even if Xerxes himself is going to disappear.

"Huh, so there's a key fragment that's kept in Hades' personal vault, which is in this castle. Me being here is probably the only chance we're going to get to get it since no one living can enter the Underworld under normal circumstances, and I'm sure as hell not willing to kill one of

the guys in order to get the fragment, especially since they wouldn't be able to get it out." I say to Xerxes, grateful that he's still here even though he's given me the information that he came to give me. "But why haven't the princes got it if it's in there? Surely they know it's there?"

Xerxes's pages glow again, and he hums with interest as he answers me, "Only Hades himself can enter the vault, and no matter what the princes have tried, they can't get in."

"Okay, that makes more sense, and that is probably why they want to know where he is so badly," I muse out loud. Refocusing on Xerxes I add, "I don't suppose whichever god sent you to me added how to get out of the cell?"

"No, that's not within my pages; I'm sorry, Farren, I want to help you, but I don't know any more than what they've allowed me to know." The pages take that moment to glow slightly, and he adds, "It says to use your magic."

"I know, don't worry," I reassure him and then add, "I don't suppose the wise ones have said how to use my magic since it's suppressed under at least one hundred spells all woven together?"

"I'm sorry, Farren," he replies regretfully.

"That's okay, it's not your fault."

I sigh and then admit quietly, "Without that information though I'm not sure that I'm going to be able to get out of here."

Chapter Six

Farren

U nsurprisingly, my revelation is met with silence, Xerxes understandably not knowing how to respond.

“Am I right in thinking that you have the gift for picking spells apart?”

I nod, “I do, but I can’t use it to pick the spells apart when its been cut off from me,” I pause, not wanting to sound crazy but wanting to get his opinion; I decide to add, “but I swear that it’s trying to pull the spells apart from behind the bindings, is that possible?”

Xerxes hums while he thinks, “It could be; there are very few people that have actually had the ability, so I can’t be certain. You may be able to coax your magic to work from this side of the bindings though.”

“I’ll try anything at this point; I know that it’s going to be impossible to get out of here without some help from my magic.”

“Try connecting with it like you would when you need to do a particularly difficult spell, go into a meditative state, and see if you can coax it through the bindings to start picking some of them apart. You need to be aware that some of the spells may have traps built into them that you could trigger if they’re undone, and you could experience some nasty side effects.”

“It can’t be anything worse than what I’m experiencing or will experience here. I may as well try now since I’m being left alone, and there’s no telling how long that’s going to last. If I’m too deep and someone comes, hide. I don’t want them finding you, that would be really fucking bad.”

“Okay, I will, I’ll try to pull you out first though.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

I hope he does what I’ve asked. I don’t want him in the hands of the princes; the torture that they would put him through would be horrific, and the information that they would have access to would definitely mean that they could do some severe damage, considering that they are already doing plenty of damage without having access to the information makes me dread to think what they would do with it.

I take a deep breath, trying to block out all of the pain that my body is in, the thoughts of my men, H, the princes, torture, everything; I push it all away and sink into my centre, my eyes slipping closed. Usually, when I slip into my centre where my magic resides, I get this overwhelming sense of peace and immediately feel better. This time though, I’m just hit with a wave of pure anger, I can barely feel my magic, and I fucking hate it; not only that, but it’s mad as hell at being trapped, as in the kind of anger that wants to destroy everything in its path.

Coming face to face with my magic makes me worry about how I will cope with not being able to get into the Void. I have no idea how long I’ve got before I start to feel the adverse effects of not going into the Void, but I do know that it’s pretty serious if I don’t get in. Not only did I experience that firsthand, but Monty was pretty sure that it would get more extreme each time.

I can’t dwell on that now though, I need to see if I can convince my magic to try and pull apart the spells from the other side. I take another grounding breath and refocus myself. I don’t know how long I spend immersed, but it has to be quite a while. The good news is that I managed to unravel two of the spells, and picking them apart didn’t have any adverse effects; the bad news is that it took me so long and, as far as I can tell, didn’t give me any more access to my magic. In order to get through all of the spells and entirely free my magic, it’s going to take time, and I fear that it will take more time than I have.

For now, I’m going to celebrate the small win.

“How did it go?” Xerxes asks as I come back out and groan at the stiffness in my limbs. I was right; I’ve obviously been

under for a while.

I explain to him that I managed to get two undone but that it's going to take me a while to get through the rest and then ask, "How long was I under for?"

"Around four hours."

"What? And no one came in that time?" I ask, needing to reassure myself. Even though if they had, I would definitely have known about it.

It's not like they would've thought, oh, she's meditating. I'll come back to torture her some more later.

"No, no one has come." Just as he finishes the sentence, I hear the telltale click of the door at the end of the corridor that leads to my cell.

"You need to hide somehow, right now," I whisper urgently. Magic encompasses him, and he shrinks until he's barely bigger than my thumbnail; he then moves to the dark recesses of my corner and stays there. As footsteps echo down the hallway, I add, "Whatever happens, do not get involved; that is an order. If you can somehow zone out what's about to happen, I'd highly suggest it."

He makes an unhappy noise but then falls silent.

"Farren," Hiromu's voice snaps out, and I feel a spear of dread trickle down my spine and settle in my gut.

I hate Hiromu's brand of torture the most. I can deal with physical pain, but his ability is illusions, and he is extremely good at them; he will create an illusion in my mind, and although I know this, it is so real, and he has done it for so long that it becomes impossible to think of it as anything but real. I feel and experience everything as if it were real.

What worries me the most is that it was bad enough when the only thing I truly cared about was Poca and Kill, both of which were used against me in the illusions, either watching them die or be tortured in hundreds of different ways or having them turn on me. Now, I have the others who I care about and who actually mean something to me, and watching them all die in horrifying ways over and over again is going to be way

worse than any physical pain that the princess can put me through. The only silver lining is that, for whatever reason, he can't see what the illusions are, at least not with me. He simply throws his magic at me, and it takes care of the rest; it was a point of massive disappointment for him when he tortured me the first time. Unfortunately for me it doesn't seem to affect the potency of his gift and he quickly realised that although he couldn't see what I was seeing, it was still having the desired effect on me.

Hiromu grins, his pointed teeth wickedly sharp, the black colour of them a deep contrast with his red skin. With two sets of eyes, the fact that he's only barely taller than I am does nothing to lessen how intimidating he is. His eyes connect with mine, and just like that, I'm pulled into an illusion.

It's not real, it's not real, I chant to myself as my men come into view.

Each one of them looks at me with disgust as they begin to circle me.

"I told you that you'd be the death of us," Storm sneers.

"Not worth our time," Loki spits, his teeth flashing dangerously in the light.

"You'd be better off dead," Mayhem growls.

"I'm happy to help you kill yourself, I'd consider it an honour to rid this world of you," Rival adds.

"Save some for Ryu and me," Reaper says, "pathetic."

Grey's eyes flash with malice, "I enjoyed watching them torture you. You deserved it."

"He's right. I've seen how They sliced at you, and I've seen what they're going to do to you," Zev grins, his eyes dark and filled with a level of hatred that makes my heart hurt, "what they've got planned this time is so much worse."

They continue to throw more and more insults my way, getting more creative in the ways that they'd like to end me and how useless I am. This is just the warm-up act for what's about to come, and that's proven when their harsh and hurtful

words are accompanied by hits and pain. I curl up and chant over and over again that it's not them. They'd never treat me this way, not even Storm when he hated me.

Killian

This is taking too fucking long, we've been travelling for days now, camping in the woodlands that seem to cover most of the Underworld, or at least what we've seen so far. Apart from the first town that we arrived in, where we only stayed for a couple of hours before we set off again, we've avoided them entirely so far. Although the new terrain is interesting and nothing like I have ever seen before, it doesn't detract from the fact that Farren is missing; well, that's not strictly true. I mean, we know where she is, so I guess kidnapped would be the better way to describe it.

The point is, she's been taken, and she's being tortured; we don't even know why they want her, although from what Grey and Khaos have told us so far, I wouldn't put it past them to want her just for revenge for escaping the first time that they had her. Either way, I want to destroy some princes. I want to tear them limb from fucking limb, slowly, and watch them bleed out. If the worst happens to Farren, then I'll have nothing to lose, and the Princes will wish that they had never set eyes on her. I will torture them forever, and I know that I won't be the only one who will be doing it.

"Alright, that's it." Loki suddenly says, throwing his hands up in the air and spooking his horse.

I say horse, but these creatures are barely related to them. Instead of four legs, they have six, which allows them to move incredibly fast, although their faces are a similar shape to the Fae horses that we're used to. These horses have two sets of eyes, one set above the other, as well as wickedly sharp teeth. They could easily tear you apart and not even break a sweat. I tune back into the conversation as Loki points at Khaos.

“You are quiet, too quiet. We may not have known you for very long, but I think I’ve gotten to know you well enough over the last few days; something is wrong. You haven’t replied snarkily or blown something up all day, so I know there’s something going on; what gives?” Loki asks a slightly shocked looking Khaos.

Something that we learned within the first full day of travelling, which was only two days ago, is that if there is a problem that we come up against and there isn’t an easy or straightforward solution he just blows it up. His love of explosives reminds me of Farren and makes me miss her even more. I feel like I’ve only just got her back after missing her for so long and thinking that she’d given up on me. I fucking loath knowing that she’s in danger, and I can’t murder them. I also know how much past trauma being in a cell is going to trigger, thanks to her fucking father and being there before.

Grey and Farren both told us a little bit about how they met in the cells but not really much about what happened while they were imprisoned there. I only needed to see their shared haunted looks to know that it was fucking terrible. I’m actually surprised that they both got out alive and that they can even function. Many seasoned warriors have lost themselves and become shells of their former selves or, worse, Wraiths after they have been tortured, and yet Farren, although admittedly jaded, could laugh, love, and be so incredibly gentle even after all of the pain that has been inflicted on her.

She is the strongest and fiercest person I know, and that is the sole reason why I’m not completely losing my shit right now. If anyone can survive the fucking princes for a second time, it’s Farren.

Grey chuckles, bringing me out of the wayward thoughts I keep getting lost in.

“They genuinely care; you’ll get used to having more than just me notice if you’re alright,” Grey tells the still slightly confused-looking Khaos. “He’s not wrong though, what’s up?”

Khaos tenses slightly and then sighs heavily, rubbing his hand through his hair, “I just had a strange dream, and I can’t

stop thinking about it. It affected me more than I thought it would.”

It’s easy to tell from the way that he shifts that he is really uncomfortable admitting that to us, and Mayhem asks, “Do you want to talk about it, or do you want us to forget you told us?”

Looking relieved, Khaos replies, “The second option, please.”

“You got it, mate,” Reaper replies for all of us and then adds, “if you change your mind though we’re here.”

Khaos just nods, not sure what to say.

Loki, as usual, comes to the rescue and changes the subject, “Where is here? How far away from the next stopping point are we?”

“We’re staying in a small village just up ahead,” Grey replies.

“We haven’t seen any souls, just Underworlders,” Mayhem says, not really phrasing it like a question, but you can hear the curiosity in his voice.

“We’re only travelling through the part of the Underworld that holds the native Underworlders. The Souls are in an entirely different part and travelling through it would be extremely complicated especially since they may recognise me. It might be necessary at some point in our journey if we hit any snags, and we can deal with it then, but for now, I’m hoping that we can carry on through this part; it’s a lot more like what you’re used to.” Grey explains.

“Gotcha,” Mayhem replies, questions dancing in his eyes.

It’s nice to know that some things haven’t changed since the last time that I saw them all, and I’m incredibly grateful that they have just accepted me back into the fold despite how we ended things. I didn’t have much choice, but they still could’ve given me a hard time, and they haven’t. I think that their easy acceptance has to do with Farren and also because we haven’t really stopped since I came back into their lives.

Storm and I haven't even had a proper chance to talk about our father and what me being back in the picture could entail as soon as he realises I'm alive and back. That's a worry for another time, hopefully far into the future.

"The castle is in this part and not in the part that houses the souls?" Storm clarifies.

Khaos nods, "Yes, so there shouldn't be any reason why we would need to go through the Soul side."

Zev clears his throat and looks slightly uncomfortable as he dodges a branch, "Can you tell if she passes when you're here?"

I tense, it hadn't even occurred to me that he may not be able to tell, and in the back of my mind, I have sort of been counting on the fact that if something went wrong with Farren, Grey would know because he's Hades and he said he knew when any living creature in all of the realms died, but what if it doesn't work here for some reason.

My heart pounds in my chest as my tail starts stabbing the air in preparation to kill whoever has taken her from us.

"My gift doesn't turn off depending on location; not even the suppression spell that I had on me could stop that part of my magic, even when it was first put on me." Grey starts to explain as the lights of the village begin to appear through the trees. "I will know if she crosses over."

My anxiety dips a bit, although the thought of her crossing over absolutely terrifies the fuck out of me, so it doesn't go entirely. I try to take comfort in the fact that she hasn't crossed over yet.

"We're here," Reaper says unnecessarily as we start to head down a dirt street, with houses and shops on either side of us.

It's only early evening, so the streets are still bustling with people going about their business. At least it was when we first arrived; as we get further into the town looking for somewhere to stay for the night, I start to notice that not only are the villagers looking at us in fear, but they start to head off the street shutting the doors tightly behind them, by the time

we get to the town centre they're being a lot less subtle about the fact that they're trying to avoid us.

As the last door in the town square slams shut and we're left alone, Rival stops his horse, prompting the rest of us to do the same, "Okay, I thought I might be being paranoid at first when everyone started to disappear, but I know I'm not imagining it now."

"They're scared of us," Loki frowns, clearly not liking that they all appear to fear us so much.

"Not just scared, they're absolutely terrified of us." Mayhem points out, his gaze moving from staring at the closed doors and empty streets to looking at Grey and Khaos, "Is it because we're obviously not one of them, and we're not dead?"

Grey shrugs, "I mean, that would certainly make them curious, but I don't think it would make them scared."

"There's no way that they could recognise you right?" Reaper asks.

Khaos shakes his head this time, "It's unlikely, but even if they did, he wouldn't be met with fear; the whole Underworld was devastated when he disappeared; he's very much loved."

Storm sighs, "There's a tavern over there, let's see if we can get some more information from there and hopefully a room or two so we can get a couple of hours sleep before we set off again."

Chapter Seven

Killian

I t's the best option we have right now since it's not like we can ask a passerby for directions to the nearest place to stay, and more often than not, in small villages like this one, the taverns do it all. We ride around the back of the tavern to where the stables are, but unsurprisingly, there isn't a stable hand there to take our horses from us.

"I'm not sure I like this," Khaos mutters, his eyes scanning our surroundings shrewdly. "I'd suggest that we leave the horses untethered in case we need to leave in a hurry, which I'm starting to think is quite likely."

"Agreed," Grey replies as he gets off his horse and pats its neck.

"They'll stay put without being tethered to something?" I ask. So far, we've tethered them to the trees where we've bedded down for the night.

"They'll stay put unless they get spooked," Khaos replies, as he too dismounts, "and it takes a hell of a lot to spook them. Usually, they just eat the things that scare them."

"Well, there's a slightly disturbing image," Loki comments, stretching his back as he lands on the floor.

"Only because we're used to Fae horses who only eat plants and shit," Rival points out.

"Good point," Loki replies.

Once we've made sure that the horses are safe and are able to bolt if they need to, we all head toward the door that leads into the tavern. I've already reminded myself where each of my weapons are, and my shadows are ready to be called upon if they're needed. My magic is extremely close to the surface

anyway, and it will stay that way until Farren is back with us and safe.

I'm used to willingly walking into situations that are going to get me killed, so I make sure that I'm the first one through the door. That way, I'll be hit first if they're hostile, and I can assess the situation before the others even make it through, which allows them precious time to escape and save themselves. At least that's the theory, I know that if I get attacked they aren't going to leave me behind.

As soon as we walk in, all movement in the tavern stops as everyone turns to look at us; I try to put them at ease with a smile, the smile that Farren likes to refer to as my kiss arse one. Unfortunately, it must be broken because as one everyone suddenly leaves.

Glancing at the bartender, who is watching us with a scowl, most likely due to us scaring off all of his business, my smile turns slightly sheepish, which seems to surprise him, "Something I said?"

He seems to consider whether he's going to answer me or not as he looks over at the others standing behind me and comes to some sort of realisation and tension drains out of him.

"They think that you work for the princes," he explains, "it's never a good thing when the princes are around."

Grey tenses, "They're that afraid of the princes?"

The bartender looks at him like he's been hidden under a rock before answering anyway, "Everyone is. The princes have made sure that. We need Hades to come back, but at this point, everyone is starting to lose faith that it will ever happen. I think he's dead."

I can feel the anger coming off of Grey at the bartender's words, and as his magic starts to build, I know that if he's not careful, he's going to burn through his glamour, and the bartender is going to get even more of a shock and have a ton of fucking questions.

Khaos grips Grey's shoulder tightly warning him to reign it in, and then says, "With the amount of power the princes seem to have gained in Hades absence, I imagine that Hades wouldn't be able to simply come back even if he was okay."

Khaos is clever in the way that he phrases his words, and it does what he intended to do and gets more information out of the bartender.

The bartender immediately starts to shake his head, "No, he would need an army and a fucking big one at that. Underworlders are either loyal to the princes or far too terrified to defy them. The Helliers are sent out regularly to take unwilling people Underworlders with them. We have no idea what they did with them, and they're never seen again. "

"They're abducting people?" This time, it's Khaos's anger that fuels the question.

I can't say I blame him; the armies were his responsibility, and from what I've picked up from both him and Hades, Khaos was a fair but ruthless commander, and he believed in only the best. He wouldn't have wanted soldiers who didn't want to be there, and he wouldn't have taken anyone against their will.

The bartender once again looks confused but nods his head in confirmation.

"I think we all hope that Hades appears when he can and in a way that means he can successfully take out the princes," Storm replies.

"Here, here," the bartender replies, "you boys look like you've been travelling for a while and I can't imagine that you've had a very good welcome here."

"I can't say that I blame anyone since the princes are so awful, and they thought we worked for them." Reaper replies gruffly.

"Hmm," the bartender hums in reply as he starts pouring ales, "here, I can offer you a drink and we have a stew on the go if you're hungry."

“Yes, please,” Loki replies before anyone else can, and I think that it’s because he needs to feed; it has been a while since he fed from Farren, but he adds, “I smelt that stew as soon as I walked in and it smells awesome.”

I need to keep an eye on him. He’s not showing any of the usual signs of hunger, and it makes me wonder if it works differently in the Underworld because, by this point, he really should be at least starting to get hungry. I’ll watch him closely, just in case. The last thing we need is a hangry vamp.

The bartender grins, “Thank you. Take a seat, and I’ll bring you over some bowls.”

We pick up our drinks off the bar and then find a table big enough for all of us to sit comfortably. I have to admit that I’ve finished half of my ale before it occurs to me that it might be something unique to the Underworld that we shouldn’t drink. Since Khaos and Grey didn’t warn us though, I’m just assuming that it’s okay.

Either way, it’s too late now.

“Are you okay?” Zev asks Grey.

Grey glances up from his still full glass and shakes his head, “No, my people should never have to live in fear, and if it’s this bad here I shudder to think what kind of condition the soul side is in.”

“Fuck, that’s going to be an issue.” Storm agrees, a deep frown darkening his features.

“As soon as we have Farren and we know that she’s okay, we will work out a plan to stop the princes and restore the Underworld,” Zev says.

Grey looks at him, his eyes narrowing slightly as he asks, “We will?”

Zev nods firmly, and Grey’s shoulders slump.

“What’s wrong?” Khaos asks this time, “I thought that you’d be relieved?”

Our conversation is interrupted as the bartender brings each of us massive bowls of meat stew, a huge plate of still warm

bread rolls, and a wedge of butter.

Once he's gone, Grey answers Khaos's question, "I am relieved that we're going to fix this; my Underworld needs me, and it's my responsibility, but," he pauses.

It suddenly occurs to me what's wrong, "But if we help you fix it, we will need to leave at some point. We're a part of the Warrior Games; the Fae realm needs us, and the Underworld needs you, so we will need to leave, and more importantly, so will Farren."

Grey gives one sharp nod, letting me know that I've hit the nail on the head with my explanation. The rest of us all share a look but stay silent, there's fuck all that we can do, that's the reality of the situation. Grey is needed here, and we're needed in the Fae realm; it would be ridiculous if he attended Black Onyx Academy even if he could leave the Underworld unattended, which he can't.

"We'll figure something out," Zev says, but he looks worryingly unsure about his reassurances.

Grey has very quickly become one of us, and Khaos isn't too far behind, which is weird since we've only really known him for a few days, at this point though I just assume that the Fates are pulling the strings and that we'll eventually understand what's going on.

I would miss them both, and I'd find it difficult just to leave them behind. I don't even want to think about what Farren's reaction will be.

We all eat in silence for a while, and I'm so glad that Loki answered before anyone else could decline because the food is absolutely delicious, and I'm not just saying that because we haven't eaten anything but what we've hunted for the past few days.

"I don't think we should stay in town," Mayhem suddenly says.

"Why?" Storm asks around a mouth full of food.

"Because we're making the locals extremely uncomfortable and causing them distress, it's really not a problem for us to

make camp in the woods,” Mayhem replies.

“I think you’re right,” I agree, “these people have clearly been through enough, and I don’t want to cause them any extra stress just because of our presence.”

“Agreed,” Grey replies firmly. “We’ll eat and then head out.”

“Do you think he’d package some up for us?” Loki asks hopefully.

“I think, considering we scared away all of his patrons if we pay handsomely enough, he wouldn’t mind,” Reaper grins, tearing off a hunk of bread. “Hopefully, he has some more bread, too.”

“It’s settled then,” Rival says, “we’ll ask if we can take some food with us and then head out.”

Everyone nods in agreement.

We end up having a second round of both food and ale, and the bartender is more than happy to allow us to take some food with us, especially since we pay handsomely for it. As we’re leaving, he stops Grey.

“If Hades were to be found, there is a following that is still loyal to him and aren’t swayed by the princes lies or live in fear of their wrath,” the bartender pauses as he looks over all of us with a knowing glint in his eye, “we would gladly fight alongside him to fix the wrongs that the princes have wrought in the Underworld.”

“That is good to know,” Grey replies, gripping his forearm, “what is your name?”

“Bezeal,” the bartender replies.

Grey nods and smiles, “Nice to meet you.”

“We need to get going if we’re going to find somewhere to settle down for the night,” Khaos says.

We say our goodbyes and head back out, finding our horses exactly where we left them and load up. Once we’re out of the

village and making our way down a dirt road, I start up the conversation again.

“Do you think he knew that you were Hades?” I ask.

Grey shakes his head, “I doubt it. There’s no way that he could possibly know.”

“Isn’t it more likely that he thought that we’re a strange enough group that he automatically assumed that we may know something?” Zev asks.

“Our reaction to what he was saying was strong enough that he wouldn’t think that we were on the princes side, so it is possible,” Reaper agrees.

“And we were asking questions about things that we would have known about if we were natives of the Underworld,” Loki adds.

“Regardless of whether he knew who we, or more specifically you, are, we need to remember him. We’re going to need as much help as we can to sort this out, and I have a feeling that we’re only scratching the surface of what the princes have been up to in your absence,” Khaos warns.

Fixing the Underworld seems like a gargantuan task to me, and I have no idea where we’ll even start, but I know that we’re not going to allow Grey to fight this battle alone. I just have no idea how it’s going to fit in with the Warrior games that we have no choice but to be a part of and finding the key fragments so that the princes can’t open the door to the Underworld and allow some of the more deadly creatures to escape into the fae realm and then potentially into the others as well.

“Anyone else feeling snacky?” Loki asks.

“Dude, we just ate,” Khaos replies with a smile and adds, “but yeah, I could eat.”

“Can we at least find somewhere to spend the night before we eat more?” Storm suggests, rolling his eyes.

“Fine,” Loki jokes.

“Guys, shut up a minute; Ryu senses something,” Reaper orders.

I instantly become more alert as I study our surroundings. We’re still on the hard-packed dirt road, but as it is now extremely late and pitch black, we haven’t come across anyone else travelling. On either side of the road are densely packed trees, and if I’m being honest, we’re in the perfect place to be ambushed or assassinated.

At first, I don’t sense what Ryu does, but that’s hardly surprising since his senses are so much stronger than mine, and he always senses things before the rest of us do. A full minute after he’s mentioned it I sense something closing in on us from both sides of the road, we are definitely being ambushed.

“Do you want to see if we can outrun them?” I ask.

“Hell no, I want to play,” Storm grins, drawing his sword and twirling it in his hands.

“I was hoping that you were going to say that,” I reply.

There’s no time for any more conversation as creatures burst out of the tree line, not worrying about stealth and going straight for the kill. None of them stop to assess the situation, and we’re thrown into the fight immediately. I dismount my horse since I have no idea how Underworld horses react in this kind of situation, and I’m not bonded to it, so it will always choose its own life over helping me, which is entirely natural but means that I’d rather not fight from their backs and would prefer to do it with my feet firmly planted on the floor where I can’t get thrown or anything else.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, my tail stabs out behind me, killing an attack as my shadows warn me of someone attacking me from the left. I allow one of my shadow beasts free and draw my sword, preparing to attack. I trust that the others are all capable of looking after themselves, but I will check in on them to see if any of them need any backup after I’ve dealt with this one. I have no idea how many creatures are attacking us, but they’re soon going to wish that they hadn’t chosen us to attack.

As I swing my sword, the moonlight illuminates the creature that I'm fighting, and there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that it's a Wraith. It shouldn't be possible. Grey said that there were none in the Underworld. It's not something that I can dwell on right now though as this one seems to be intent on eating my face.

I mean, seriously, it's not just aiming for my neck, which would be relatively predictable and standard practice; it's specifically trying to eat my face, and for some reason, that just freaks me out more. He seems ravenous, and because he's so distracted by his own hunger it means that he makes mistakes and my sword is quickly slicing through neck, the head thumping as it hits the floor.

Shockingly enough, as soon as he's dead, another Wraith takes his place; this one grins at me; it seems better trained and is sparring with me well, embedding spells into his sword that means I have to counteract with my own magic in order to stop him from killing me. He must have been very well trained in his past life.

Finally, I get the upper hand and knock his sword out of his hand; my shadows wrap around him, dragging him to the floor and pinning him there as I bring my sword up, ready to sever his head.

"You may end me, but you won't stop the uprising; the princes will set us free, and we will devour the realms," the Wraith hisses.

Through my surprise that he has enough mental function to be able to speak, I manage to reply, "Mate, that's a creepy choice of words."

Before he can reply, my sword slices through his neck like butter, and I kick his head away from his body. There's no time for me to question the fact that a Wraith could fucking communicate and what that could mean, as I see one twice the size of the ones I fought barrelling straight toward Khaos who is already fighting off three of his own Wraith's. Running toward him, I realise that Khaos is truly enjoying the fight and

has a massive smile on his face as he battles, he easily fits in with the rest of us purely because of his bloodthirsty nature.

I'm still too far away to get to the barrelling Wraith before he's going to get to Khaos, and if he manages to get to him, then Khaos is going to get overwhelmed within seconds. Still running, I call on my shadows and set them free, feeling Storm's shadows join mine as he must see the same thing that I do. Our shadows wrap around the Wraith and help to stop its progress, giving me enough time to catch up to him and intercept him so he can't get to Khaos; I quickly dispatch him and then look up, seeing that they've all been killed. Not only do the guys have at least two Wraiths dropped on the floor around them, but Meri and Poca must have been following us fairly closely because they're standing over a few as well.

Chapter Eight

Killian

I'm not really sure why they decided not to stick with us, but they quickly separated from us when we left the first town, probably because it's pretty difficult for them to blend in; I catch glimpses of them every now and then, but for the most part, they stay hidden. I know that the only reason that they're staying with us and not running off ahead is because they're watching over us and keeping us safe for Farren.

"Thanks, mate," Khaos says as he wipes his sword on the grass, a massive smile exposing his sharp teeth.

I grin, "Anytime."

"They were Wraiths," Mayhem states the obvious, "Underworld Wraiths."

"Underworlders can't turn into Wraith's. It has never happened before," Grey says, staring down at the now very dead Wraith at his feet. "I thought that Underworlders were somehow escaping into the Fae realm, and then getting turned into Wraith's because they can't handle the differences in the Realm's, but this suggests that Underworlders are capable of being turned while they're here."

"Don't forget that there is a lot of unrest in the Underworld at the moment; there is a possibility that the princes are having a cause and effect on the natural order of the Underworld." Mayhem points out the wheels in his mind clearly turning in a direction that none of ours are. "I mean, have you ever been away from the Underworld for this long before?"

Hades shakes his head, looking thoughtful, "No, never."

"Then it might just be the natural effect of not having the god of the Underworld here and the Princes causing shit,"

Mayhem reasons. “Even though you’re not in your role right now, I would bet that the Underworld itself recognises that you’re here and that just your presence will be having a positive effect of balancing things back out.”

Grey’s eyebrows raise in surprise, “I hope you’re right.”

“There’s something different about these Wraith’s though. I don’t know if it’s just because they’re Underworld creatures but one of the ones that I killed threatened me,” I say, and then repeat what the supe said before I behead him, “normally, Wraith’s are completely mindless and definitely not capable of communication. This one was able to talk in complete sentences and the whole group seemed fairly well organised.”

“That is incredibly concerning,” Grey says as his eyes study all of the wraiths scattered around us.

“You said that he was particularly skilled, so he retained a lot of skills from his past life?” Khaos asks me, and I nod, “Can you show me him?”

“Sure,” I reply, as I glance around the bodies before heading back toward the supe that I killed.

Khaos is silent for a second as he studies him and then curses, “He was one of the soldiers that worked at the castle when Hades and I were there; he was a good soldier.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry, man,” Loki says, offering his sympathy and clapping him on the shoulder.

Khaos shakes his head, “I didn’t know him well, but it’s shocking that to see someone I used to know is fucked up.”

“It really is,” Reaper agrees with a frown.

“Can you use your hellfire to get rid of the bodies here, or will it alert people to your presence?” Storm asks.

Grey’s eyebrows dip slightly, but he answers, “It should be okay; there are enough supes here that can use hellfire that it shouldn’t raise any alarms.”

Khaos glances at Poca, who I’m surprised to find hasn’t slunk off again yet, and asks, “Care to help Cerb?”

Poca barks once, and I watch in fascination as he starts to incinerate the bodies closest to him while Grey does some of the others. I had no idea that he could do that. Once he's finished, he comes around to all of us; Meri curled up on his back and checks us all over, receiving strokes in the process. Once he's satisfied that we're all okay, he barks once at us, almost as if warning us not to get into any more trouble, and then moves into the treeline again, disappearing from sight.

We all share a look; as much as I'd like him to stick with us, he probably is safer in the woods, and it's not like we could force him to stay with us; it's Poca. He'll do what he wants. He's like Farren in that way.

"Come on, let's find somewhere to rest for the night, and then we can head off again soon," Storm suggests.

Khaos claps Grey on the shoulder and adds, "We'll figure it out, but you heard the bartender it's not going to be as simple as you just turning back up. The princes have loyal followers here, and you will need an army to take back your realm. Which means you need to find people who are loyal to you and capable of fighting. You may be a god, but they're demi-gods, and together, they're fucking strong."

As we continue forward, I ask, "Would any of the other gods help?"

Grey shrugs, "It's unlikely. They all have their own things going on, and the few that I could ask are dealing with big things right now."

"Was it a god that put the silencing spell on you?" Mayhem suddenly asks.

Grey seems shocked by the question but nods once.

"So, we won't be asking them to help then," Loki mutters.

"It's complicated," Grey replies.

Farren

lood is once again pooling around my feet, adding another layer to the pool that had dried from my previous torture sessions. Hiromu has come back twice in a row, and as sick and twisted as it is, I am actually grateful for the reprieve from the illusions and welcome the pain of being sliced.

Xerxes is still here; at least, I think he is. My mind has been trying to protect itself from the horrifying things that Hiromu has made me see, and as soon as he leaves, I pass out. This time I was woken up by Dagon greeting me overly happily as he jumped immediately into torturing me. I've managed to get myself sort of near the middle of the room so that I don't get blood in my corner or on Xerxes, who should be hiding there still in his tiny form.

I'm aware that every now and then, the pain becomes less intense as he shouts a question at me, but I've gone so far into the dark that I don't even hear the questions he asks; I just wait to ride it out so that I can crawl back into my corner.

I need to heal, I need to try and make a plan of how to get the fuck out of here, I need to get the key fragment, but Hiromu's torture has really fucked with my head, literally.

"Farren?" Xerxes' voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I glance toward the bars of my cell to see that I've once again been left alone. I didn't even realise that he'd gone. That can't be good.

"Hey," I reply, my voice cracking.

"I wish I could help," he replies, sounding desperate.

I sigh as I pull myself up to sit and turn to face him properly. I'm aware that I must look like a horror show. A tray by the door catches my attention, and I force myself to stand to grab it; they give me enough water to keep me alive and a small hunk of rock-hard bread, again just enough to make sure that I don't die.

"I'm sorry that you have to witness this," I say as I try to eat, "if you can leave, please do; I won't be offended at all."

“I’m not leaving you,” he replies indignantly like me suggesting it has really offended him.

“Thanks,” I reply. “I need to get out of here.”

“You can’t go anywhere in the condition that you’re in,” Xerxes points out.

Drinking the water, I reply, “I know I need longer between torture sessions to heal properly or even enough to give me a fighting chance, and I don’t think that they’re going to give me that.”

“No,” Xerxes agrees, “wait, I might be able to help to heal you. It won’t be a lot, but I can at least take the edge off.”

I perk up as my eyebrows rise, “You can do that?”

“I should be able to, but it won’t make a massive difference,” he replies.

“Even slight relief would help right now,” I reply, “I can then try to get some actual sleep instead of trauma induced sleep that doesn’t actually allow me to heal, and I might actually be able to think of a way to get out of this mess.”

I don’t tell him that I really want to go back to sleep in the hopes that I get to see H again because he just makes me feel better and not like I’m in a crazy, impossible situation that I’m unlikely to escape.

“Alright, place your hand on my cover, and don’t let your magic fight mine,” Xerxes says.

“It won’t. I don’t have any access to it, apart from a trickle of healing magic.”

“Of course,” Xerxes replies, “ready?”

“Yep,” I reply.

His cover warms underneath my hand, and I feel the warmth spread throughout my body; his magic heals some of my minor cuts, or those that are nearly healed anyway, and takes a small amount of the pain away from the other ones, although it doesn’t heal them I am incredibly grateful.

He takes away enough of the pain that I know I'll be able to get to sleep.

"Thank you," I tell him as his magic pulls back, and I move into the corner again.

"I wish I could do more," he replies sadly, "you get some rest and I'll keep watch."

I thank him again and then close my eyes.

I feel ridiculously excited when I realise that I'm in my cell and I'm dreaming. My eyes quickly scan the cell before they land on H, gorgeous as I remember him sitting on the floor and frowning. Before I can let him know that I'm here, he tenses, and his head snaps up, looking in my corner.

"Ren?" he questions, hope saturating his tone.

"Hey," I reply, trying to sound upbeat.

I must fail because his frown deepens, "You're in more pain and not just physically."

"How did you know that?" I ask instead of confirming or denying, either way; I don't really see the point. I'm more honest with him than I am with myself, which doesn't make too much sense because he is me, or at least a part of me. That's going to get confusing fucking quickly the longer that I think about it, so I'm going to abandon that line of thinking.

He pauses for a second, most likely wondering how much he can tell me before he comes to a decision, and replies, "I'm a higher demon, kind of; I can feel when someone is in pain and how, physically and emotionally or mentally. I also feed on it, although, for some reason, my magic doesn't want to feed on your pain. It wants to fix it."

That explains why his magic has once again been trying to heal me since I arrived and why I'm finding it easier to move and speak than I have for what feels like a long time. I don't

care if I'll only feel the effects while I'm in here, and when I go back to my real cell, I'll feel it all threefold. I have a feeling that there won't be many pain-free moments in my future or ever again, and I should take advantage of the gift that he's giving me while I can.

Weirdly, he looks kind of nervous, and I'm at a complete loss as to why, so instead, I say, "Well, that's got to be super helpful for your kind of enforcer job."

His lips tick up into a small smile as his shoulders drop slightly releasing the tension, "Yeah, it was. I thought it would freak you out."

I chuckle as I slide down the wall, and realise I can sit slightly closer to him than I could last time, although we still can't touch.

"There's not much that freaks me out and how a supernatural survives is definitely not something that would. Besides, I can see how that would come in handy for your job, as I said before. Can you manipulate someone's pain levels?"

His head tilts to the side as his eyebrows raise slightly, "Yes, actually I can. I can heighten, lower it, and make someone feel it when there's no reason for it."

"That is so cool," I reply and then add, probably revealing a little bit too much in the process, "less messy too; you could torture someone and get the information that you need and leave no trace of it anywhere."

He's silent for a moment before a sharp and beautiful grin stretches across his face, revealing his sharp teeth and making his red and gold eyes sparkle, "You're a little bit bloodthirsty, aren't you, Ren?"

"You have no idea," I reply, smiling although I know that he can't see me.

"I like it," he replies.

"So, at the risk of ending this dream before I want to, I have a question to ask," I start.

His eyes dart sideways in my general direction but don't land on me, so I'm assuming that for whatever reason, he still can't see me; it's probably a good thing since I know that I look like death, covered in fresh and dried blood, missing a finger, sliced up and bruised. Yeah, I don't think I want the hot as fuck demon seeing me like this.

"Okay, I suppose there's no harm in you asking, but I can't promise that I will answer."

"Fair enough," I reply, knowing it's probably as good as it's going to get, "what is it you really do? I mean, we both know an Enforcer of sorts isn't quite the truth."

His lips twitch ever so slightly, "I was Hades' head Enforcer, I punished the worst of the worst that came from all the realms and was in charge of the team that helped to do the same. I also oversaw the training of the Helliers when I had the time. I trained them until Hades disappeared, and then I couldn't get back into the realm; I'm not even sure what happened."

I'm quiet as I absorb that information; I mean, in theory, he would've trained some of the Helliers that kept Grey and me imprisoned and helped to torture us. If what Dagon said was true, then Grey is actually Hades, and that means that H knows Grey because H knows Hades, which also means that he still thinks Hades has disappeared. Of course, I have no idea if what Dagon said was actually true, so bringing it up now could possibly have a negative effect.

Oh, and I almost forgot H is a fragment of my imagination, and none of what he's saying is actually true; it's just my subconscious way of putting all the pieces together and keeping me distracted, giving me something else to think about while I endure hell. I'm pretty impressed with its inventiveness, to be fair.

"Are you okay?" he asks, and then adds before I can reply, "I know you're in the cells of the castle. I recognise this one, I can promise you that whatever Helliers are keeping you there and inflicting this kind of pain are not mine. I haven't been

back to the Underworld for a long time, almost as long as Hades has been missing.”

Although most of what he’s said rings with truth, there’s a part of it that pings with a lie. I don’t think it’s a significant enough lie to call him out on it though and quite frankly, there are a lot bigger things that I should worry about right now. A little white lie is hardly concerning.

I answer him like he is real because that’s how I’ve treated him so far, “It’s okay, I know that. The Helliers aren’t giving me any grief, I actually haven’t seen any of them, it’s the fucking princes.” As soon as I mention them his expression darkens, and becomes something a whole lot more deadly, I get the feeling that he’s not a fan of the Princes although if what he said is true about being Hades right hand man, then he probably has more reason to hate them than anyone.

“Fucking cowards, the lot of them, and not nearly as powerful as they think they are,” he rants.

My eyebrows rise with interest, “Well, I can’t say that I don’t agree with you; their magic is pretty fucking strong when you can’t fight back. Of course, the fact that they won’t allow me to fight is more proof that they’re cowards.”

After that, the conversation changes to lighter topics, and we spend what seems like hours just talking about everything and nothing. I learned that his favourite meal is a dish called Levenrethata, which he described as a kind of meat stew with vegetables that are only found in the Underworld, and in specific his hometown. He said he’d missed it, the stew, not his hometown, although he didn’t elaborate on why he didn’t miss it.

“I’m also not good when I get bored,” he adds.

“In what way?” I ask, sounding confused.

“Erm, I guess I get a bit stabby and bit plotting my enemy’s deaths, that sort of thing,” he admits.

I chuckle, “Doesn’t sound like a problem to me.”

“You’re probably the only person that would think that,” he replies with a soft smile as he lifts one knee up and rests his

arm around it, “even Hades used to be wary, and I got bored. I have somewhat of a grey moral compass.”

“Me too,” I admit. “Plus, I think it’s impressive that even Hades is worried about you getting bored.”

He chuckles, his laughter warm and somehow helping to heal me even more than his magic is already doing.

Chapter Nine

Farren

“Yeah, I don’t really do friends, but Hades is more than that anyway. He’s my brother. We’ve been through things that you probably couldn’t even comprehend, wars and torture,” he pauses, a dark expression crossing his features, “I don’t think I will ever forgive myself for not seeing the Princes plan when I had the chance. I could’ve stopped it all. He went through hell.”

I almost say I know, but I don’t know, not really. I mean, even if Grey is Hades, he went through shit before he ended up in a cell opposite mine, and I don’t know anything about that. I do know that what he went through when he was near me was hell. Worse than hell.

“If you are as close with him as you’ve said, then he’s going to forgive you,” I reply, trying to make him feel better.

H smiles, “He probably doesn’t even realise that he needs to forgive me.”

“Well, there you go.”

“I should’ve been there,” he mutters.

Strangely enough, I get a ping of intuition, “They probably planned to have you out of the way; they most likely knew that they wouldn’t be able to trap Hades with you around, and that’s why they did it when you were in another realm.”

He stays silent and doesn’t reply, but I think that he’s at least heard my words because he doesn’t immediately refute them. When it’s clear that he’s gotten lost in his own mind, I try to think of something to say to distract him from his thoughts and keep the conversation going because it’s helping to distract me from the fact that I’m probably going to have to go back to my hell soon.

I've had this reprieve for far too long now, and my pain levels are more than manageable, thanks to H and his healing magic. Suddenly, some of what he said sinks in.

"Wait," I say, gaining his attention and pulling him out of his thoughts. "You said wars, as in more than one? How old are you?"

H chuckles, the sound chasing away the shadows that were darkening his eyes thanks to our previous conversation, "Ren, I'm going to be brutally honest with you right now; I have no idea. I'm old enough that I stopped counting."

"Wow," I mutter in reply. I mean, I expected him to be old; he's Hades' right-hand demon, and he had to have earned that spot in the first place, which would have taken time. Then he would've had to have been in the role for a while to earn Hades' friendship as well, so it would stand to reason that he's old, but old enough not to remember how old you are is pretty crazy to me. "So, in all of those years what was your favourite birthday?" I ask him, wanting to keep the conversation light.

He shrugs, "I've never really had a birthday to celebrate. I've just got a year older. I don't think even Hades knows my birthday."

"Seriously?" I ask, and then, because we're sharing anyway, I add, "I haven't either, not really. My uncle would try to sneak me some cake if he could and always try to wish me at least a happy birthday, but my father tried to keep me as isolated as possible, especially on my birthday. He liked me to know how alone and helpless I really was."

H growls, clearly not liking my words but then again who would? It's not exactly pleasant.

"From your words and the sting of pain that accompanied them and most likely the memories of remembered pain, I can tell that there is a lot more to the story. I'm not going to ask, but I do want to tell you that a man who can treat his own daughter how I suspect he treated you doesn't deserve to live." His words are harsh and full of a dark promise.

Even though I know he can't see me, I grin and say, "He is dead. I killed him."

My response startles a surprised laughter out of him before he says, "Good."

After that I share some more of my past as he shares his and learn things like his favourite colour is purple, but he only really likes to wear black.

After it has fallen quiet for a moment I ask a question that has been playing on my mind since he first mentioned that he recognised my cell.

"H?" I ask and he raises his eyebrow in question, "I don't suppose you know how to get out? Of my cell I mean, you said that you recognised it being in the castle."

That small glimmer of hope that had been building snuffs out entirely as he begins to shake his head.

"No, I'm sorry." He seems extremely frustrated by that fact, "I'm going to assume that the fucking princes have locked down your magic, and that's why you aren't healing properly?"

"Well, yeah," I reply, unsure where he thinks he's going with that line of questioning.

"I might have a way for you to get your magic back, but it's not for the faint-hearted, and it's going to hurt a lot," he says, worry creasing his brow.

I don't even have to think about it as I immediately reply, "Tell me. I'll do anything at this point, and I've never shied away from a bit of pain."

"I don't like that," H replies but simply, but carries on before I can reply, "it would be easier if I could see you. The only way that I'm going to know you're in trouble is because of your pain levels; the problem is, as you said, you have a high pain tolerance."

"I know, but just because I can tolerate it doesn't mean that I'm in any less pain, and you can feel that," I point out.

He hesitates, "Yeah, okay. For the record, I'm already regretting telling you this."

"Too late now," I reply, silently begging that he's not going to back out now, not when I know that there could be a way out of this.

"Okay, so first I need you to ..."

Before he can say anything else, the threads of consciousness start to tug at me, not now for fuck sake, why.

Wait a second, I'm definitely not back in my cell, I think to myself as I look around the empty but bright space that I find myself in, and it is a space. There's nothing here, no defining features, no hills or buildings. Hell, there are not even any plants; it's just empty space. I'm not really floating though, my feet are definitely on solid ground. I'm used to travelling the Void, which is like this but the dark version and it just feels more than this, it's because of this that it doesn't feel as weird as it should to be standing in nothingness but on something solid.

Shit, am I dead?

If this is the afterlife it's shit.

Although the nothingness for eternity could be classed as hell, I think you'd get pretty bored pretty fucking quickly; the thought of being bored makes me think of H; I'm sure he'd be able to cause trouble here.

My thoughts turn to the guys, and my heart hurts. I don't want to leave them. I've finally found a place where I feel like I belong. They need me; Zev needs someone to be there for him no matter what; Storm needs someone to fight him occasionally; Loki needs someone to remind him that it's okay to feel; Reaper and Ryu need to remember not to fear themselves but trust each other and themselves, Rival needs someone to see him separate from his twin and capable of his

own amazing things, Mayhem needs someone to genuinely be interested and excited when he shares something new he learns, Kill needs to be reminded that he is enough and that his past does not define who he is, and Grey well Grey just needs someone to be there, unwaveringly and without question.

I need them, too. I need them for more reasons than I could possibly list, but they make me better in all ways. They make me feel safe, which I never thought it was possible to feel, and even now, just the thought of them makes me feel lighter; even when I'm potentially in grave danger or dead, I'm leaning toward being dead because there's no pain, and there's usually pain.

When my thoughts keep sending me around in circles, I decide that instead of staying glued to the spot I'm currently in, I may as well walk around this empty spot and see if I can find anything of interest. So that's what I do: I walk, and I walk.

"Oh, Farren," a female voice suddenly breaks the silence.

I immediately spin, dropping down into a defensive crouch, only what I see pulls me up short, and I don't immediately attack. The woman standing before me is stunning, with dark hair down to her butt, her skin tanned and gorgeous, and shockingly silver eyes, she looks ethereal, she also has a look of pure anger on her face, and after a moment, I realise that I recognise her voice.

"Erm, hi?" I ask as I straighten up somewhat cautiously. She's not attacking and looks more concerned than anything, but she is immensely powerful; I have never felt any kind of power like it, and I'm beginning to wonder just what kind of supernatural I'm standing in front of.

My greeting has her smiling, but only for a second as her face falls into a concerned frown.

"I'm so sorry, Farren. I wish I could help, but believe it or not if I were to help, the outcome would be worse." Her voice has an ethereal yet husky quality.

I pull a face and figuring I'm dead anyway, I reply with no filter, "That's great and all but I have no fucking idea what you're talking about or who you are."

Her eyes widen slightly before she chuckles, "Oh shit, sorry. I'm talking about your situation with the princes."

When she says princes, thunder rumbles from fuck knows where and the bright space becomes dark as lightning dances in her eyes and the wind whips around her. I stand my ground, my feet practically glued to the floor as I will myself to stay upright; I don't want to show weakness in front of this incredibly powerful supernatural. Even though she hasn't given me any reason to think that she will harm me, it's never a good idea to show weakness in front of someone who is stronger than you. It doesn't however escape my notice that she doesn't tell me her name.

I watch as she takes a deep breath, visibly trying to calm herself, it doesn't take long until the thunder stops and the whole place lightens up instead, back to the bright place that I arrived in.

She smiles sheepishly and says, "Sorry about that; I have some unresolved rage when it comes to the princes."

I return her smile and reply, "Oh, trust me, I get it; I'm hoping my rage doesn't go unresolved, though."

"Me too, Farren," she replies. I raise my eyebrow but don't get the chance to question whether she knows something that I should know because she continues to talk. "Unfortunately, I can't keep you here for very long, so I'm going to have to make my next points very quickly."

"Erm, okay," I reply, because she pauses and it seems like she's waiting for confirmation from me that I've understood her.

"Good," she replies, her husky voice taking on a more business-like tone, "First, and most likely the most important, trust your instincts; they will never steer you wrong. You can trust H," she says this with an amused but brief smile before she continues, "You must listen very carefully to this next part,

your decisions from this point onward will greatly affect the outcome, you need to think extremely carefully about the decisions you make, there are certain paths that will be a lot more complicated. I think you've dealt with enough complicated in your life, at least for the time being."

"What outcome?" I ask, she said it like I should be aware of the outcome that we're aiming for, but honestly I have no fucking idea what she's talking about. In fact, the way she's talking like she's all-knowing... "Holy fuck, you're a goddess, aren't you?"

I don't know how I've come to that conclusion, but I'm pretty fucking sure I'm right.

She smiles and nods, then continues like I've not just had my mind fucking blown by the fact that I'm talking to a goddess, "Yes, I am. I'm afraid that I can't tell you what the outcome is, or even anything else really."

"But you're a goddess," I feel the need to point it out again.

She chuckles, "Yes, but even we don't know everything and are bound by rules, especially when dealing with the Fates."

"The Fates?" I can't help but question. She simply raises her eyebrow at me, and I add, "Right, you can't tell me. Awesome."

"I know it's frustrating. Trust me, I would love to tell you everything, but as I said before, if I did, I'd be going against the Fates, and by influencing you, I could make it a thousand times worse."

"Why do I get the feeling that this doesn't just affect me?"

"Because even as injured as you are, you have great instincts," she replies.

"I'm going to assume that's all you can say?" I ask, as she just stops talking.

She nods and looks genuinely apologetic; I watch as she tilts her head to the side as if she's listening to something that I can't hear, and then her gaze lands on me again, "We've run

out of time. I may not be able to interfere much, but if you allow me to, I can heal you to a certain extent and give you a fighting chance.” Her face becomes even more severe as she gently takes my hands in hers, “You must fight Farren. Don’t ever stop fighting.”

I nod. “I haven’t stopped fighting yet.”

Her eyes fill with sadness, “No, you haven’t. Now, would you like me to heal you?”

“Yes, please,” I reply, barely refraining from saying duh. I mean who would be in my position and refuse healing?

She grins as if she heard my thoughts, and to be quite honest, she could have. I have no idea what her gifts are or even much about gods and goddesses, but I do know she’s powerful, so it’s entirely possible that she’s read my mind.

Without any more words, I feel a gentle wash of magic go through me. I’d like to say that I feel the difference, but since I’m in this space made of light, I can’t feel pain anyway. I’m assuming that it’s something that I’m going to notice back in my cell.

“Thank you,” I tell her gratefully.

“I must send you back now, but before you go, I need to tell you one more thing,” she starts.

“Okay? Shoot?”

“You have to get out of the cell and get your magic unlocked soon. The effects of not going into the Void are going to start affecting you soon, and you won’t be strong enough to get out.”

I tense, it’s something that has been playing at the back of my mind for a few days now, and to have the seriousness of it confirmed is quite frankly terrifying.

“Any idea how to do that?” I ask her, a little more bite in my tone than I probably should have considering I’m talking to a goddess, but I’m freaking out a little too much to care right now.

She shakes her head, "I'm sorry, Farren, I can't say anything."

"Fantastic," I reply, the snark prominent before I sigh and pinch my nose, distractedly noticing that I am still missing my middle finger. "I'm sorry. I know you can't say things. Thank you for healing me as much as you could."

"I'm sorry, Farren," she repeats.

I don't have time to reply, not that I'm sure what I would reply, as I feel that now familiar tugging sensation urging me back to reality. I don't want to go; I want to stay here, even in this strange and unknown place, even if I was left alone. I don't want to go back to the torture and their stupid questions that I refuse to answer. I want to go back to the Void, I want darkness, but my kind of darkness.

The darkness that makes me feel safe, and powerful. I know now for certain that no one is going to help me and that I don't have very long to figure a way to get myself out of this before it's too late and the Princes either succeed in killing me or my lack of access to the Void kills me. I'm used to being in life-or-death situations, but none of them have been quite like this and seemed this impossible; I'm used to being able to fight back, at least physically, if not magically.

It looks like my luck has finally run out.

A sudden realisation has me cursing; holy shit, I know why her voice seemed familiar. It's the same voice that has been talking to me through the years, the same voice that has helped me countless times, and along with that realisation comes the realisation that I can't even rely on the voice to help this time, because she's told me outright that she can't help any more than she has.

Fuck. I don't think I'm getting out of this one.

Chapter Ten

Farren

“**R**esting?” Crem’s voice tuts as I come out of my dream. “It seems like my brothers have been far too lenient on you.”

I don’t even get a second to enjoy the fact that I’m not in as much pain as I was when I went to sleep or stand up, for that matter, as Crem unleashes his magic on me.

I force the pain away as his magic burns me with hellfire in very concentrated places. He is standing far closer to the bars of my cell than any of the others have, so close in fact that if I can reach through and grab him, I’ll be able to smash his head on the bars which will allow his blood to spill on the enchanted bars and take off the enchantment so that I can access my magic and escape this fucking cell. I have no idea how I know that will break the enchantment on the cell door, but the goddess said that I should trust my instincts, so that’s what I’m doing. Blood is an incredibly powerful tool and is used in all of the most powerful spells so logically it would make sense.

Of course, I can’t touch the bars without causing myself incredible pain, but I’m in great pain anyway so what difference would it really make at this point?

It’s my only chance.

The pain suddenly stops, and I push myself to my feet, wanting to put my plan into action before he starts the onslaught again and I won’t be able to move.

“My brothers are interested in Hades. Personally, I think he’s too weak to cause us any trouble. I want to know about your mother,” Crem grins, a cunning smile.

The random question pulls me up short, “My mother?”

“Yes, that is what I said, you stupid girl. Who is your mother?”

I frown and freeze; I haven't thought about my mother for years, not since I was a young child. I have never known her, I've never seen pictures, I've never heard stories. I literally know zero about her, less than I know about Hades, who I am now sure is, in fact, Grey. My mother is merely someone that I know I must have had because I wouldn't exist if I didn't, but that's it. I asked my father about her once, and he almost killed me.

It wasn't worth asking again, and honestly, I've assumed all of these years that she's dead, and if she's not, then she abandoned me with a man who she no doubt knew was capable of horrific things, so I don't want to know her either way. It's not like I feel sad or angry or really anything when I think of my mother. I don't have any feelings about it either way. You can't miss something that you've never had; at least, that's how I feel about it. So, his focus on her throws me, and I forget what I was initially doing.

Pain blasts me, and that stops just as quickly as it started, “Farren, I asked you a question.”

“I don't know anything about my mother,” I spit and then add quickly, “ask my father, he's here isn't he?”

“Your father knows nothing; that is clear from the amount of torture we've put him through and the useless shit he has told us.”

The fact that he's been mercilessly tortured for as long as he's been here makes me incredibly happy, it will never make up for what he put me through but it's a start. Crem's words sink in and I frown that doesn't make any sense at all, how could he not know anything about my mother? I really couldn't give a shit, and Crem is distracted so I take the opportunity to rush the bars. I don't even manage to get my hand through the bars; I barely even touch them as I'm flung backward, landing hard on the floor as the flow of electricity goes through me, making me twitch. Crem's laughter booms around the cell as I instantly regret trying to escape.

Loki

It's been a few days since the tavern and the most delicious stew ever, and I'm missing the stew immensely. Rabbit and deer are nice, or at least the Underworld equivalent of rabbit and deer is nice, but it lacks seasonings, and I make a mental note to always carry some with me when we go on these trips in the future. Thinking about eating brings up a thought that I'd been trying to avoid; I haven't had blood in longer than I'd usually be able to handle, and yet I seem to be okay. I would assume that it had something to do with the fact that we're in the Underworld, and things work differently here, but the others are all behaving exactly the same, so it can't be that.

Of course, none of them are vampires so maybe it's just a thing that affects us? I am aware that I could ask but in all honesty I'm scared of what Hades answer would be and if it means there's something wrong with me. If I start to feel any negative effects, then I'll say something, but for now, we have enough to deal with without me throwing in an issue that may not actually be an issue. It has crossed my mind that maybe the length that I've been able to go between feedings this time is because the last person that I fed from was Farren, and her blood was fucking insane. I've never tasted anything like it, and the way it revitalised me was something I have never heard of before. It boosted my magic and if I didn't know that it was impossible I would've said that it increased it too, and not just temporarily. I'm still feeling the effects now, and it's been a good few weeks since I fed.

I'm not complaining, but I am concerned—not just about my lack of need to feed but also because Farren's blood is powerful, and if the wrong person were to realise that, it could get really complicated really fast.

Not that her being kidnapped isn't really complicated, but having someone keep you and drain you of your blood regularly for feedings would be a whole new level of hell. I do not doubt that the wrong person would choose to drink regularly rather than risk having the effects wear off. It's just added another layer of fear to this whole nightmare situation.

Nightmares are another wonderful side effect of this situation; I haven't slept, not properly, since we got to the Underworld. I have a very active imagination, and all it's doing is showing me the worst-case scenarios, most of them having something to do with the blood. I know I'm not the only one having nightmares; we all are. Khaos's are affecting him a lot, a surprising amount if Grey's reaction is anything to go by. We're all sleep-deprived and pissy; I'm actually surprised that we haven't taken it out on each other.

We haven't stayed in any other villages and have, in fact, tried to avoid as many people as we can. None of us wants to cause panic, and we also don't want to risk anyone alerting the princes that we're here.

"This is taking too long," Killian grumbles.

None of us are taking it very well knowing that Farren is most likely being tortured and we're walking through the fucking woods. I keep trying to get through to her through the link, but I'm just hitting a brick wall. Even without that link, I'm starting to feel like we're running out of time. I feel a pressure to rush and move quicker, but really we can only go as fast as we are, and we're pushing ourselves pretty hard.

"We're closer; it shouldn't take us too much longer," Khaos replies.

"Dude, did you dream about that woman again?" I ask.

He looks at me surprised, "How did you know?"

"You've gone quiet again," Mayhem replies for me, clearly having seen the same thing that I have.

"I'm starting to think that she may be real," Khaos admits.

"Oh really?" Grey asks, seeming to be surprised by the admission.

“It may be wishful thinking, I guess,” Khaos replies.

Storm frowns. “Well, you said that she was in one of the castle’s old cells, right?” When Khaos nods in agreement, Storm continues, “Then when we get there to get Farren, we can check the cell and see if she’s there.”

“Good idea,” Reaper replies, “that way, at least you’ll know if she’s real or not.”

Khaos thinks about it for a second and then nods, “Thanks, guys. I just have this feeling that she’s important, you know.”

“I think we probably get that better than anyone else would,” Rival agrees. He smiles and adds, “Hell, knowing Farren she’s probably already befriended this woman and won’t allow us to leave without her.”

Grey chuckles, “Yeah, that sounds about right. Her escape before was made so much more difficult because she insisted on taking me with her.”

All of us have fond smiles on our faces as we think about the kind of person that Farren is. Even after all of the shit that she’s been through.

I’m having to push away all my fear for her because if I don’t, it’s going to overtake me, and I’m going to be a wreck. What I feel for Farren goes far beyond anything that I have felt before, and although the strength of it scares me, nothing compares to the fear that I have of losing her. I can’t lose her; we can’t lose her. She hasn’t even been with us for very long, and she’s already changed us for the better.

“How long have we got exactly?” Kill asks, still not satisfied with the time it’s taking.

I grin as Zev’s eyes flash white for a second, “It’s two days until we get to the castle.”

“You seem unsure?” Grey asks, his eyebrow raised.

Zev’s frown deepens, “Well, it’s hazy, like the path isn’t entirely set yet.”

“Reassuring,” Reaper grumbles.

“Not in the slightest,” Zev replies drily.

We all look at Grey, even Khaos, which isn't reassuring since he knows this realm as well as Grey.

“Wait, could it be because you don't tend to see too much when we're involved?” I suddenly ask, and then add, “Although you seem to have been getting some visions to do with us?”

Zev shakes his head, “I'm still not getting any visions of you guys, but I'm learning to read between the lines, as it were, so I'm getting a vague idea if I'm shown something that I know could affect us and then using my intuition to decipher it. I'm actually having to listen to my instinct a lot more when it comes to visions that could involve us.”

Grey's eyebrows rise. “You know, I can't remember the last Seer who was able to do that.”

“He's not just a Seer,” Khaos says casually.

Zev shakes his head, “Yes, I am.”

Khaos laughs, “Friend, I haven't known you for very long, and even I can tell that you are far too strong to simply be a Seer even if you were to become the next High Seer, which, for the record, I don't think you're going to be. Your skills would be wasted there.”

Grey nods, “He's right. Seers don't tend to possess any warrior ability, and you absolutely do; I'd take you into battle with me any day.”

Coming from Grey, that's a pretty big fucking compliment.

“What else am I then?” Zev asks, looking at the rest of us.

“I have no idea, but I've been meaning to bring it up since you've always seemed like more to me,” Storm tells him.

“What species were your parents?” Mayhem asks.

Rival rolls his eyes and smacks his twin, “You can't just ask someone that outright.”

Zev smiles as Mayhem looks confused and replies, “It's okay; I don't mind. My father had some pre-cog, but my

mother died in childbirth, and it hurt my father too much to talk about her, so I have no idea. My siblings are fairly varied in their gifts, though. My eldest sister has some air abilities, and my little brother has telekinesis and a gift with healing tinctures.”

“That’s an eclectic mix,” I point out.

“Yeah, and even my brother can’t remember what my mom’s gifts were. He was so young that his memory doesn’t stretch that far back.” He pauses, “Surely, if I had another gift, it would have manifested already; I mean, I’m twenty-seven.”

“Not necessarily,” Grey states as he bats a branch out of the way. “Your Seer ability is clearly extremely strong, that could have masked the other ability.”

“Or you may not have needed it as much as you do now, so it lay dormant,” Khaos suggests, “I’ve seen that happen before.”

“You have?” Grey asks.

Khaos glances over at him, “Do you remember Frasier?”

“Young demon? Was really motivated? Used to follow you around everywhere?” Grey asks with a smile.

“Yes, that’s him,” Khaos replies. Something happened during training, and it triggered a part of his magic that he had no idea existed.”

“That’s interesting,” Mayhem replies.

The conversation then dissolves into Mayhem asking Grey and Khaos as many questions as he possibly can before they get fed up with him. They hold out longer than I would’ve, and it’s not until we come out of the trees and get to the road with a sign pointing out the nearest village that Reaper interrupts them.

“I hate to interrupt this because it is interesting, but Ryu has pointed out that we need to get some more supplies; we’re running low, and since it’s getting late, now might be the best time to do it when the village is going to have fewer people in it, and we’ll cause less of a stir.” He suggests.

An agreeing bark has me looking to my left, where I'm surprised to see Poca, Meri curled up in his fur, his glowing eyes the only thing visible.

"How long has he been with us again?" I ask.

"No idea," Khaos replies. Cerb sure as hell loves this Farren of yours. He usually loses interest as quickly as I do, but then again, it would make sense, considering that he's been with her since she was young. It fascinates me."

"Me too," Grey replies, "especially since he's managed to keep himself hidden from me."

"I know I should've asked before, but Cerberus guards the gates to the Underworld, right?" Mayhem asks. Grey nods, so he continues, "And I'm assuming it's the gates that we're getting the key fragments for?" again, Grey nods. "Right, so who is guarding the gates then, and who has been guarding the gates for the last twenty-odd years?"

"He's not the only one guarding the gates. He's like their commander, I suppose, although they've been doing it for millennia, so they don't need him all the time, and time works differently for them since they've been alive for so long," Grey explains.

"Maybe that's where he goes when he disappears?" Zev asks.

"It would make sense that he's going to check in on them." Khaos agrees.

"And warn them since the princes want to open it, and they're the first line of defence," Kill adds.

"Good point," Grey replies, "I think he's probably checking in more regularly while we're here, but I also think he's trying to find a way to get to Farren quicker."

Poca huffs once and nods, confirming what Grey is saying and then trots ahead as he leads us toward the lights of the town.

"Let's try and get our supplies in as few shops as possible; that way, we cause as little upset as we can and can get out of

town quickly.” Storm suggests to everyone.

I start to open my mouth but am interrupted by a smirking Khaos. “Sorry, Mate. I don’t think we’re going to be able to stop and get any food while we’re here.”

My eyebrows dip in confusion as I ask, “How did you know I was going to ask about food?”

Khaos’s chuckles are joined by the others and he replies, “Because you’ve mentioned it at least once a day since we had it back at the tavern, and you made us promise to go back there after we got Farren so long as she was okay but then made a point to add that even if we were being chased by the princes, we should still stop in.”

I try to hold in my smile but don’t succeed, “Oh, fair enough. Maybe I did say that.”

Kill rolls his eyes at me. We all know with one hundred percent surety that I absolutely did say that.

“Guys, go on ahead a second. I just need to have a word with Loki,” Kill says, surprising me. I haven’t seriously pissed him off, have I?

“Sure, but is this about the fact we’ve been here for over a week, and he hasn’t fed at all?” Khaos asks.

It surprises me that he’s noticed, but there’s an unmistakable note of concern in his tone that makes me smile. We’re growing on him, the grumpy bastard.

I glance at Kill in question, and his eyebrows raise, “Yeah, actually.”

“Well?” Storm asks me as they all glance at me.

I shrug, “I don’t know what to tell you guys. There’s no big secret. Nothing’s wrong. I’m just not hungry.”

“What do you mean you’re not hungry?” Reaper asks, sounding entirely confused by the sentence, but then the guy is always fucking hungry. Case in point: he’s munching on beef jerky right now.

It's actually something that he used to do a lot when we were younger. You'd never see him without a snack; he'd always be eating, but as he got older, he stopped doing it as much. I had thought that it was something that he'd grown out of, but seeing him do it again now, I'm starting to wonder if it's got something to do with reconnecting with Ryu.

Chapter Eleven

Loki

“Loki!” Rival exclaims, “Focus, what do you mean you aren’t hungry?”

I smile sheepishly, “Whoops. I don’t really think there’s anything else to explain. I’m not hungry, I’m not weak; it’s like I fed a couple of days ago.”

“Huh,” Mayhem replies eloquently, although from the look on his face, I’d say that his brain is going a mile a minute at the moment trying to come up with a reason why I’m not hungry.

“You last fed from Farren, right?” Grey asks, having come to the conclusion quicker than the others.

Khaos’s eyebrows rise.

“Yes I did,” I reply, hoping that my tone carries enough warning in it that they take notice.

“I thought so. This conversation is probably best had when we’re in safe surroundings, and as that may not be for a while, I suggest that we leave the conversation for now,” Grey says, thankfully hearing my warning and putting the implications together.

The others all seem to catch on pretty quickly and don’t ask any more questions, but somehow, they still manage to look at me with concern. It’s evident that they’d all picked up on it, and I honestly don’t know why I thought they wouldn’t have noticed. Although, Khaos noticing too was a pleasant surprise.

“I agree with Grey. However, I just want to add that if you start to get hungry or anything weird happens, tell us before it’s too late.”

I nod, “Yep, I can do that.”

We all fall silent as we cross the boundary into town. This one is built within a wall, so we go from a dirt road with trees on both sides of us through a massive stone archway and instantly have houses on either side instead. Unfortunately, because of how this town is set up, there's no hope of us finding a shop that has everything that we need on the edge of town.

"We've been noticed," I say quietly as a set of shutters slam loudly in the empty street.

"Are they even going to serve us?" Zev asks.

"The bartender guy at the tavern in the last town did," Rival replies.

"I feel like he may have been a one-off though," I add.

Reaper clears his throat as he tries to make himself smaller by rounding his shoulders and shrinking a bit on top of his horse. It makes no difference; he's a giant supernatural, thanks to Ryu, but it says a lot about the kind of person that he is, especially since Khaos is bigger than him and Grey is the same size, and yet he still tries to make himself smaller and less threatening.

"We can make do if we don't find anything," Reaper suggests, "it would just be better if we can find the stuff here."

"He's right. We know we can hunt for things, so it's not like we'll starve or anything," I add.

"Okay, we'll ride straight through; if we pass a shop that has what we need and doesn't shut its doors immediately, then we'll stop in; if not, we'll just carry on going," Storm suggests.

As we suspected, the town that didn't have that many people still out and about quickly becomes like a ghost town and I quickly lose hope of getting some new boots. Apparently, the ones that I have had for years decided that now would be a good time to break for good, and I can't use magic to fix them again because I've used it too much in the past, and now the fabric is magic resistant and the spell won't fucking stick.

I have wet tootsies, and I'm not a fan.

“Look, that one is still open. The lights are on and everything,” Mayhem suddenly says with hope in his voice.

As we start toward it I squint, my eyes widening as I realise something, “Isn't that Monty's shop?”

Grey sits up straighter in his seat and then rolls his eyes, “Yes, that's Monty's shop.”

“Are we back in the Shadowlands?” Kill asks, an edge to his voice.

Grey shakes his head, “No, Monty is just unique. He's a ...”

“A what?” Storm asks, as Grey just stops talking.

“For fuck sake, apparently, the spell isn't gone, and there are still some things that I can't tell you,” Grey groans.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Can Khaos? Does he know how Monty's shop is here?” Mayhem asks and then immediately adds, “Is Monty in there too? How is that possible unless he's dead? Is he dead?”

I can't suppress my chuckle, “Someone better answer something because I'm fairly certain that he's short-circuiting.”

Khaos smiles, “Monty is able to be here because he's a shifter and ...”

My eyes widen, “No fucking way, you can't say anything either?”

“Of course, he can't,” Monty says as he appears perched on top of the sign to his shop and grinning.

“Would you care to enlighten us as to why not Monty?” Grey asks as he gets off his horse and prompts us to all do the same.

Monty pretends to think about it for a second before shaking his head, “Nope, not particularly; I'm not dead, though.” He replies, jumping down from the sign and landing

lightly on his feet. “Now, come on, you need supplies, and you’re running out of time.”

“Out of time to do what?” I ask; although I’m reasonably sure I know the answer, I just want to confirm how much he actually knows.

“To get to Farren before she becomes a permanent member here,” Monty replies, serious for once.

We leave our horses outside the front of the shop since they’re unlikely to go anywhere without us and then follow Monty inside. I’m unsurprised to find that although it’s pretty much exactly like his shop in the Shadowlands, it also has a section filled with stuff that we need to get to Farren. It’s like he knew that we were coming. Actually, the more I think about it, the more I am absolutely certain that he knew that we were coming.

I’m just uncertain about whether him knowing is a good or a bad thing.

“Quickly gather the things that you need, and then we need to have a little chat,” Monty says.

Grey raises his eyebrows as the rest of us do as Monty has instructed, “None of your usual flair or tricks?”

Monty crosses his arms, “Not this time, not about this.”

Grey’s smile falls off his face, “What do you know?”

“I know that you are running out of time; there isn’t any. She will die if someone doesn’t get to her soon, one of ...” Monty’s words get cut off, and for the first time since I met him, I see anger flash in his eyes and a growl rumble in his chest.

He’s mad as fuck.

“You can’t tell us, can you?” Khaos asks, clicking on before the rest of us.

Monty tilts his head to the side, “Apparently, you’re not the only one that has a silencing order put on them.”

“Well, isn’t that interesting,” Grey says.

Monty levels him with a scowl, “Not the words I would have used. Have you got everything?”

The rest of us all nod and then move to stand in front of him.

“Alright, did you have anything else that you needed to tell us?” Storm asks impatiently. All of us are feeling the added pressure now that he’s confirmed that we’re running out of time, more than we realised, and we knew we were pushing it as it is.

“Yes, you need to push yourselves hard; after you rest tonight, the next place is going to be the cabin; you mustn’t rest until you get there.”

“Only two rest stops? It’s still a long ride?” Khaos questions.

“I’ve drawn up a shortcut,” Monty starts to reply and then gets interrupted by Grey.

“This is my realm; I would know if there was a shortcut to the castle from here,” Grey surprises me by being honest.

“I’m well aware this is your realm, Hades, but you know full well that if the fates hadn’t deemed it necessary for you to know, then you wouldn’t know that the shortcut existed,” Monty replies.

I expect Grey to argue with him, so it surprises me when he just sighs like it’s something he’s been reminded of a thousand times and then replies, “Fair point, I suppose. Damn, fates.”

“Indeed,” Monty replies. He clicks his fingers, and a small scroll appears in his hand, which he gives to Khaos. “That will show you the shortcut. It should knock a day or two off your journey. You’ll still be pushing it to get to her in time, but at least the odds will no longer be impossible.”

My heart tightens painfully; I’m not too fond of the way he’s worded that; it means that there’s a very real possibility that we’re going to be too late to save her, and I don’t think any of us would be able to live with ourselves if that was the case.

“You must rest tonight and then not stop again until you get to the cabin marked on the map. That is very important,” Monty tells us again.

“Got it, Monty, thanks,” Storm replies.

“Oh, Loki, here,” Monty smirks as he throws me a leather pouch.

Frowning, I pull the strings so that I can look inside, and when a delicious scent hits me, I ask, “What’s this?”

“Something to make the things you catch taste better,” Monty replies with a smile.

My eyebrows hit my hairline, “How did you know?”

Grey chuckles, “There’s not much point in asking him that; he’s unlikely to tell you.”

Monty’s smile gets bigger, “He’s right.”

Grey chuckles as he holds his hand out, and Monty grasps his forearm with the traditional respectful greeting. Before Grey can say anything, Monty’s eyebrows dip as he frowns at Grey.

“What? Did you see something?” Grey asks, peeking my curiosity, unlike when Zev sees something, there were no outward shows of him seeing anything.

Monty shakes his head, “Oh, I don’t think I like that at all. I mean, what are they thinking?”

“Care to elaborate?” Khaos asks.

Monty shakes his head, “Nope, you’ve got to get going and I need to have a word with the love of my life I have some, what the fuck, questions to ask her and her sisters.”

Just like that, he completely disappears, with no fanfare or anything; he’s just gone.

“Should we be concerned?” I ask in the silence of the shop.

Grey shrugs but looks just as confused as the rest of us, “I don’t think so. I’m not sure that had anything to do with us.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” Khaos replies as he picks up a few more things, and we all head out of the door.

I wait until we’re back on our horses and heading out of town before I ask, “What do you mean by we’ll know soon enough?”

Khaos glances back at me confused before the realisation seems to kick in and he says, “Oh, it’s pretty simple, if Monty has a problem with us then we’re going to know about it. He’s not one for being subtle.”

“Oh,” I reply, “Well, that sounds like it’s not going to be fun.”

“It won’t, hopefully, Grey is right though and it has nothing to do with us,” Khaos replies, stumbling over Grey’s name.

“Let’s get to the first camp that we had planned, then we can look over the map that Monty gave us. I think we’re going to need all the rest we can get while we can get it,” Storm suggests.

“I still want to get going as early as possible,” I can’t help but reply. I’m worried.

Worried isn’t a strong enough word. I’m fucking terrified, I’m absolutely distraught, she means everything to me, and she’s in danger, in pain, and there’s a real chance that she’s not going to fucking survive, and the way that my mind turns dark at the thought fucking scares me, I don’t think even I want to know what I’m going to do if we don’t find Farren or if we find Farren and she’s not okay. I do know that I will rip the people that hurt her apart, limb from fucking limb, piece by piece, until there is nothing but a bloody mess left. Even then, I know that it won’t be enough; nothing will ever be enough to avenge her.

“Loki, are you okay?” Storm says, and from the way he’s looking at me with concern, it’s not the first time that he’s asked me.

I clear my throat, I’m unable to put the happy go lucky facade on like I usually do when I’m feeling something dark, that scares me.

“I’m as well as any of us are, given the circumstances,” I reply honestly.

Looks of understanding cross everyone’s faces. We’re putting on a good show, pretending we’re okay and that we’re handling the fact that she’s been taken, but we’re not.

If you really look at us, you’d be able to tell, even without knowing us, that we’re far from okay. Mayhem has withdrawn into himself. Rival is showing his anger in more obvious ways, like his over the top reactions when tools inevitably break.

Kill and Storm are beating the shit out of each other on a regular basis and calling it training when really we all see it for what it is, a release of all their pent-up frustration, anger, and fear. The brothers were always bad at dealing with their emotions, although I’m clearly not someone who can judge.

Reaper, perhaps the most concerning, is partially transformed constantly. I wasn’t even aware that he had enough power to do that. I mean, it takes an incredible amount of power to stay transformed, but he’s holding it without a second thought. In fact, I’d be willing to bet that it’s even more impressive because he’s holding back Ryu, he’s holding back a humongous fucking dragon, who is pissed as fuck and want’s to rampage because his mate has been taken.

I do not doubt that Farren is Ryu’s mate. Dragons never get it wrong; I’m just unsure what that means for the rest of us.

Grey is quiet, and his fuse is incredibly short. I think we’re all grateful that he’s aware that he has to keep his presence under wraps; otherwise, he’d be flinging god-level power around everywhere.

“I think the first rest area is just up ahead,” Zev says.

Farren

’m fading.

I don't know how long I have left, but it's not long. It's not a case of I may not have long left; I know I'm going to die soon. It's just how soon it's going to be until I take my last breath. I keep fading in and out of consciousness. I have no idea if Xerxes is still here, but I hope he isn't; I hope whatever magic brought him here has taken him away since it's evident that I'm a lost cause and not going to last much longer. I hope he goes back to the guys, tells them how much they mean to me, and lies about how much I suffered. I hope they never find out, I hope they think it was over quickly. I hope Xerxes tells them that.

The Princes have upped their game, determined to get information out of me, information I either don't have or refuse to give them. They're now visiting several times a day, sometimes one straight after the other, and they're constantly finding new ways to torture me. I can't lift my head, I can't open my eyes, my body won't move, and although I know that it's because my body has been torn apart, it's also because I can't get into the Void.

Somehow, even though I can't access any of my magic, it's made no difference to the effect not going into the Void has on me; I'm being sliced apart, and even without the Princes, I'm being drained. Old wounds that the Void healed are starting to reappear, and its agony.

All I know is agony. Because I'm passing out, I'm not sleeping, which means I'm not dreaming, which means that my only ray of hope, the only thing that was keeping me slightly sane and distracting me from the shit show that has become my life, isn't happening anymore, I haven't see H, and I miss him.

I decide I have nothing to lose at this point; there's no way that I'm going to get out of this. I'm going to die soon.

So I pray, *if there is anyone still listening, anyone at all, anyone who gives even a tiny shit, please let me see my men again, even if only in a dream, please let me dream of them,*

please let me see my light again, let me see H, and my men one last time before I fade into nothingness.

I get no sign that anyone has heard me, and that last flicker of hope disappears, leaving behind pain.

Only pain.

I'll be glad when the pain stops.

My thoughts pause, I'm not in pain, it's fading. I can feel panic start to rise before that too fades; I feel the cool darkness start to encroach quicker, not my usual darkness, not the comforting friend that I love. No, this is the end. I thought I would be scared, but I'm not, I'm relieved even though I know that I won't see my guys again.

If I'm granted the honour I'll watch over them, from wherever I end up, because I have a strange feeling that I'm somehow not going to end up here. The guy's and H's faces flash through my mind one last time, bringing a soft smile to my face before the darkness drags me under completely.

Chapter Twelve

Farren

***M**y heart leaps, I'm here, I'm in the cell.
"H?" I question, hope screaming through me
dangerously.*

My men aren't here, but I'll take what I can get at this point, and if I get to see my light, then I can fade completely, more at peace than I was seconds ago.

"Ren, fuck Ren," H's panicked voice echoes around the tiny cell as he tries to step toward my corner, "what the fuck have they done to you?"

I smile. It's so nice to hear his voice. The peace it brings me. It's incredible that he can do that for me, and I'm so fucking grateful.

"Ren?" H's voice asks again, "It's bad, it's really fucking bad. My magic is panicking, and it's never panicked before."

"I'm tired, H," I manage to say, and wince when my voice comes out weak, barely above a fucking whisper.

I shuffle closer to him, trying to get as close as this weird barrier will let me. I want to soak up as much of that peace as I can before I die. I'm not naive, this is my last wish being granted, I'm dying as we speak, when this dream ends so does my life.

His panicked eyes search my corner as he moves as close as he can to the barrier as well, and I force myself to shuffle so I'm standing in front of him. The only reason that I can walk right now is because I'm dreaming, and his magic is trying to fix me. It's a last mercy that I've been granted.

"I know, Shade, I know," he replies.

“I want it to stop hurting. I don’t want to be in pain anymore.” I whisper as a sudden wave of excruciating pain comes over me; it’s so strong that it makes me gasp, and my knees buckle beneath me.

Shock courses through me as I land against a solid chest, and strong arms wrap around me.

“It’s okay, Ren, Shade, I have you,” H says as he pulls me further into his arms and sinks to the floor as my hands clench weakly in his shirt. “I’ve got you.”

“You can see me?” I gasp.

“No, just feel you.” He says just as quietly, holding me like I might break.

The thing is, I am already broken, and right now, I want to feel comfort.

“Can you hold me tightly,” I ask. Usually, I’d feel embarrassed about such a request, but now is hardly the time to worry about such ridiculous shit.

He takes a big breath as I feel his heartbeat pound under my ear, “I don’t want to hurt you; you’re already in so much pain.”

“Please, H,” I ask, “it’s my last chance to feel something other than pain.”

His arms tighten around me immediately as his breath stutters in his chest, and his head comes to rest on top of mine. My eyes fill with tears as I feel wetness drip onto my head.

This giant, terrifying demon is crying for me. I don’t like that.

“It’s okay, H, don’t cry for me,” I say, trying to comfort him. “I’ll be okay. I’m ready to go, I’m in so much pain. I don’t want to hurt anymore.” His arms wrap around me tighter, as more tears drip down onto the top of my head, “I know we haven’t really talked about it, but since this is the last time I’m going to see you, I figure what the fuck, if you are real I need you to find me those guys that I started telling you

about. I can tell you their names and where to find them in the Shadowlands.”

Somehow, his hands manage to find my cheeks, and he gently turns my face to his. His eyes are closed as he rests his forehead against mine, and I once again marvel at the fact that I have a connection like this with him. We stay like that for a moment before his eyes open; when they meet mine, not that he can see me, his eyes blaze with determination, and when I say blaze, I mean they’re literally alight.

His grip tightens on my cheeks, his thumbs instinctively rubbing away the tears that have overflowed, “Fight, Ren. You have to fight. I need you to fight this.”

My heart breaks, “I don’t think I can, I want to, I do, but I’m so tired.”

I know he wants me to fight; I can see just how much he wants me to in his blazing eyes. I can feel it in how tightly he holds me, and I want to, I do, I want to fight for him, for the guys, for Poca, Meri and Oryn, but I don’t think I’m strong enough.

Without the Void, I’m nowhere near powerful enough. I’m becoming weaker by the second, even now; in this dream world, I can feel the effect it’s having on me, and not just my physical body; I’m mourning the loss of the Void. It’s like I’ve been cut off from a vital part of my existence, which I suppose I have.

H shakes his head, “You can. I know it’s hard. I am real; this is a dream, but I am real, Ren, and you just confirmed that you are, too. If you are real, then I can help you, but it’s going to be hard; it’s going to hurt you more than anything that you’ve ever been through. But you can do it. You’re so strong. You need to fight for me, your guys, and especially you.”

Somehow, his words trigger the fight in me. I thought it was gone, but it flickers, and as the guy’s faces flicker through my mind, this time, they look at me with determination, not sadness; their expressions are begging me to fight, not to give up, and it’s working.

I feel my face dip into a frown, “How? You’re a figment of my imagination.”

He frowns heavily, worry clouding the determination in his eyes, “I’m not Ren, I just told you that. I’m going to need you to focus.”

“You’re not a figment of my imagination?” I question because my memory is getting cloudy.

“No, Ren, I’m not,” he confirms, “now, I really need you to focus, okay? We’re running out of time.”

I nod. I can feel that we’re running out of time, but I want to fight. I do, so I take my good hand, the one not missing a finger, and dig my fingers into one of the many wounds on my leg.

“Ren, why the fuck did your pain level just spike?” H asks, no demands.

I sigh, my voice clearer and my mind more focused, “As fucked up as it is, pain has always grounded me and cleared my mind, helped me to focus. I’m in worse shape than I have been, I think ever, thanks to a change of circumstances, I guess you could call it, anyway; because of that, I have no idea how long this clarity is going to last, so whatever it is that you have to tell me, I suggest that you do it quickly.”

H’s eyes fill with a small amount of relief, “There she is. I have to warn you that this isn’t going to be easy; it’s going to feel like you’re being torn apart.”

“The alternative is death, and I’m used to pain,” I reply, my fingers still buried in the wound.

“You’re fucking strong, I know you can do this.” He pauses, “I’m going to give you as much of my magic as I can while we’re in this dreamscape; I’ll help you as much as I can.”

I nod; I’d deny him his offer to help, but one, I don’t think it is an offer he’s telling me that’s what he’s going to do, and two, I instinctively know that if I have any hope of surviving this, I’m going to need him.

Images of my loved ones flash through my mind again, possibly for the last time, but they slip by too quickly; it's not until the image of me tearing apart the princes, grinding them down and pulling at their souls that the flame of desire to live blazes to life.

Revenge.

That's what I will cling to throughout this pain.

I'd worry about what it says about me that revenge is what makes my will to live and fight grow brighter, but honestly, there's no point. I'm either going to die from the wounds inflicted by the princes and my lack of access to the Void, or I'm going to die trying to get to my magic.

"Whatever you're thinking about right now, don't let it go. It's lending you strength, and you're going to need all the strength you can get." H says.

My smile is sharp and no doubt bloody; I'm sure he'd be horrified if he could see me, but I reply, "Don't worry, this image isn't going anywhere. Now, what do I do."

"I can show you how you can access your magic; if it works, you'll still be in the cell. I can't help you escape from there," he warns me.

My smile grows, "Perfect, I need to visit a couple of princes anyway."

H's eyebrows rise as he looks surprised, "If you manage this, you're going to go after them for revenge?"

"You bet your fucking arse I am," I reply with absolutely no hesitation.

"I knew I liked you," he smiles, and then leans back further; his arms still around me as his face becomes serious, "I need you to sink into your centre where you would usually find your magic."

"I can, but it's wrapped in so many spells," I explain.

He nods, "Yes, and this is where it's going to hurt like a motherfucker. You're going to have to attack yourself; you need to pull, tug, and claw at the spells; you're going to have

to tear yourself apart and hope like hell that you get to your magic before your body gives up completely.”

I wince as nerves start to build, I can't help it. What he's suggesting that I do is horrific, intense, and not something that anyone would ever recommend you try; it's practically suicide.

But I have nothing to lose and potentially a whole lot to gain. You know, my life, my men, revenge.

“That's it?” I ask when he doesn't carry on talking. “No spell, no other instructions, just attack myself.”

H winces, “Pretty much. I'm going to help you as much as I can. I'll give you as much of my magic as I can, but it won't work unless you are the one who breaks the seal around your magic; no one else will be able to do it. Only you.”

I nod and then remember he can't see me; he's doing such a good job of actually talking to me that I kind of forgot that he couldn't actually see me. I guess feeling where my face is has helped him know where I am.

“Got it,” I reply, a thread of determination; I then add, “I already know how painful this is going to be. Whatever you do, don't pull me out of it; I have a feeling that I've got one shot to get this right, and if I'm pulled out, I won't be able to go back in.”

His throat bobs as he swallows thickly, and his eyes darken with shadows, but he nods. “Got it, don't die.”

I smile, “I'll try not to.”

I move my hand to another wound to help ground myself and then take a deep breath, sinking into my Centre. Even sinking into it is more effort than it should be, but I push away all of my nerves.

As I reach the dark and desolate place where my magic resides, all I can see is a tangled and barbed ball of spells wrapping around my magic, the glow of which I can barely see through the layers. I reach out to it and immediately get zapped, a jolt of pain shooting through me. Yeah, this is going to more than simply hurt. I can't even tell if my magic is still trying to pick apart the spells from the inside or not, and I'd be

willing to bet that it's because I'm so much weaker than when I last tried to get to my magic.

I feel H's magic wrap around my physical body like a blanket, warmth, and comfort that I'm grateful for and that I utilise while I still can since I'm not sure that I'll be able to in a minute.

I have to admit that I take a moment just to enjoy the feeling before I push it away. I call on that darkness that I love to help me and lend me the strength that I'm going to need to get through this.

I push forward, reaching toward my magic and gritting my teeth as the spells attack me; I tear at them, snapping the strands and watching the magic fizzle out, attacking me as it does. Clenching my teeth, I carry on, working my way through the spells as each one attacks me. I feel H's magic surge as he tries to help me as much as he can; there's only so much that he can do. Just knowing that he's still with me is enough though, since I'm no longer able to feel my physical body and would have no idea if he left me or not otherwise. After what feels like hours, I can no longer keep my screams of pain inside, and with each shred of magic against my already battered self, I scream, I holler. I know that I writhe in pain, but still, I keep going; I have to keep going; I need to get to my guys, my safety, and the first people to make me feel that way. I want to meet H in the real world, this mysterious supernatural that's become my lifeline while I've been living in this hell.

I slow in my attack of the spells as a lilting lullaby. No, it's not soft enough to be a lullaby; it's a war song. It comforts me; it goads me; it lends me strength and stokes the flames of fight that were starting to wane. The voice that sings it is deep, soulful, and unlike anything that I've ever heard before; somehow, even in this state, I can feel goosebumps rise all over my body. It's intense and strengthens me in a way that I didn't even think was possible.

With renewed vigour, I speed up, tearing the spells apart and getting a tiny bit closer to my magic. I know it can feel me coming for it because I can feel it start to pull apart the spells from its side. The problem is, my magic is exactly that, mine,

so I'm getting double the amount of pain, and for a second, it takes my breath away.

The strength of that song increases and echoes around me, soothing my hurt and helping me to ride it out; as soon as I'm able, I pick up the pace again. Renewed hope lights my heart as my guys, Poca, Meri, and my uncle; all flash through my mind as I imagine them screaming words of encouragement at me.

Bring it on, you bitch arse fucking spells.

H

*S*he's been at it for hours. Each scream, each whimper that leaves her, stabs my heart, and I know without any doubts in my mind that they're going to haunt me for my very long existence. It's not just her screams but the way that she's writhing in pain, her back arching. My magic is desperately trying to help her, but it's barely managing to scratch the surface of her pain, and I'm not weak; I should be able to help her more than this. I hate it; I have never wanted to help someone more than I want to help her, and I can't fucking help her.

Instead of losing my shit, I do something that I have never done before in my many years of life; I try to comfort her. I hold her as gently as I can while still ensuring that I don't hurt her even more. I wish I could see her; for me, it's like I'm trying to hold on to shadows. During periods of quiet, when she's not screaming, I whisper comforting words. I highly doubt that she can hear me, but I say them anyway, just in case she can. Although I have to admit that I don't really know if what I'm saying is comforting at all, it's been a long time since I've heard any sort of soothing words, and quite frankly, I'm not sure I ever have, but I try to offer her comfort.

When I run out of words, I sing.

I haven't sung in centuries, but for her, it's easy; I pour my entire being into the songs and pray that somehow something is getting through to her; that somehow, I'm helping her to fight. I have never known someone to have to fight for this long before, the longest I've ever known is two hours, and he didn't fucking survive. Fortunately, time works differently in the dream world, and although it's been hours in here, it won't have been out there.

She's been at it for so long, and I have no idea how she's doing it. She has far more strength than even I gave her credit for, and I already thought that she was strong. I think she's stronger than even she realises. I refuse to give up, refuse to stop comforting her, and every time a new scream tears from her, I sing louder, praying to the damn gods that it's helping her.

Chapter Thirteen

H

*S*uddenly, her pain level gets impossibly higher, off the charts, and in a way that I'm sure is going to kill her. I can't allow that to happen. It's not that I don't want to; it's that there is something deep inside me on a soul level that won't allow me to let her die. It would kill me, and I can't die easily.

It's because of that I do something that I probably shouldn't, something that I know I shouldn't do while in a dreamscape, and throw as much of my magic as I can at her. It obeys me willingly, readily, as desperate to help her as I am.

Ren screams, her back arching with pain as I feel her heartbeat slow.

No, no, no.

She becomes too bright to look at, the light piercing the shadows that surround her, and yet I still can't make out anything distinguishing about her. It grows so bright that I have absolutely no hope of seeing anything; my magic responds, growing with it until her scream reaches a crescendo and the weight of her disappears from my arms.

I jump up, my eyes squinting, trying to get used to the light, but before I can get them to adjust, I'm forcefully pulled back to the awake world.

“No, what did you do? Hades, you son of a bitch send me back,” I growl before my eyes are even open.

I know that Hades is the one who pulled me out. He's the only one who could, especially since I'd put some spells in place to ensure that I couldn't be prematurely woken. They were strong enough that he's the only one that could have pulled them apart to get me out.

"Whoa, hold up, mate," Loki says, and when he sees my expression, which is no doubt in complete panic, he adds, "We had to pull you out. You were kicking off insane amounts of power. Side note: you're incredibly competent at riding and sleeping. I would've fallen off at least six times by now."

I finally open my eyes, the swaying of my horse beneath me registering in my mind again, and I quickly glance around, showing that we're still in the woods.

"You nearly burnt yourself out, friend," Hades adds, concern darkening his features.

"It took a lot to get you out," Zev surprises me by saying.

The surprise is big enough that it makes me ask, "Wait, you're the one that pulled me out?"

Zev tilts his head, looking confused, "Yes, it's something that I've always been able to do."

Storm mutters, and when I look at him adds, "None of us realised that it was in his skill set either. He apparently didn't mention it before because he thought that it was a part of his seer ability."

"Why do you look so confused?" Hades, or as they call him Grey, asks.

"Because I had spells stopping me from being pulled back, strong ones that only you should've been able to break," I explain.

Hades' eyes widen with shock. "Seriously?"

I'm done with this conversation though and my gaze moves to Zev, as I demand, "Dude, I need you to send me back."

"What?" Zev asks.

I sigh, trying to be too patient with him because, quite honestly, I like him, I like them all, but it's fucking hard. "You were able to break through my spells to pull me out, and you didn't even realise that you were doing it; that's not just a dream walker. That's an insanely fucking strong one; you can send me back. You have to send me back."

By the end, my panic has hit the extremes again, and all of them are tense.

"We're going to need a little bit more information. Is this your woman?" Killian asks.

I sigh, but I know that he's right, "Yes, she was dying, and I have no idea if she succeeded in what she was trying to do or if she died. I have to go back. I have to know if she died."

Sympathy immediately floods all of their features. All of them know how much I've been struggling with these dreams, and they don't even know the half of it; for some reason, I find myself unable to tell them certain things. I can't even tell them that I'm struggling to tell them things which is irritating as fuck.

Zev steps forward, "I can send you back easily enough, but if she's real, then there's no telling whether she will still be there, and you may still not know if she's alive."

"He's right. Sending you back could give you no answers whatsoever, and from what I understand, it's a lengthy process to send you back and involves spell ingredients that we'd have to go back to Monty's to pick up, which would delay us getting to Farren and Monty said that we were running out of time." Hades replies.

Zev is shaking his head before Hades has even finished talking, and immediately replies, "Not for me, I don't need anything else, I can just send him back."

"You can?" Mayhem asked, as shocked as I feel.

Zev nods, "Yeah, I've pretty much always been able to do it."

"And you thought that your only gift was being an incredibly powerful seer?" Reaper questions.

Zev rubs a hand on the back of his neck as he glances around at all of us, “Like I said, I just thought it was a part of being a seer, but from your reaction, I’m guessing it’s not?”

Hades shakes his head, “No, it’s not.”

Zev’s eyebrows rise, and then he adds, “I guess we can come back to that later. If I’m going to help you, I need to do it now while the dream is still fresh.”

“Please?” I ask, and I see Hades’ eyes widen in surprise.

“Settle on your saddle again and close your eyes. When you feel my magic, do not fight it; it should put you under and back in the dream almost immediately.”

I again feel surprise but couldn’t really care less right now, I need to see if she’s okay, she has to be okay.

I nod and make sure that I’m not going to slip from my seat as I prepare to head back to find her.

I feel Zev’s magic start to build before it suddenly stops.

“No.” A lilting voice echoes around us, and we all draw our weapons. “I can’t let you go back. I’m sorry.”

The heaviness in the air that came along with the voice suddenly disappears, and it’s only then that I recognise it for what it is.

“Fuck,” I growl, “was that a goddess?”

Hades nods.

“Why the fuck would the gods and goddesses have a problem with sending you back?” Storm demands.

“How the fuck should I know?” I retort sharply.

Everyone falls silent.

“I’m sorry,” Rival says quietly.

I nod curtly, but that’s all I can manage as my mind whirls with all the possibilities. Am I not allowed to go back because she’s dead, so it would be pointless, or is there another reason? Why can I not know? I hate not knowing. I need to know that she’s okay. The thing is, I really don’t think that she’s okay,

and I have no idea how to deal with that. There's so much that I still don't know about her and so much that I want to know. More than that though, there are the mysteries surrounding her; she kicked off a hell of a lot of power when she was fighting to get to her magic, more than any normal supernatural would do, and why can't I tell the guys anything substantial?

As my mind spins with unanswered questions and fear, I push my horse to pick up speed. I need a more challenging ride to get me out of my head and stop this hurt that's trying to encroach on me. The others don't question me; they don't try to stop me, as they just encourage their horses to pick up speed and keep close. I know that if anything tried to attack us right now, they'd pick up the slack until I got my shit in the game. I just need a moment to collect myself and work on how I'm going to find out if she's okay or not.

"We will help you find her; we can figure out a way to get back to the dream or find her in the cells at the castle like we originally planned," Storm starts.

"Are we even sure that she's in the Fae realm?" Rival questions, his voice raised to be heard over the pounding hooves.

His response has my mind pausing for a second. I'm starting to wonder if she is actually in the cells at the castle or if it's just a manifestation of my own memories. She's being held somewhere, but that could be anywhere, not necessarily in the cells; either way, for some reason, I can't say anything, so I reply instead, "I have no idea what realm she's in."

"I thought you said that she was in the cells at the castle?" Hades asks, looking confused.

I sigh, feeling frustrated, "I don't know anymore. I thought it was the cells, but what if I was wrong? I'm suddenly unsure about everything."

"We can try and find her, there are spells that can go across realms." Mayhem replies.

A small smile stretches my lips, "Thank you."

“Of course,” Hades replies and then adds, “We’re on a time constraint right now though, so we’re going to have to find Farren. First, I’m sorry.”

I shake my head, “No, don’t apologise, Farren needs to be found immediately.”

I understand the mission, and as always, a mission comes first. Besides, as difficult as it is to admit, and as much as I don’t want to do it, there is still a chance that Farren can be saved, and I have no idea what state Ren is in or if she’s even alive. Hell, I don’t even know if she’s real. I mean, my instincts are telling me that she’s real; there’s no way that I could be this affected by a figment of my imagination, but I might want her to be real too much. At least, that’s my fear. She was dying when she came to the dream; her light was fading, and she wouldn’t have woken up once she left the dream; I could feel that. I’ve been around enough people on the edge of death to know that she only had as long as the dream lasted left to live.

Anyway, it gives me something else to focus on. I do a hell of a lot better with violence, death, and pain than I do with all of these emotions that I am not familiar with.

From that point on, we focus on riding hard, we’re not that far away from our last rest stop before we get to Farren, and even I can feel the urgency that’s pushing us.

Farren

The light blinds me, and honestly, I expect to see some kind of paradise in my own little slice of the Underworld, the spirit side of it, not this side. I wonder what it will look like and what my deepest desires will make my paradise look like.

Surprise jolts me as I open my eyes to find myself in my corner of the cell. Pain is wrecking my body. I still feel on the

edge of death, but something is different. It takes me moments to realise that it's my magic I can feel my magic, which means I fucking did it.

H, you beautiful bastard.

Without a second thought, I allow my magic to take me over and pull me into the Void. Relief immediately fills me as the power of the Void rushes me, healing me and filling me with power. Usually, I resist the power surge, and I fight the overwhelming magic that it gives me, but not this time. I've missed my magic too damn much; I was hurt too badly for too fucking long, and so instead of fighting it and worrying about losing control when I step out, I embrace it fully.

Something unfurls within me, something I'm sure that I've never felt before. I'd question it, but I have a prison to escape.

"Thank you," I tell the Void, my hair whipping around me in a frenzy; I can feel the Void. I don't know how to explain it without sounding crazy, but it seems grateful. I have no idea why it would be grateful to me, but again, I have no time to question it right now, and instead, I make a silent promise that I will be back soon before I head back to the cell.

I don't even try to see if I can leave the Void at another point and get out of my cell that way. One, I need to see if Xerxes left or if he is still in the cell; I'd never forgive myself if he got stuck in there. However, he does seem to be able to turn up where we need him to, and I'm unsure whether it's his magic or someone who is sending him. The other thing is that if I go back to the Shadowlands and the guys like this, with this much Void magic in me, I'm incredibly dangerous. I could kill them, not hurt them but kill them. I can feel it, the strength it's given me is even more than usual but strangely enough, along with the extra strength has also come control.

I don't know whether it's because I haven't had my magic for too long, but I would've thought that my magic would be more uncontrollable because of that. Or the more likely case is that my magic and the Void know exactly what I plan to do as soon as I get back into the cell, and because of that, it has a

focus that's helping to stop me from losing my shit, or at least that's what I'm going with.

As I step back into the cell, I glance down at my hand with a frown. I still don't have my finger back, and I don't know why; it doesn't make sense because the Void usually heals everything else; something else to add to the pile of mysteries, I guess.

"Farren?" Xerxes' shocked voice asks.

I spin around revelling in the fact that I can move so easily and smile as his tiny form comes out from a crevice in the cell wall, ah so that's where he's been for the last god knows how long. I actually don't know how long I've been here for. I have no windows, so there's no way to see when the suns rise or set, and you kind of stop trying to keep count of the days.

"Hey, Xerxes," I say as I pick him up.

"How are you okay?" he asks incredulously, "You were dead, I'm sure of it. I didn't understand why I hadn't been pulled back, but now I see it's because you're still alive. I'm so fucking glad that you're okay. You are okay, aren't you? I'm not dreaming? The princes didn't find me, did they?"

I shake my head, "No, the princes haven't got you, and yes, I was dying. A friend helped me and told me how to get my magic back."

"You owe your friend your life," Xerxes replies.

"I do," I agree, "but first, I need to take the lives of a few people."

"Farren, I just, it's just," he starts stuttering, and I stop heading toward the cell door, giving him time to finish his sentence, "I am so fucking glad that you're okay; that was hard to watch. I couldn't do anything, I have no offensive magic at all apart from the poison thing that you know about, but they'd have to touch me and there's no way that I could've gotten close to them without them realising that I was coming. I'm so sorry, I couldn't help."

My heart fills with more affection for the quirky book, "It's okay, honestly, I wouldn't have wanted you to expose yourself

to them anyway, not only would it have gotten you hurt and they would've used you to hurt me even more but also we wouldn't have wanted to let them know that you're here, you're a very powerful tool for anyone to have and they most definitely shouldn't have you."

"You're right," he replies, sounding relieved.

As I take another step, his pages light up, making me pause again. He floats out of my hand, and he opens his pages, flickering. I hope he finds whatever has suddenly appeared in his pages quickly because I have no idea how long it's been since they last tortured me, but I know for a fact that they'll be back soon to see if I'm dead or try to torture more information out of me.

"What's this?" I ask as I look at the map set out on the page.

"Well, the information that I've been given states that it's a map leading to Hades vault," Xerxes replies.

"The key fragment, that's where the key fragment for the gates to the Underworld is, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," he replies.

I grin; my magic is beginning to get incredibly antsy; it needs to be released, like usual, "Well, I might as well make good use of being here, you know, other than killing as many of the fucking princes as I can."

"There's five, Farren, four princes, and they're fucking strong," Xerxes warns me.

My smile is sharp, "There's actually five, but Azreal is different. He never joined in the torture before, and he never did this time. So long as he doesn't get in the way, then I'll leave him alone." I pause contemplatively before I continue, "The others though, I'm going to take them all on, and I'm going to repay them for what they did to me and the problems and pain that they've inflicted on the Underworld because I can guarantee that with them in charge and Hades missing in action, the Underworld and the natives are in trouble."

Chapter Fourteen

Farren

“Well, okay then, it’s hard to argue with that surety,” he replies, “I can lead you to the vault, but killing the princes is on you.”

I grin, “Absolutely. I’m not in the mood to share anyway.”

“How are we getting out of here?” he asks, changing the subject.

Before I can answer him though, Oryn suddenly appears in front of me. He rushes toward me, his wings flapping to steady himself as he rubs his cheek against mine. I stroke his soft fur as he squeaks at me.

“Hey,” I reply, a tiny bit surprised at his easy show of affection, “did you follow me back from the Void?”

As soon as I ask the question, images fill my mind, flooding from him to me in quick succession.

“Farren?” I hear Xerxes ask, “Is everything okay? Are you feeling weak?”

His words confuse me for a moment until I remember that no one else can see him. I never got around to asking him what Oryn is, and now isn’t the time to bring up that conversation.

“Yeah, a friend showed up; he’s been here the whole time apparently and must be linked to me in some way, I guess because it appears that he suffered along with me.”

“Why can’t I see him?” Xerxes asks and then adds, “I can see everything.”

“I don’t know. He came back with me from the Void before the last battle at the stronghold, but I lost track of him during the fight. I kind of assumed that he’d gone back to the Void,

and then I had my throat slit and ended up here. I guess I was wrong.”

I hate that he’s experienced everything that I have and that I had absolutely no idea that he was here, I couldn’t try to comfort him or anything. I have a feeling that shielding him would’ve done nothing and that, somehow, he experienced what I did when I was experiencing it. I need to know how that’s possible and if it’s something that I should be concerned about.

“Wow, that’s actually incredibly interesting, and I couldn’t tell you straight off the top of my head what kind of creature he is, but I’ll look into it when you can give me some more information about what he looks like. For now, how are we getting out of here?”

I smile, “Thanks, Xerxes. Well, I have all of my magic back, and my instinct is telling me that I can use it to get out. Failing that, I’ll wait until one of the fuckers turns up to torture me and then flip it around on them.”

“Okay, let’s try it then,” he says. He shrinks down to his tiny size and adds, “For this bit and maybe all the blood and gore that’s going to follow, could you maybe put me in a pocket? I’ve seen enough for a lifetime.”

I grimace, knowing exactly what he’s seen, “Yeah, I get that. Are you sure though? My clothes may be somewhat intact, but I am literally soaked in blood.”

Xerxes’ pages flap, and I equate it to shrugging. “I don’t care.”

“Well, okay then,” I reply and pluck him out of the air, putting him in my pocket.

Checking over Oryn to make sure that he’s really okay now, after everything that he’s experienced with me, I stride up to the bars, and my magic surges, with slight hesitation since it hurt like a mother fucker last time I touched the bars, I reach out, and my magic chews through the spells keeping the door locked like its chocolate cake. It’s too easy, far easier than it should be. As I step through the cell door without even

opening it, I wonder if it's because my magic spent so long on the other side of the wall trying to unravel the spells that were keeping it at bay. It's almost like it got a major workout while it was trying to do it, and now it's supercharged.

As I step through onto the other side, I reach my hand into one of my pockets in the Void and pull out two of my favourite swords. Twirling them around in my hands, joy fills me. Being without my weapons always leaves me feeling vulnerable, and I hate feeling vulnerable. It makes me feel weak, and it brings up memories that I'd rather forget. Not only that, but my weapons are like an extension of myself; they're like extra limbs; I've missed them more than I probably should, considering they're inanimate objects.

The door at the end of the stone corridor opens, and instead of fear, excitement fills me; I'm mildly surprised that it's a Hellier who walks through the door. I haven't seen them since I arrived, and they haven't come down here. I'd be willing to bet that it's because they've been ordered not to. Glancing down at an excited-looking Oryn, I say, "Let me handle him; I don't want to risk you; would you like to go back to the Void?"

Oryn growls, the sound echoing through the atmosphere, and the Hellier charging me pauses. He looks around like he's confused about where the sound is coming from and looks scared as hell as well. I don't think the Hellier can see him, and it makes me curious about what exactly he is; I need more information about his species.

I chuckle as I spin my sword once again, "I'm going to take that as a no. You got my back?"

His lips curl up, and I take that as a yes.

"How did you get out bitch?" the Hellier asks, before deciding to think better of it and shooting a stream of magic in my direction.

I don't move; I don't dodge it. Instead, I reach out and catch it; my magic hums happily as it absorbs it, and the Hellier's eyes open wide, shocked, and starting to panic at the ease that I was able to harness his magic. I don't give him a

second to build another attack or to get to me. I have bigger fish to fry, and this one is barely worth my time. I allow my magic to attack, and it releases in a burst, piercing through him in multiple places and making him look like a damn pin cushion.

Wasting no more time on him, I step over his corpse and head toward the door at the end of the hallway. Once again, I'm stopped in my tracks, but I am more than happy to be interrupted in my search for retribution.

"Poca!" I cry and hear a muffled voice question from my pocket; I pull Xerxes out as I crumple to the floor and wrap my hands around a smouldering Poca. My hands brush against something, and I glance around him to find Meri, "Hey buddy, I've missed you both so fucking much."

I'm immediately covered in kisses from both of them, kisses that should kill me but that just tickle. Unfortunately, our reunion can't last much longer. The princes would've felt the spike in power that we both kicked off, and while it's not unusual for power spikes to happen in the castle if they're clever enough to trace the spike and realise that it's coming from near my cell, then I'm about to be swamped with princes, and although I am strong, I think even stronger than I was before all of this happened, I'm not sure I can take them all on even if Meri, Poca, and Oryn were to help me.

"Alright, guys, I've got some princes to end and a key fragment to find. Have my back and kill anything that you see, apart from the princes and the innocent, got it?" I say to all of these weird and wonderful creatures that I've managed to gather around me.

They all show their acknowledgement of my words in some way or another.

"I'm surprised that they've managed to show up here; I mean, we're not in the realms. We're in the Underworld," Xerxes says, "they shouldn't be able to follow you here."

"Yes, but I shouldn't be able to survive here, and I do," I point out. It's something that has bugged me since the first time I was dragged here, but it's something I've never looked

into. “Maybe whatever makes it okay for me to be here extends to them since they’re connected to me.”

Xerxes hums, “Hmm, maybe. I’ll add it to the list of things that I need to look into.”

He shrinks back down, and I put him into my pocket where he’s safe. Then, I head out of the door, this time grateful that I’m not interrupted again. I really want to get this done. That brief moment of use to take out the Hellier has made absolutely no difference to my levels, and I’m starting to get twitchy. I get my head back into the game as I stalk the hallways. Xerxes didn’t even attempt to tell me where the key is, he knows I want to find the princes first.

As I walk the halls slowly, taking out the Helliers as I go, it occurs to me that it would actually be better if they had picked up my magical signature and were coming for me. It would mean that I wouldn’t need to go and find them; they’d find me with this in mind; the next Hellier that comes to me, I kill him with more magic than I need to, which pretty much announces my presence.

I ready myself as I finally leave the bowels of the dungeon and enter the castle, the smell of death and pain is replaced by the smell of clean fresh scents. The carpet runs the length of the corridor, and beautiful tapestries hang on the walls. I want to stop and admire them to study them closer as they each depict scenes of battles, new beginnings, and gods. I have a feeling that this is the remnants of Hades, and the tapestries in Grey’s house are in a very similar style.

I stop as some of the things that the princes have said sink in.

Holy fuck, Grey is Hades.

Oh, we’re going to have some things to talk about when I get back to them. Wait. Oh fuck, of course, that’s the reason that he has the silencing spell on him. I wonder if I tell him that I know whether he will finally be able to talk about it.

“Naughty little mouse,” Jomeial chastises as he appears in the hallway, and I curse myself for being distracted, although

in my defence, I've just realised that one of my closest friends is a freaking god.

"You look surprised," I taunt as I slip into a fighting stance, holding both of my swords up, ready to attack.

"Not so much surprised, Little mouse," he sneers, "more like thrilled."

I need to end him quickly. Once one prince arrives, the others are usually quick to follow, and although I am confident in my skills and the anger of my magic, I don't think that I'm strong enough to take on all four of the princes together, possibly five if Azreal decides to defend his brothers. They're all demigods, and together, they're incredibly strong; I mean, they managed to trap Hades and put a dampener on his magic somehow so he couldn't access all of it. I'm actually assuming they had help because although they're strong, the things that I've heard about Hades would make him impossible to beat, especially for demigods. Unless, of course, the stories have been wildly exaggerated.

I'm not inclined to believe that, though since I know the kind of person Grey is, and even without all of his magic back, he was a freaking powerhouse and good too. If I manage to get back to him and the guys, I need to warn him about what's happening here.

I infuse my magic into my weapons just in time for him to charge, swinging his own sword; that is something that I have learned about Jomieal; he loves his weapons, and I'm guaranteed to be able to fight with my own weapons, something that I prefer to do.

Our weapons clash, sparks of magic shooting in all directions and His smug smile starts to fall as he realises that I know what I'm doing. They should believe what their research tells them and not let pride blind them. I know that they've done enough research to question me about certain things, and they obviously know about my father and what he had me do, but for some reason, they seem to skip over the part where I'm capable of assassinating all manner of creatures.

Prideful fucks.

I spin and twirl, stretching muscles that haven't been used properly for far too long. I enjoy the fight, but as I start to sense a significant power source approach and Poca growls in warning, I double down on my attack, infusing more of my magic into my swords and trying to find a gap in his defence so that I can take him down as quickly as possible. With a rush of power, my sword comes down heavily on his and snaps it in a move that not only shocks me but shocks him as well. Fortunately, I recover from my shock quicker than he does, my swords singing through the air as they slice through his neck. Poca darts forward and catches the head before it hits the ground. In a move that we haven't done since I last did a job, I open up a small pocket in the Void, and Poca swings his head and launches the prince's head into the hole, yipping and jumping around happily when he makes the shot. I grin as Merri and Oryn watch curiously. I have a feeling that they're going to want in on that trick from now on or at least to practise it.

I don't really have time to gather myself as I feel a steep rise in the magic, and I know that one of the other princes has appeared behind me. My magic hasn't waned at all; if anything, it's gotten stronger somehow. It's almost like it's excited to be able to get a proper workout, and now it's had a taste, it wants more. Because of this, I end up taking Yeal out with an ease that surprises both of us. Once again, Poca catches his head before it hits the ground, and I throw it into a different pocket of the Void than I threw Jomieal's head just in case they decide to conspire. I mean, I'm not entirely sure that chopping off their heads will kill them, but I assume that separating their heads from the bodies will at least make it more difficult for them to be put back together for a while at least.

Once the body crumbles to the floor, I pause in moving on, waiting for another prince to turn up; after five minutes of no one and no power surges, I figure they must have felt their brother's life forces go out and are planning their next move. I start forward, pushing through the doors and heading further into this giant fucking castle.

As I walk, my mind drifts to the fifth prince; as I said before, I refuse to include Azreal unless he gets in my way. He's never been the same as them, and he actually used to sneak me food before Hades turned up in the cell opposite mine. After that, he disappeared, but he never joined in with any of the torture. He never said a word either, and I kind of assumed that when the other princes didn't have someone to take their depthless anger out on that, they took it out on him for some reason. I never begrudged him for not helping me escape; I understood that he was doing as much as he could, and that was enough for me.

I honestly think that he probably orchestrated having Hades put in the cell opposite mine, whether he knew that we'd be able to escape if we were together or he just wanted to give me some company. I don't know, but I was always grateful for that.

My senses are heightened as I hear every soft step that I'm making, every creak of the castle, and the very light padding of Poca's feet; he's choosing to let me hear him so I know exactly where he is in case we get jumped. The thing is, that's all I hear; I don't hear anyone or anything else, and quite frankly, the castle should be teeming with servants and guards. It's actually more concerning to me that I haven't seen anyone than it would be if I were regularly being attacked. I mean, there were only a few Helliers guarding the prison, and there were at least twenty the last time I was here.

Of course, that may be because they had Hades in the fucking prison.

I walk past yet another set of giant double doors, and my magic pings; I'm hoping that it's telling me that there's a prince in there, one that I want to kill. I don't do subtlety, now is not the time for it, so instead, I boot the door as hard as I fucking can; the wood splinters, and I realise I may have put a tiny bit more magic in that kick than I intended. Magic is immediately flung my way, but instead of it slicing me like it has done repeatedly for god knows how long, my magic grabs the strands that are coming for me and yanks them, pulling the surprised Dagon closer to me.

“Just the asshole I’ve been looking for,” I grin, my need for revenge bubbling up to the surface.

Chapter Fifteen

Farren

I order my magic to seal the doors behind me shut again and add a layer of nasty as fuck spells. Some of them replicate the ones I had to go through to get to my magic. It's not until I'm layering them against the door, and then windows for good measure that I realise I have the perfectly memorised, it's almost like because I had to take them apart, violently, they've now been committed to my memory forever, all of them. This means that not only can I now cast some powerful and painful spells, but I can also pull them apart with ease. It also means that my magic now recognises them, and knows how to disarm them.

In trying to stop me, the princes have actually given me a massive advantage, and I now know thousands of spells that I had no knowledge of before.

Refocusing on Dagon as he tries to send yet another wave of his pathetic magic at me, I bat it away as if it's nothing and pull a chair from one of the nearby tables and force him to sit down, my magic pinning him in place in a better way than anything else I could've used.

I know, in theory, that I should be heading straight for the key piece, but the opportunity to pay Dagon back for my missing finger and for the multitude of scars that have no doubt joined the rest of them, well, that opportunity is just too much for me to pass by. Besides, the more princes I can kill, the better off the whole of the Underworld is going to be.

Unfortunately, because of the time constraint and wanting to get out of here as quickly as possible and back to the guys, I'm not going to have much time to torture him as thoroughly as I'd like to. Instead, I settle for trying to cause him as much pain as possible in as short of a time as possible. My magic is

like an excitable puppy at the thought, and I release it, instructing it to tear and slice at Dagon but to drag it out as much as possible. My magic seems to revel in the fact that I've given it a challenge and a time frame to do it in. Wielding it, I slice at him, my smile growing as his screams of pain echo around this room; I decide to methodically take each of his fingers, not just the finger that he took from me.

Once he's in pieces, a blubbering mess, and no longer screaming, I take his head, ending his miserable existence and hoping that he's with some mean as fuck Underworld demons and they're punishing his soul in the darkest depths of the Underworld.

Opening up yet another separate pocket in the Void, Poca throws Dagon's head in there as well, and I release my magic, holding the doors tightly shut, slowly moving through them to see that the hallway outside is empty. I move as quickly and silently as I can away from the blood-soaked room, Poca, Oryn, and Meri following closely behind me, each one of them rubbing against me every now and then, almost as if it's for reassurance that I'm still here. It makes me smile.

As I move through the still, silent hallways, I come to the conclusion that I may as well end all of the princes since I'm here and not just end them only if I can find them. I'm following my instincts, and they're telling me that I need to take out all of the princes. It's like a need, like an itch, something that I have to do; the further that I walk, the more aware that I become that I actually don't have a choice. It's because of that I trust my magic-led instincts to guide me through the twists and turns; I even end up going through one of the castle's many kitchens, which I'm unsurprised to find completely empty if I didn't know better. I'd say that the entire place was deserted. My magic is leading me out of the castle, and it starts to make me wonder if I misinterpreted what my instincts are telling me to do and whether they actually meant that I need to kill all of the princes but that I need to get out of here first.

I mean, the Void healed me, and I am filled to the brim with magic and, more importantly, vengeance, but at some point,

that's going to wear out, and my newly healed body is going to need sleep and refuelling, actual food. Perhaps because I've been missing my magic for so long, the time that I have left before it runs out is a lot shorter than it usually is, so I need to leave to build my strength up and then come back to finish Hiromu and potentially Azreal off.

The dusk air is warm in the most pleasant way, and the gentle breeze cools my skin but makes me even more aware of the dried blood that covers me from head to toe. I may be healed, but it's not like the Void cleans my clothes when I go into it in a state; it just heals me. I kind of feel sorry for the creatures that are following me; I must really fucking stink; I mean fuck knows how long it's been since I've been able to shower.

Suddenly, my instincts are pulled to the left, and my feet instinctively follow; when Poca's footsteps become silent, I know that I'm heading toward something dangerous and pay extra attention to my surroundings. By this point Hiromu definitely knows that I'm here, and what I've been doing to his brothers, and the few Helliers that were guarding the hallway to my cell. This means that he's no doubt laying in wait for me, and if he hasn't set a trap for me, I would be very shocked.

I pause, looking over my shoulder at the array of creatures diligently following me, they all stop looking up at me curiously and I realise that I have a huge advantage, one that he won't have.

Keeping my voice barely above a whisper, my eyes land on Meri, "Meri, could you please fly ahead and see if you can find Hiromu? Stay hidden; do not let his magic sense you; he's dangerous, and I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you. Actually, that's a lie; I'd go even crazier than I'm already going to go. Don't engage either; I just need you to see his location and somehow tell me as much as you can about it so I can take him down. Is that okay? Can you handle that? Don't worry if you can't."

Merri chirps, flaps his currently tiny wings, and launches himself off Poca's back. He glides through the air, and I stay incredibly still as he rubs his little, soft nose against mine,

making my smile widen in happiness. He chirps again, his eyes serious as he then takes off, heading down the path. My heart jumps into my throat, worry squeezing it. I'm not the only one who's worried; Poca whines quietly, pressing himself up against my leg, and I wind my fingers through his fur; it surprises me when Oryn lands on the floor on my other side and does the same thing, leaning on my leg and looking for comfort. These three appear to have gotten closer than I thought, even though they haven't known each other for long.

Fortunately, none of us have to wait very long before Meri is zooming back to us; his wings flapping excitedly, he once again rushes me and rubs his nose against mine, except this time, he somehow manages to transfer some images to me; and I clearly see exactly how far up the path Hiromi is waiting for me and exactly how many Helliers he's managed to gather around him too. I'm surprised that there aren't that many of them, but I'm starting to think there's probably more to the missing people in this castle than everyone just being warned that I'm on the warpath.

Just as Meri pulls back severing the connection between us, I see a familiar face from the first time that I was in the prison. The one-eyed jailer, hell, it'll be nice to drain him of his pathetic life; if I hadn't been so weak the first time I escaped, I would've ended him then. It's always played on my mind that I left him alive when his kind of corrupt evilness should be eradicated and sent to the depths of the Underworld, where the vilest souls go to be punished.

I guess I'll be getting more revenge than I thought I would, righting a few more wrongs.

"Thank you, Meri," I say gratefully as I take a step in Hiromu's direction, stopping to look down at them all. Meri curled back up in Poca's fur. I'm starting to feel the urgency to leave, and I don't really have the time to play around like I'd like to; plus, they've been amazing, and I know that they are pretty much chomping at the bit to take some out. "Are you guys up to handling the guards?"

They all get really bouncy, and I'm guessing that it's because they want to help. They are, after all, dangerous

creatures in their own right, and they've been through some stressful shit themselves. It's affected them all not being able to locate me and for Oryn for him to be a witness to everything that I went through and not to be able to do anything was ridiculously hard. I think it's safe to say that we're all going to be walking away from this with some trauma, but at least we'll be walking away.

“Hiromu and the guard with one eye are mine,” I tell them, “distract one while I finish the other?”

They all nod and grin, my smile full of dark promise as I watch them race up the path ahead of me. It doesn't take me long to catch up, and I take a moment to watch them in action. It's incredible and impressive, and I have to physically shake myself to stop myself from getting distracted. My momentary distraction costs me and I barely get my sword up in time to block the blow that's coming for me.

Hiromu is a fierce warrior, but the deaths of his brothers have clearly shaken him and angered him. His fighting is far more jerky than it usually is, which can only be a good thing for me. I tune out the creatures; I know that they're probably even more capable of taking on the Helliers than I am. I have nothing to worry about; my only concern is Hiromu.

I launch three daggers in quick succession, summoning them from the Void as I throw them, and then swing my sword as I race after my daggers. I manage to get one good strike in before Hiromu counters with his own attack and I only just manage to move out of the way of his magic, only catching the edge of the illusion that he tries to send my way. Thankfully, my magic is still angry enough that it just bats the wispy tendrils away before the illusion can take hold. If that happens, then I'm pretty much done for; he could kill me, and I won't know until I'm gone and it's too late. It's not worth it. I keep swinging and hacking, throwing spears of magic his way. Every spell that he throws in my direction I manage to catch and throw back at him, but I'm tiring quickly, and he manages to get a few swipes in. Fortunately, they're not deep enough for me to be worried about, and nothing in comparison to what I've had done to me recently. They're like fucking tickles in

comparison really. The only thing that makes me feel like I might have a chance at winning is that he is also showing signs of fatigue; it's those signs that help me push harder and dig deeper even though my magic is getting tired.

He takes a swipe at me, and I jump over his sword, barely managing to launch myself backward so that I'm not sliced by the other one. As soon as I land, I summon another dagger and thrust it into his gut, dragging it upwards and making his gut split open, his insides spilling out; he bellows in pain, one of his swords dropping to the floor as he tries in vain to put his insides back where they belong. I don't waste any time in a favourite move of mine, I scissor my swords and sever his head, before it can hit the floor I open a pocket Void underneath it and then instantly close it back up.

I barely have time to take a breath before I spin around, checking on my creatures to make sure that they're okay. All of them are done with their opponents and are standing in a circle around the one-eyed Hellier.

Smiling, I head over to them, the Hellier's eyes widening in fear, which gives me a perverse sense of happiness. I had planned to say something, to let him know exactly why he deserved this revenge although he already knows. However, I'm tired after my fight with Hiromu, and instead, I simply swing my sword in my hand, Oryn and a Poca-sized Meri move apart to allow me through. The Hellier looks around, and quickly realises that there's no way to escape, three deadly creatures gathered behind him and me in front.

He mistakenly assumes that I'm the easiest one to get past and my blade sings as it sails through the air and the Hellier's neck like butter. I don't put this one into the Void; beheading him is enough to ensure that he's dead and can't resurrect.

"Good job, guys, you were amazing," I compliment them, making Poca's tail wag, Oryn's ears twitch with happiness and Merri's entire body wriggle.

She launches herself into the air and then lands on my shoulder, making herself the perfect size to curl around my neck, her head on one shoulder and her tail draping down the

front of the other one. Her weight barely registers, and yet her warmth is comforting. We all head away from the massacre that we all just participated in, and I pull Xerxes out from my pocket.

“Is it over?” he questions. “I was starting to think that it might’ve been better to see what was going on because it sounded fucking terrifying, and quite frankly, my imagination was coming up with all sorts of scenarios.”

I smile but shake my head, “Trust me, you were better off not seeing.”

There’s a pause before Xerxes replies with some amusement in his tone, “You know you terrify me, and I say that as someone who has been alive for thousands of years and known many supernaturals in that time.”

“You know what? I’m strangely complimented by that,” I reply with a smile and then add, “But to answer your question, yes, I am done for now. If any more Helliers show up, I’ll make sure that I put you back in my pocket.”

“Deal,” he replies, “I can live with that.”

“We need to get to Hades vault and find the key fragment, I don’t suppose that you have a map that can lead us there?” I ask, as I carry on walking back toward the castle, I actually hadn’t realised how far out we had gotten.

“Erm, I didn’t see one when the information first showed up, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there; it just means that I wasn’t meant to find it the first time. I’ll have a look; give me a moment, please.”

“Take your time,” I reply.

I keep my senses on high alert. That itch that was urging me to end the princes has gone, and my intuition has calmed, which means I’m not supposed to kill Azreal; I have to admit that I’m kind of relieved about that. Poor guy has been through enough in his lifetime; of course, that doesn’t mean that I won’t kill him if he attacks me. If it comes down to a case of his life or mine, then I will always choose mine, but the fact that my intuition is no longer screaming at me lets me know

that he is not a threat to me or the Underworld and is not someone that needs to be taken out.

“Just as I suspected, I’ve found the map,” Xerxes states, “oh, that’s interesting. It needs you to say a trigger word.”

“Erm, okay, sure. What is it?” he tells me the word, and I somewhat cautiously repeat it, hoping that I’m not about to trigger something unwanted and dangerous.

I breathe a sigh of relief as a string of gold-coloured magic streams from Xerxes’ pages.

“I’m guessing that’s what you have to follow, and it will lead you to Hades vault.” He explains.

“Sounds good to me,” I reply as I jog to follow it so that we don’t have to hang around here any longer than is truly necessary, “I don’t suppose you know if there are any spells or traps that are guarding the vault?”

Xerxes hums, and I’m guessing that he’s searching his pages to see if there’s any information within them that can help me.

After a moment of me silently following the magic that’s leading to Hades’ vault, Xerxes says, “All I can find is that it has protection spells on it.”

I wait for a moment to see if he has any more information to give me, and when he doesn’t say anything, I ask, “Is that it?”

Xerxes’s voice is apologetic as he replies, “Yes, that’s all there is.”

Chapter Sixteen

Farren

“**W**ow, okay, well, that’s super fucking helpful,” I reply.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about. I saw how easily you pulled the spells apart that were locking your cell; you barely broke a sweat.”

I shrug, “While that’s true, I had just come out of the Void, so I actually have no idea if I still have enough power to pull apart any spells that are on Hades’s vault, especially since I’ve taken on four princes.”

“Oh, I hadn’t even thought of that,” Xerxes replies, “let’s get there and find out what we’re dealing with first; if you can’t get through the spells, then we’ll just come back again later. We’ll know exactly where we need to go, and when you get back to the guys, you can all make a plan on how to get in, or better yet, since you now know that Grey is Hades, you can just come back with him and get him to open it for you.”

“I keep forgetting that. It’s strange, and yet it also makes a lot of sense,” I muse.

“We should probably be careful what we say in these halls. We have no idea if anyone is listening; after all, you said there were five princes,” Xerxes reminds me.

“Yes, Azreal, isn’t an issue though, or he hasn’t been this far,” I reply, and then add in agreement, “but you are right, we should be more careful just in case.”

From that point on, we all move silently through the castle; I need to concentrate anyway, just in case something decides to come out of the woodwork and attack us.

“This has to be the most tedious walk through a castle I have ever taken,” I complain.

I’m starting to feel some of the wounds that have been inflicted on me while I’ve been fighting. None of them are bad enough that they’re going to slow me down, but they are irritating me. The castle décor suddenly changes from stone walls and the bare minimum in décor to plush carpeting and even more ornate and brightly coloured tapestries adorn the walls. There’s also a thick layer of dust that covers everything, and I mean thick. It’s weird; there’s almost a definite line where the castle is clean, and then boom, two-inch thick layers of dust cover everything.

A sound from my right has me tensing and my eyes darting to the edge of the hallway, and the floor-to-ceiling tapestry that moves just as my eyes land on it. I stay silent, not particularly sensing a threat but knowing that there is definitely someone behind the tapestry. Sure enough, after a minute of me and my creatures staying extremely still, a young face peers around the edge. She can’t be older than fourteen, and she looks utterly terrified when she sees me, the varying shades of blue feathers on her head in replacement of hair ruffle in agitation.

She’s the first person I’ve seen that isn’t a Hellier, or prince and I can only assume that she works here in the castle, and I realise that I might be able to get some information from her.

“It’s okay. We aren’t going to hurt you,” I tell her in the softest voice I can manage. I’m trying to appear unthreatening and not scare her, but I am very aware that I’m covered in both fresh and dried blood, various wounds that I’m sure are visible, and I’ve received on my journey through the castle.

She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t retreat either, so I’m taking that as a good sign—unless she’s frozen in fear. I’ve heard that for some people, instead of having the fight-or-flight response in times of danger, they actually have the third option that not many people know about and they freeze instead.

“Are you the only one here?” I ask, grateful that my creatures are keeping themselves in the shadows and not

moving. I have a feeling that they might freak her out. Especially since they aren't native Underworld creatures. Of course, a talking book might freak her out too so I'm really glad that Xerxes decides to be quiet as well.

She steps out from behind the tapestry by the tiniest amount, and I notice her hands clench at her sides. I stay really still, not wanting to spook her.

She shakes her head, "No, there are more of us. Not many, not anymore. They're hidden in the castle, the princes were on the warpath, and we have all learned to stay far out of the way."

"Oh?" I reply curiously, hoping that it prompts her to explain some more.

Sure enough, she moves even further out from behind the tapestry but makes sure that she is staying close to the wall.

She nods, "Yes. Lots of those who were here are now dead, killed in one of the princes' fits of rage or simply because they're bored. The lucky ones have escaped, and the rest of us are just staying out of the way as much as possible. I don't think any of the people who work here now are here willingly; all are either taken from the villages by force or here under threat of all sorts of things. Even the generals don't come here anymore unless they have to."

It seems she's had a lot to say for a long time, and now that someone has taken the time to ask her, she wants to get it all out as quickly as possible. I'm certainly not going to stop her; she's giving me important information.

I raise my eyebrow, "How did the princes know what was going on with the Helliers then?"

"They didn't; the commanders haven't sent any new Helliers here for a very long time. That's why there aren't many here. They've died or been killed off. The princes still order the commanders to do terrible things with their armies to ensure that the Underworlders stay in line and accept their rule, although begrudgingly. From what we can tell, they try to

keep the Helliers as far away from the princes and their tyrannies as possible.”

I frown, “So, why haven’t they done anything about it?”

“No one is strong enough, even with an army. The princes have a lot of power at their disposal, and there are people that do agree with the way that they’re running the Underworld,” she explains and then lowers her voice, “there are those that are so desperate to leave that they’re willing to go to extreme lengths to do it. I know that they gained a following in the spirit side of the Underworld. There are many humans, creatures, and supernaturals from all over the many realms that want to go back.”

“Desperation is a dangerous thing,” I mutter, concern pushing against my mind.

This is really bad; even the souls that were human in their lives and have no magical qualities have a power to them simply because they’re souls; if they went back, they could cause a lot of issues. They cannot go back to their old lives; it’s not the natural order of things, and it quickly warps and distorts the souls. It can cause massive issues, huge mass murder type issues. It is almost impossible to stop them because of the power they can gain.

In other words, the dead need to stay dead. Apart from those souls that believed in reincarnation in their lives, they remain until anyone they knew has moved on and then get their memories wiped and sent back into a new body with little or no memories of their previous lives. There are many complicated facets to the Underworld; after all, this is where all of the souls from all of the realms and all of the religions come when they die, their beliefs in life are honoured in death.

I’ve gotten off track; the short of it is that the dead can’t go back to their lives without causing catastrophic consequences that are not even worth thinking about.

“It is, you need to be careful.” Her warning surprises me as she looks down the hallway nervously, “from the looks of you, I’m going to assume that you are the reason that the princes went into high alert. They’ll be able to catch you if you stay in

one place for too long, and I fear that we've already hit that point."

She seems like she's got more to say, but the panic that is flooding her eyes makes me want to interrupt her so she doesn't have to worry anymore, "The princes are dead; I killed them."

Her mouth drops open as she simply stares at me in what can only be described as absolute shock; I wait while she processes what I just said and that I'm not joking.

After a few moments she asks, "You killed the princes?" I nod, and she gulps, but asks again, "All of them?"

I pull a face, "I killed all of them except for Azreal. He hasn't shown up, and I didn't see him while I was in the cells."

The open expression she is wearing fills with guarded caution again as she edges back toward the tapestry. I'd be offended by her reaction and her obvious fear of me, but I understand it. I shouldn't have been able to kill them, in fact, I'm not entirely sure that I did, but I do know that even if their bodies reanimate, they'll be useless without their heads, and even demi gods can't regrow heads. I try not to let it affect me; I should be used to the look she's giving me; it's been given to me many times over the years when someone has seen what I'm capable of. It usually comes from those that I'm saving, which is a real kick in the teeth. With time, it's stung less, but it still stings more than I'd like to admit.

"No one knows what happened to Azreal," she replies, her voice nervous, but she's still talking to me, which I'm grateful for.

"There haven't been any rumours or anything going around the staff?" I ask. I know how big castles like this work, there is always a rumour going around, some obviously fake but some of the best intel I've gotten has been from the staff in the houses of my targets.

She shakes her head quickly, "No, he always steered clear of the other princes; as much as he could, he was polite and kind to us and tried to keep his brothers in line whenever he

could; he saved many of us from death. So we all noticed when he disappeared. It was around that time that the commanders stopped being willing to come to the castle and engage with the princes face-to-face. Azreal was the only one that they would deal with; when he was suddenly unavailable without any explanation, they refused to engage with any of the others. It really pissed them off.” She finishes her explanation with a smile.

“He’s dead then,” I reply, my mind going a mile a minute, causing me to forget to censor my words and make them less blunt. Surprisingly, she doesn’t seem offended at all.

“Yes, that is what everyone agrees,” she replies.

I nod, then clear my throat, smiling as warmly as I can and hoping that I don’t look constipated, “Gather all of those still alive and tell them to get out of here and go home. There’s no need for you to stay. The princes are gone, and from what you’ve told me, none of you are here willingly.”

Her eyes widen, “We can go home? Really?”

My smile widens, and I nod, “Really, you can go home. All of you can.”

Her smile becomes blinding, and she quickly turns around, darting behind the tapestry and to what I’m assuming is a hidden door to allow the staff to move around unseen. The smile is still on my face as hers pops back out.

“You shouldn’t head into that half of the castle. There’s a reason why it’s not been cleaned in the many years that Hades has been missing.”

“Care to share?” I ask. Having to admit to myself that the very definitive line of clean and dirty had really piqued my interest.

“I wasn’t here then, but those that were passed down the warnings before they were killed. That wing leads to Hades’ private quarters and throne room. Anyone that has gone in there hasn’t come back out; no one knows for certain what happens to them, but their pain-filled screams somehow manage to echo around all corners of the castle.” She gulps as

all colour that was in her cheeks drains away, “Something guards that side of the castle. Once the princes realised that, they sent Helliers in to go and kill whatever it is but none of them ever returned. They lost a lot of Helliers that way. They also used it as punishment for people that pissed them off, visitors and staff.”

“Well, fuck.” I reply.

“Pretty much,” she smirks, showing a level of humour that I’m surprised she still has considering the shit she must have been through.

I return her smile, “Thank you for warning me. Unfortunately, I have to go in there. Make sure that you get everyone out, and they know that they can head home. The bodies of the princes are scattered around the castle and on the grounds if they need proof that they are actually dead. I know I would.”

She nods, “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

I dip my head once in acknowledgment of her words, but I’ve never been very good at handling gratitude, especially in this situation, since I killed them in revenge. The fact that it has saved these people is a massive bonus, but the reasons at first were mostly selfish.

She seems to understand that I don’t know how to reply because she smiles once more and then does this cute little wave before she disappears again, and I hear the soft snick of a door closing.

“Well, that was certainly an interesting conversation,” Xerxes says from my hand, and I flatten my palm out again so he can rest on it properly.

“I’ll fucking say, she threw a lot of information at me that I’m going to have to pull apart later and tell Grey, especially the thing about the princes having a following with the souls. I assume that they were managing to get some Underworlders over to the Fae realm at least because of the Underworlder Wraiths that we came across.”

“Yes, that’s certainly one of the biggest things that need to be addressed, but the more immediate worry for me is that we need to head through the doors and into the side of the castle that has probably taken hundreds of lives.”

I can’t help but chuckle, “Yeah, that may be a concern, but we need the key fragment. It’s not like we have much choice.”

“We could come back later? You know, bring the guys and Grey, the person who can most likely control the thing that wants to kill us?” he suggests.

“I’m not saying that you’re wrong and that your idea wouldn’t be an excellent idea, but something is telling me that I need to get it sooner rather than later.”

Xerxes sighs heavily, “I had a feeling that you were going to say that.”

His response makes my smile widen, “Don’t worry, we’ve got Poca, Meri, and Oryn with us, and I’m pretty handy with a sword. We should be able to handle whatever is in there. Will the magic guide still work if you go back in my pocket?”

His voice is filled with relief as he replies, “Yes, it should do. Thank you. I’d much rather hear it from somewhere safe than get dropped in the middle of a fight and then get eaten because that would be just my luck. I’ve survived wars, warlords, crazy maniacal dragons, deranged Fae, and trigger-happy gods only to die by being eaten by some unnamed creature.”

“Erm, X, sweetie, you’re rambling,” I interrupt when it doesn’t sound like he’s going to stop any time soon. Poca lets out this sound that sounds suspiciously like a chuckle, and I glance behind me to see all of them with varying looks of amusement on their faces; they’re clearly finding this as funny as I am.

“Shit, I am, aren’t I?” he asks and then continues before I have a chance to reply to him, “I do that when I’m reaching the end of my nerves, and actually, I think I’ve done really well to hold onto my nerves for this long I mean I really like you and you’ve been so kind to me even though I nearly killed

one of your mates and I didn't deserve for you to spare me, but I don't want to lose you, and I had to see them hurt you and I couldn't do anything, and I thought you were going to die and then you exploded with power and you are fine and went on a massive rampage that sounded terrifying and now you're faced with even more danger and instead of running away like most people would you're just ready to dive straight in with barely any fear and quite frankly you scare me but your also one of my best friends, and I know that's kind of weird, but shit."

By the time he's finished, my eyebrows are in my hairline.

"Wow, that was one hell of an info dump. We're good, I'm okay. We've been through enough that I consider you one of my closest friends ever, and that says a lot because I spent a long time without friends. I promise that when we're back in the Shadowlands, you can go to your library and have nothing but comfort and peace for as long as you need it."

Chapter Seventeen

Farren

“**T**hank you,” he replies, “and sorry for the ramblings.”

“I get it,” I reply, and then add excitedly, “let’s do this.”

As I put him in my pocket, I swear that he starts muttering about crazy women, but I can’t quite make out his words, even so they make my smile widen. Once he’s safe, I glance over at my creatures as I twirl my sword, and my smile turns vicious.

“Are you guys ready to do this?” I ask, the excitement unmistakable in my voice as they all yip or chirp in agreement, all of them as eager as I am, “Good, let’s go.”

I take a deep breath and then step further into the unclean side of the hallway, heading toward the door that the string of magic is leading me to. To be honest, it makes a lot of sense that Hades’ vault is in Hades’ private quarters, I mean if I had lots of powerful and unique artefacts you bet you bet your ass I’d be keeping them as close to me as possible. Gathering my magic around me so it’s ready to strike at a moment’s notice, I push through the grimy door.

The first thing that hits me is the smell; it’s pungent and not pleasant in the slightest. I know the smell better than I’d like to; it’s the smell of rotting corpses. The door is harder to push open than it should be, and I have a horrible feeling that I know why. Sure enough, when I’ve opened it enough to squeeze me and my creatures through, my theory is proven correct.

Bodies are piled behind the enormous double doors and in the immediate area surrounding them. All of them are in varying stages of decomposition, all of them wearing different

styles of clothing. Some are obviously staff members wearing simple styles left in rags over bones. Some are clearly the Helliers, their weapons still clutched in their half-rotten hands; some are dressed in fine silks with jewellery still draped on them, and I'd be willing to bet that these were once important Underworlders that didn't bow to the prince's demands like they wanted them too so the prince disposed of them.

Of course, there are also bodies of shifted creatures, and I have no idea who they were originally. What is especially concerning is that mixed within these creatures are ones that are not weak by any standards, ones that I know are hard to kill, and yet here they are, dead, most of them missing limbs and all with their final expressions frozen in fear. Or at least those that still have faces are still frozen in fear; most of them are too decomposed to make out facial expressions.

From the looks of all their positions, the majority of them were either shoved through the door and killed immediately or killed while they were trying to get back out of the door; that's the only reasonable explanation for why there's such a big pile up behind the door. The light is still glowing softly and heading further down the vast, darkened corridor in front of me. I suppose it was too much to hope that the vault was in one of the rooms directly behind the door.

The magic is giving off just enough light to see in front of me but not much else, and I briefly toy with the idea of throwing up a brighter magic light of my own. The magic is going to attract whatever creatures that stalk these hallways anyway, so I may as well. Just as I'm about to cast it though, doubt makes me pause, in this kind of situation I think it's best not to ignore any niggling feelings that I have, and because of this I hold off from launching my magic light, and instead grip my swords tighter.

Without any words needed, all of us head forward, leaving the macabre pile of bodies behind us as we venture further down the long hallway. While staying alert, I have to admit that I am incredibly curious to see if I can recognise any part of Grey in this part of the castle. I probably shouldn't go looking for anything though considering there's something that

stalks these hallways that clearly likes to munch on people and judging from the freshest corpse in the pile hasn't been fed for a long time.

As I move forward, my eyes adjust to the darkness easily, and it's evident that the creature has been fed exceptionally well over the years; more bodies, mainly of Helliers, line the hallways although there aren't nearly as many as there were piled against the door and most of these are piles of bones, with crushed skulls and covered in rags that were once clothes.

Thanks to the layers of dust that coat everything, my footfalls are muffled, although I'm almost certain that the creature that uses this area of the castle as its personal buffet is already aware of my presence here, and if by some miracle, it's not, it will be soon.

With this in mind I pick up my pace as much as I deem able to do quietly. Fortunately, I'm used to needing to move quickly and quietly, which means that while most people would probably be only able to move at a fast walk, I can run fairly swiftly. I don't even need to look back to know that my creatures are keeping pace with me easily; I can sense them. Which is definitely a new development; I can tell exactly where each of them is.

Meri moves from behind me to scout ahead and seeing his now small form fly up in the air gives me an idea, the hallway has a lot of beams and things high up on the walls that would make travelling up there easy enough. It would also keep me out of the reach of any creatures that are stalking the hallways. Of course that would only be an advantage if the creature is bound to walking on the ground and can't get up high. I decide that if something approaches me on the ground, then I'll go up to avoid it and start to map the beams and things that I can use to travel up high so that I can head up as quickly as possible.

Meri seems to sense somehow that I'm now worried about being attacked from above because he flies higher and grows in size. He makes a single chirping noise, and Oryn replies in a similar way, launching himself higher into the air with his leathery wings and flying at the same height that Meri was before. Poca stays behind me, and I instinctively know that

he's guarding my back and making sure that nothing sneaks up on us from behind.

They are an amazing team, and I wish I had them all with me for those times when I had to do assassinations or rescues that I then disguised as kills. Not only would I have been a lot less lonely, but I could have gotten out of a lot more situations with fewer injuries if I had them.

A sound to my left has my senses perk up, and all of the creatures become tense, although none of them seem to be overly worried; it's more like they're cautious. I almost wonder if they know what the creature is. I keep moving forward as I allow my eyes to dart to the left, and I see a huge dark shape running through the rooms that I'm running past; it's keeping pace with me and moving through the walls between the rooms with no effort at all.

It's fucking huge, but it isn't attacking yet.

Motion on my other side draws my attention and I realise that Poca has tripled in size, and that is what is hopefully keeping the other dark creature away. I can't even work out the vague shape of the creature; it's moving so quickly that it's just a giant blur of darker shadows. I'm relatively sure that the only reason that I'm able to tell that it's there is because of the Void and how long I've dealt with the wispy shapes in the dark depths of it.

It's obvious to see why the supes that came in here either willingly or unwillingly didn't stand a chance against this thing. It's really hard to fight something that you can't fucking see, even more so when it can travel through solid objects with ease and knows this half of the castle better than anyone because it's not only its hunting grounds but its home as well.

Since it's obviously aware that I'm here, I give up on trying to be quiet and instead focus on speed. I chase the magic string, and although the creature keeps pace with me still, increasing its own speed to match mine, it doesn't attack. I have no idea if it's waiting for something, maybe a hunting partner, or if my own creatures that surround me are a big enough threat together that they're stopping it from attacking

or at least making it pause. Whatever the reason is, I'm going to take advantage of it for as long as I can.

Finally, after many twists and turns, the magic string seems to go through a set of double doors that are ornately carved and dotted with gems that glitter even now. I don't think that this is the vault. I mean, it would be pretty stupid to make the vault so obvious, even if it's got an insane amount of spells on it to guard it and stop people from getting into it by promising grizzly and pain-filled deaths. I mean, that would be incredibly arrogant of Hades, and unless the Grey that I know is an entirely different person, then I don't see him doing that.

I only have a brief moment to wonder if this ornately carved door has spells on it that I should be aware of because in the next second I'm careening through the door anyway, because of course I fucking tripped on something. Landing on the gold-veined marble floor in a painful heap, I roll back to standing and pause, gathering my bearings. I somehow managed to turn myself around in the room when I fell, and I'm facing the door that I just came through, the door that is now wide open. Pacing outside of the room is the shadow creature, and even now that it's so much closer, I can't make out its shape or what it is. It's just a mass of darker black that is pacing outside of the door.

"Holy shit, it can't get in here," I mutter out loud without meaning to. The realisation was just a shock and it came out.

My words clearly affect it though and it stops and lets out a bone shaking roar, before I can even think about reacting, all of my animals growl and roar together the sound so immense and powerful that it shakes the room, and makes goosebumps rise over my entire body.

Holy fuck.

The creature doesn't run away or pause but does stop roaring at me and instead goes back to its pacing. I have no idea how we're going to get back out of here, but I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. I'm sure Hades has more than one exit out of here. Dusting myself off, I pick my swords up since I dropped them when I went ass over tit and take a

look around. The glowing string of magic leads straight across the vast room and through the wall. Because of its light, I can see the sheer size of the room that I'm standing in and that there's some kind of raised platform to the left where the glowing string disappears.

The room is so big though, and the light of the magic is not that bright, so I can't make out much else, and since the creature is still pacing outside of the door and apparently can't seem to get in here, I allow my curiosity to get the best of me and using my magic make a huge ball of glowing light, throwing it high up into the air and ordering it to stay put.

"Wow," I can't help but say aloud again.

The ceiling is domed and decorated in mosaics that depict various times throughout history, from what I can guess, is pretty much the beginning of everything. There are wars mixed in with serene scenes of waterfalls and woodlands, creatures that look both cute and terrifying, there are so many different creatures from all the realms that I could spend hours looking up and still not see everything. It's incredible, and it's only a small nudge from Oryn that reminds me to get back on track. We finally have a key fragment to find, and we need to get out of this place. I have no idea if the fact that the creature can't get in here is only a temporary fix, and any minute now, he's going to come racing in here and tear me to pieces.

However, I can't resist having a quick glance around at the rest of the room as I follow the magic string slower than I probably should. It turns out I should've probably looked down before I looked up. The floor is littered with bodies, dried blood covering almost every surface. The sight is enough to make me pause. There was clearly a battle here. One that happened a long time ago, none of the bodies are fresh; all of them are nothing more than just bones. I'm incredibly grateful that I didn't accidentally stand on any of them and that I decided to light this place up.

A noise from the door catches my attention, and when I turn around, I'm shocked to see two glowing green eyes staring at me from an impossible height. It suddenly occurs to me that the creature may have been guarding this room and the

fallen in here. I know that he's likely guarding the vault and whatever else Hades has hidden in here too but I get the overwhelming urge to say something to him.

I bow my head, "I am sorry. I promise you that I mean them no harm, and I will do my utmost to respect them as I move through the room."

It tilts its head, and the only reason I know that is because its eyes move. The mass seems to nod, and I simply turn back around; I have no idea if that was the right thing to do or not, but he didn't roar at me again, and he's no longer pacing, just watching. I'm going to take that as a good sign, but it's not like I'm going to trust him not to eat me if he gets the chance.

I slowly move forward, following the magic and being extremely careful that I don't stand on anyone. As my eyes drift to where the magic disappears through the wall, I realise that the platform that was barely visible before is actually a dias where a massive throne sits. There are two large slices in the ornately carved back that confuse the shit out of me until I remember that Hades has wings, and that must be so that he can sit comfortably.

Compared to the opulence of the rest of the room, and actually, even the castle itself, while huge, the throne is much simpler in its design, much more modest although still exquisitely made. For the first time since walking these halls I find something that reminds me of the Hades I know, my Grey. Something settles inside me, something that I should probably look closer at, but I don't want to right now.

I can't help moving up the steps and approaching the throne; something about it draws me to it, and when I see the blood splattered across it, I have to push down the irrational fear that starts to rise. He's okay, well he was when I last saw him.

Nope, that line of thinking needs to stop right now, or I'll start to panic, and that's not going to help anyone. It's strange, but even in this room, surrounded by the dead, being up here on this platform and looking over it all just seems very lonely. When I first met Grey, he struck me as extremely lonely, but I

just put it down to being a prisoner. I mean he'd been there for a long time before I showed up and Azreal managed to get Hades moved so his cell was near mine.

Maybe it was more than that though, perhaps he had been lonely for a long time before he became a prisoner. I imagine that being the god of the Underworld and all of the responsibilities that it brings would be pretty lonely. As far as I know, there aren't any other gods that reside down here, but then again, I know that the Underworld caters to those of all religions, so would that mean that those gods exist? If they did, then why aren't they down here, too? Why is it left only to Hades? I find myself getting indignant and pissed off on Hades' behalf for something that may actually not be an issue and I realise that I need to let it go for now and deal with it when I can ask the man himself.

"I wonder what happened here. I wonder if this was where those prince fucks managed to capture Hades?" I ask, no one in particular since the creatures can't answer me, and the beast at the door won't even if he could.

Chapter Eighteen

Farren

It seems like those words trigger something because the world goes black, and I find myself slumping into Hades' throne; my last thought before I pass out entirely is that I seriously hope it's not cursed and only his delicious ass can sit here, or I'll die a horrible death.

For a brief moment, I hope that I'm back in my dream world, and H is about to appear but those hopes are dashed as I realise that I'm in the throne room except it's not scattered with bodies. I realise that I must be witnessing what happened to all of the people here. I'm suddenly thrown up into the air, and I watch from above as the scene unfolds.

For the moment, all of the Helliers are standing silently, waiting for the door to open; I'm assuming that they've been tipped off or something, and my eyes travel the room, searching for Hades. They quickly find the throne, and I'm kind of surprised to see that it's empty. Instead, I spot a hulking supe with giant magnificent wings standing right at the front, right in front of the doors and I have no idea how I missed him in the first place. He looks like Grey, but more, if that's possible; his features are sharper, what I can see of his eyes are brighter, the sparks in them literal flames, and he's huge, not just because of his wingspan but because of his height and mass too.

He's fucking magnificent and even hotter than when he's in glamour. I actually didn't think that it was possible. The power that he's kicking off is truly immense, it's so vast that I'm actually struggling to comprehend just how powerful he is and it's confusing me even more, but I guess that's why I've been

pulled into this vision, to understand how Hades was subdued and taken by the princes.

Refocusing back on the scene beneath me, I smile; of course, he's in the front; he would never allow people to put themselves in danger for him, and I bet he hates that there are people in here and in harm's way as it is.

"The doors are warded, but stay alert; there is still a chance that they could get through," Hades warns them all.

The Helliers stay silent as the whole place seems to hold their breath and wait. Suddenly, there's a giant explosion that rocks the room. Somehow all of the Helliers and Hades manage to stay upright as the doors that were shut moments before shatter into thousands of tiny pieces. Hundreds of Helliers led by the princes charge straight through the doors, and the battle commences below.

Somehow, over the sounds of the battle I manage to hear Hades mutter, "That's impossible, they shouldn't have been able to take my wards down that easily."

I'm assuming that I can hear it because it's something that I need to hear, or at least whoever is giving me this vision wants me to know it. The battle is fierce and bloody, and I can see the betrayal on Hades' Helliers faces as they fight those who followed the princes in, those who they have no doubt fought beside before they switched to the princes side. This is the past, and I've seen how the future turned out for those who followed the princes; only a few of them still survive today, and if the staff member is to be believed, then the commanders of the armies are now keeping the Helliers far away from the princes. It makes me wonder if any of those commanders initially followed the Princes and how quickly they realised that they made a mistake.

As I continue to watch, I start to get twitchy. I don't want to be floating up here simply watching; I want to be down there, helping them fight, even though logically, I know that even if I could do something now, it wouldn't make any difference to the outcome that is set in stone. The battle lasts for a long time as

Hades' Helliers protect him fiercely, and the princes slowly push forward edging toward him.

Watching Hades fight is amazing; he's deadly and precise, never loses focus, and doesn't even seem to be running out of steam as he mercilessly kills his attackers, helping out his own men at the same time. He worries not only about himself but also about the people fighting for him, and I have to admit that it's nice to see that Grey has always been this way.

The battle is raging around him still but he suddenly stops, freezing in place, I wait for him to move as the princes surround him from all sides and I realise that he's stuck. They've somehow managed to freeze him. Now, I know enough about the princes and their levels of power that I know that they aren't capable of doing that, not when Hades' power is so obviously immense, it fills this room, and yet the princes who are like a blip on my radar in comparison, are able to keep him frozen?

It doesn't make sense.

I watch in horror as the princes power all attacks Hades at once, violently and viciously, and I suddenly understand that they're weakening him, which means there's a second part of the spell. They shouldn't have any power left; hell, they shouldn't have the power that they currently have. They have to be getting help from someone, but the only people strong enough to help the princes take down a god is another god, and that's a terrifying concept.

Especially since whoever the god may be wants to keep his identity hidden and is using other people to attack Hades. I hate enemies that come at you from behind other people. They make you think that you've defeated your enemy, and then boom along comes another one that's like, ha, it was me all along. It's fucking frustrating.

I can't watch what they're doing to Hades; it's making rage burn brightly through my veins, and the fact I can't help and know that he's okay in the present isn't actually making me feel any better, so instead, I start to study the room, hoping that I can find someone who is acting differently from the others I

figure if there's someone who's not fighting, or fighting in a really repetitive way or something like that, it means that they could be helping the princes. Of course, the god helping the princes could not be here at all and helping them from afar instead, and then all I'm achieving by searching the room is not witnessing the princes torturing Hades. To be honest, I don't mind that.

I have to have been pulled into this for more than just seeing that I'm right and they did have help; surely I've been pulled in to see exactly who helped them so that I can warn Hades because gods don't just die, and if he wanted Hades destroyed before then he's going to want that still. He's still a threat, and I don't like that.

The trouble is that I can't see anything close up. I can just see the room as a whole. Still, I try to do my best and thoroughly scour the room looking for anything out of place. I must make ten passes over the room before something catches my eye. I've looked past it several times and missed it, and to be honest, I could just be hoping to see something now, but off to the side, at the edge of the room near one of the ornate pillars, is a darker swarth of shadows, as I said it could be nothing but if I could just get a closer look then I'd know for sure.

I'm suddenly catapulted across the room and find myself staring into the thickened shadows. Sure enough, there's a hooded figure there, but unfortunately, I can't see anything else apart from his lips, and it is a male; no female has lips like that. It's enough to see that he's muttering a spell as he's looking in Hades and the Princes' direction. I can't make out the words well enough to know what he's saying but I'm pretty sure that I can guess.

The power around the god and in the room grows, reaching a new height, and I watch in morbid fascination as he lifts his arms, his robe falling back from his hands and exposing bronzed skin and a two-inch scar on his left hand by his thumb. I file that information away for later and continue watching, adamant that I won't miss anything important. The god claps his hands, a crackle of power rushing out of him and

straight toward a weak Hades; as soon as the power connects, Hades drops to the floor, and Yeal rushes forward, clipping a set of engraved manacles onto him as they all then move forward and lift him up dragging him from the room. The shadowed figure moves within the shadows after them, keeping himself cloaked. As those few Helliers that are still alive try to follow the princes out to save Hades, I watch the shadowed figure stop at the door leading out of the room and clap, sealing the room and slowly removing the air from it, the smile on his face is sharp, and it's clear that he is genuinely finding joy in watching these Helliers from both sides slowly die.

Fucking sick bastard.

I need to see where they're taking Hades; I know that there's more to this, and I want to see who the shadowed god is. I want to be able to give Grey a name so he knows exactly who he needs to go after.

Thankfully whoever is in control of this vision must want me to see more to because within a blink of an eye, I find myself in an office of sorts. All of the princes are present, including Azreal, so he's not innocent in all of this, although his expression is not one of triumph like the others; it's indifference. Standing in front of all of them is the god who is still shrouded in shadows, and at this point, I don't know whether it's because that's how it happened or whether I'm not allowed to identify him, which would be really annoying.

I watch as he produces five bracelets, each one with a glowing deep blue stone speckled with gold and red sparkles; he hands one to each of the princes.

"You need to wear these at all times." He says, and it surprises me that each of them puts the bracelets on their right wrist with no protest or argument. The god then continues to explain, "The gems are linked to Hades; they will keep his power drained enough to keep him controllable, and they will funnel his magic to all of you. Now, before any of you get greedy, your bracelets are tuned to you specifically, so any thoughts of stealing your brothers and getting an even bigger boost of power will do you no good. You'd simply be giving power back to Hades."

“If we take them off, then that means that he will get his magic back? Or at least a part of it,” Hiromu asks.

“Yes. It’s not the only thing, though. The stones are pretty unbreakable, but on the off chance that they do break, the bond that’s funnelling magic from Hades to the five of you will be broken, and Hades will get his magic back. However, all of them need to be broken in order for Hades to get all of his magic back. All five of the stones will need to be broken, and it’s hard to break them. There is a small chance that Hades could break the connection, and if that happens, the stones will shatter.”

“So basically, broken stones mean bad,” Azreal says.

“Yes, in layman’s terms,” the god replies, not sounding very amused at all. His voice is stern, and yet, for some reason, I feel like it’s being distorted and isn’t actually his voice. He continues to explain, “Since he is now weak, his power funnelling to you, it has allowed me to put a glamour on him, which means that he won’t be able to be recognised by anyone else, and since all of those that were witnesses today are now dead, that means that no one will know that you were instrumental in bringing them down, it’s up to you to decide how to play that. The glamour will stay on him for as long as the stones last.”

That’s the last thing that he says, and then he just disappears. There’s no other words said, no more explanations, nothing of the sort; he’s just gone, and I still don’t know who the fuck he is. It seems that’s all that I need to witness, though, because I can feel myself being pulled, or at least that’s what I thought was happening, but instead, I’m pulled into another vision.

Fucking hell, exactly how much do I need to see.

This one is just a quick vision; I watch as Azreal stares at the bracelet on his wrist as he speaks to an elderly gentleman dressed like one of the staff and obviously, someone that Azreal trusts and is fond of.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this, Hades wasn’t supposed to be tortured, I never wanted that. They didn’t tell me that’s

what they were planning, and then it was too late. I've had no choice but to go along with it."

"I know, Az," the elderly staff man replies kindly.

"Well, no amount of reasoning is convincing them to change what they're doing. Nothing I do or say is showing them the damage that they are doing to the Underworld. They're destroying it. All that was once beautiful is now being destroyed, and all they want to do is release the souls that should never leave; they want to wage a war that will destroy realm after realm; they want to rule all the realms and, in the process, they'll destroy everything that is good and beautiful. The realms need balance, all of them. The Underworld provides the ultimate balance; what the princes have done to this realm has had a knock-on effect that has affected all of the realms, even if they aren't aware that it happened. It's been decades. There's only one thing that I can do that may be able to help just the tiniest amount; there's only one person who has hope of restoring the balance, and he's down in the cells. I tried to help his loneliness and put him near Farren like I was instructed to do. I don't think it's enough; he's so weak."

Surprise shoots through me when I hear my name.

"What are you going to do?" the old man asks.

"This."

I watch in awe as he takes the bracelet off severing the connection to Hades, he lays it on the stone hearth of the fireplace and then blasts all of his power at it. I realise that he's trying to break it, he's trying to give Hades a fighting chance. His magic doesn't crack it though. He needs help; under normal circumstances, I wouldn't be able to do anything, but for some reason, my instincts compel me to move behind him.

Following pure instinct, I place my hand on his shoulder and lean in closer so I can say into his ear, "Try again."

He tenses under my hand, but when he glances over his shoulder at me, he doesn't look shocked or even acknowledge that I'm there.

“Do as she says,” the old man tells him, his eyes on me and smiling, “she can help.”

I want to question everything, but there is no time; I can feel a sense of urgency, and I can't ask those questions.

Azreal nods, and without any questions, which means he's far less curious than I am, he faces the bracelet again. I let my magic flow through him as soon as he starts to unleash his on the gemstone.

“Wow,” I hear him mutter as the power of the magic rushes through him.

Our combined magic only touches the stone for a few seconds before it turns to dust, completely destroyed. As soon as it breaks, I pull my hand away from his shoulder, severing the connection. The door to the room smashes open as the other princes rush in, they kill the old man within seconds causing Azreal bellow in pain as he sees his friend fall to the floor.

They surround Azreal.

“What have you done?” Dagon screams.

“What was right!” Azreal screams back, his shoulders back and his voice filled with conviction.

“You betrayed us,” Hiromu replies.

There are no more words as they all close in around Azreal; they attack him. I can tell it's personal because they don't start by using their magic; instead, they use their fists, brutally attacking their own brother. Azreal manages to hold his own for a short amount of time before he is quickly overwhelmed. They are merciless, and I am sure that they are going to kill him. I wish I could help him, but it seems like my interference in this vision was limited to a one-time deal, and nothing that I do now is making any difference to the reality.

Before I see what happens, although I'm pretty sure that I know the outcome, I am pulled out of my vision and back to the present. Although I learned a lot, I still don't know officially what happened to Azreal.

Chapter Nineteen

Farren

It turns out that when I was pulled into the vision, my body landed somewhat awkwardly on Hades' throne. I have no idea how long I've been out, but I do know that it's been long enough that I'm stiff. My head fills woozy as fuck, and I take a few moments to get my bearings before I move.

"Ow," I hiss as the pain in my hand finally registers, and I realise that when I fell I must have sliced it on something on the throne.

It doesn't look too deep, but it must have been deeper if it's still healing now. It buzzes in a strange way that I'm not used to, but it's probably because I've used so much magic recently.

I ignore it and glance around, trying to see where my creatures are. I smile when I see them all standing guard around me, keeping me safe while I'm in a vision.

"Thank you," I tell them all and receive nudges from all of them. "Alright, let's go and get the key fragment. We have another mission; before we can get out of here, we need to check all of the princes' bodies and destroy the bracelets that are draining Hades' power."

"Are you okay?" a muffled voice sounds from my pocket, and I shift as I stand up and pull out Xerxes.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was one hell of a vision, and I'll explain more later. Do you want to be put back in my pocket?"

"It would probably be for the best since you may need two hands for your weapons, we have no idea what's behind the wall."

“Good point,” I reply, putting him back in my pocket and then turning to the others, “Okay, guys, let’s do this.”

They all nod, and I love how much they understand me.

Thankfully, the magic is still working and still going through the wall behind the throne dias. I’m assuming that because it’s leading me through the wall and not through one of the doors that are around the room that it means that the vault is somehow hidden behind it. I doubt that it’s as mundane as finding a special brick or button to press that will open the vault. Which means there’s a spell or many spells that are guarding it.

I just want to get out of here now. I want to break the gemstones and give Hades back complete control of his power. I keep referring to him as Hades in my mind, probably because of what I’ve witnessed in the vision and because this room is completely his, but I wonder what I’ll call him when I see him. He’s always been Grey to me, but seeing him as Hades means that I’m calling him Hades in my mind. It’s going to be confusing.

Sending a spear of my magic out to follow the magic that’s guiding me to the vault, I instantly realise just how many spells are guarding the door, it’s going to take me hours to try and take it apart.

“Just walk through,” a muffled voice in my pocket says.

“Seriously, X?” I ask.

“Yeah, trust me. Just walk through.”

I pause for a moment, but he hasn’t really steered me wrong, not yet anyway, “Alright, fine, but if I end up dead because of this, I’m going to haunt your arse.”

“Deal,” he replies, still muffled.

Looking down at Poca, he does this weird shrug as if to say, it’s Xerxes. You may as well try it and see what happens. So that’s what I do. Putting my hand out in front of me so I don’t just walk smack into a wall if this fails and I can’t get through. Then I step through the wall, following the magic. My skin buzzes with a tingle of magic as I step through, but it

only lasts a second before it calms back down, and I find myself standing in the vault. Vault doesn't seem to be the right word to describe it; when I think of a vault, I think of a relatively small space, but this is far from that. This place is huge and more like a chamber than a vault.

It makes sense for it to be enormous. Hades has been alive for a really long time, and I'm sure he's collected lots of treasures over that time. Thankfully, I don't have to worry about finding the key fragment in here, which would take months, and I'm not even exaggerating, because the magic that led me here is also leading further into the room which I'm hoping means that it's leading to the key fragment.

I cautiously move further into the room and follow the magic around the bend, sure enough the magic ends at a simple wooden box, and when I lift the lid, I find the key fragment nestled inside and lying on a bed of velvet. I don't want to risk taking it out of the box, putting it in my pocket, and then inevitably losing it when I no doubt have to fight for my life at some point on my way out of here, so instead, I create yet another pocket of the Void and store the whole thing in there. I have to admit that I'm kind of surprised that the box itself didn't have any spells on it, but then again, it didn't really need them since it's in Hades' vault, and no one is supposed to be able to get in here.

Once I'm sure that everything is secure, I nod to my creatures and turn back around to retrace our steps to find the princes to break the bracelets and return Hades' full power. On my way out though, two humongous black swords catch my eye. I recognise them from the final fight before Hades was subdued, and I have no idea how they ended up back in here; I mean, the princes sure as hell didn't put them in here. I don't think they even realised where this place was, and it's been sealed since the imprisoned Hades, anyway. I start to move past them, but something makes me pause; I bet Hades would love to have his weapons back, and who knows when he'll be able to come back here.

Decision made, I try to pick them up, realising that they're so fucking big that they reach just under my chin; I decide that

the easiest way to transport them would be to use my air to wrap around them and drag them into a pocket of the Void. It's a good job that I just have to think about what I want from the Void, and it opens the right pocket, or I'd never find anything ever again.

Once they're securely in the Void, I make sure that I've got all of my creatures with me, and I head back toward where the entrance is. I have a moment of panic that just because I've been able to get in here doesn't mean that I'll be able to get out, but Poca and Oryn are a couple of steps ahead of me, and they simply walk straight through the wall, so holding my hands out in front of me again just in case, I follow them.

As soon as I'm on the other side I breathe a sigh of relief before I realise that there's an unfamiliar weight on my back. What's more concerning though is that Poca is looking at me in what can only be described as shock, and I don't think that's a good thing. I start to imagine all sorts of terrifying things suddenly appearing on my back. I decide to woman the fuck up; I mean, I have just been through things that would terrify normal people, and I found it exhilarating, but something strange on my back that makes my hellhound stare at me in shock; yeah, that's the thing that I can't deal with.

He's not growling though so I'm going to take that as a good sign, and I metaphorically grab my big girl pants and look over my shoulder, of all the things that had run through my mind, the heads of two wickedly sharp axes are not what I was expecting.

Putting the two swords that I'm carrying into the Void so that they're out of the way, I reach behind me at my waist and grab hold of the handle. I have no idea how they're secured in the harness on my back, but as soon as I touch the handle and pull, the harness seems to let go of them, and it's easy to bring one of the weapons forward so that I can inspect it.

It's beautiful; the head of the axe is pure black and made out of a material that I've never seen before, etched into it are hundreds of shimmering gold runes, and there are only a few that I vaguely recognise. I run my finger over them, and they disappear, leaving behind just the pure black of the blade. The

handle is also black but made out of wood, and it fits perfectly in my hand, almost as if it were made for me. Reaching behind me I pull the other one free and realise that it's much like the first, including the buzzing of magic that teases the palm of my hand. It's not an unpleasant feeling, but the magic that is embedded in these weapons is obviously curious.

As I study the second axe closer I realise that there is one noticeable difference, the runes that are dancing all over the axe head are copper in colour, not gold, but there are just as many as there are on the other axe and I again only recognise a couple of them. Unlike the other axe though, as soon as I've acknowledged them they disappear, I don't have to touch them.

Glancing at Poca with the axes still in my hand, I ask, "You know what these are, don't you?" he nods, so I add, "Let me guess, you can't tell me?" he shakes his head, "And, I'm assuming that you have no idea how they appeared with their magical harness on my back?" again he shakes his head, "Well great, I guess that's something else that we can figure out later, right now we need to figure out how we're going to get past the beast out there and find the princes to break the stones and get Hades his power back."

All of my creatures nod, but a muffled voice from my pocket has me pausing in my forward trajectory.

"What's just appeared?" Xerxes asks.

I put one of the axes behind me, and I'm surprised when the harness just seems to grip it again and keep it in place.

"Neat," I mutter.

I then pull him out of my pocket as he adds, "I'm starting to see the disadvantages of being in a pocket for the whole time we're here."

"Do you want to stay out now?" I ask, "You could fly with Oryn and Meri? We shouldn't come across anything else now," I pause and then add, "Oh, apart from the beast in the hallway, after we get past that though, we should be clear."

Xerxes lets out a quiet chuckle, “I think I’ll stay put for a while; knowing my luck, I’d get eaten or something by accident.”

“How do you eat someone accidentally?” I ask, aware that we’ve now become thoroughly distracted.

“Trust me, it happens,” Xerxes replies and then asks, “So, what happened, oh the axe? I take it you didn’t pick it up while you were in the vault?”

I shake my head, “Nope, I don’t suppose you know what they are and why they appeared?”

“Unfortunately not. They seem to be even older than I am.”

“Well fuck,” I reply, “let’s get out of here then. Back in my pocket, you go.”

Once I’ve put him back away, I grab my axe from my back; I may as well see what they can do and turn to face the door again. The beast is still there, only distinguishable by the darker shadows. It’s not growling at me, and I approach it cautiously. If it weren’t for the fact that I have got to break the gems on the princes’ bracelets for Hades, then I wouldn’t even bother to go out this way, and instead, I’d try and find another exit.

That thought gives me an idea though so I call on my magic and step into the Void wanting it to cross me over to the door where I spoke to the staff member. When I step in though, it’s like all exits are blocked apart from the one that I came through. It’s really weird, and I have no idea if it’s got something to do with being out of the Void for so long or if because I was out of the Void for so long, It’s broken something within it. I also can’t see as much as I was beginning to, and I miss it.

Oryn didn’t follow me in, so I can’t ask him what it means, and Laiken doesn’t seem to be anywhere to be seen, so I decide that this is yet another thing that can be put in the deal with it later pile, and step back out into the throne room, and the expectant faces of my creatures.

I shake my head, “It’s no good all the doors are blocked; for some reason, I can’t use the Void to travel.”

When I look back at the door, figuring I’ll try to reason with the creature before I just race past it and hope that I can run faster than it can, I see that the doorway is empty, which isn’t necessarily a good thing. I cautiously approach the door and look both ways as I step out. The creature is sitting to the right of the door, and I freeze, expecting it to do something, but it simply stays still. When I don’t move, I swear I hear it sigh, and I watch in fascination as the giant mass of shadows becomes a lot lower. If I didn’t know any better I would assume that it had just laid down.

Poca nudges my back, and I take that as a sign to move forward. I’m hoping that he knows something that I don’t and that he’s telling me it’s safe. I move slowly, not wanting to startle the creature and provoke it into attacking. Every few steps that I move forward, I look back over my shoulder to make sure that it has stayed where it’s supposed to be. As I get to the corner that when I move around it will put the beast out of my sight, I glance back one final time and realise that it’s gone, left in its place is just the usual dark and dusty hallway.

That can’t be good.

My creatures are alert but don’t seem to be worried, and although I know that I should take that as a good sign, I’ve seen the destruction that this beast has left behind, and I really don’t want to risk his disappearance being a distraction technique and for us to all end up dead. I grip the handles on my axes tighter, momentarily in awe at how right they feel in my hands, before I start to run.

All of my creatures keep pace with me as they return to the formation that they were in before, where Poca is behind, and Meri and Oryn are flying at different heights ahead of me. As I run, I keep an eye on the rooms with open doors on either side of me, checking to see whether the beast is running alongside me and not seeing anything at all. Despite the fact that I no longer have the magic guide lighting up the way, I can somehow see just enough to make it through the hallways

without tripping over any of the dead bodies, or anything else for that matter.

The door with all of the bodies stacked behind it suddenly comes into view, but I don't dare to breathe a sigh of relief quite yet. In my experience, if you relax too early and before you're actually safe, then that tends to be the exact moment that you end up getting attacked, and in this instance, there are a lot of bodies stacked behind this door. What's to say that the creature doesn't allow them to explore this side of the castle, and then just before they're back to safety and when they've let their guards down and aren't being so vigilant anymore, it attacks them and tears them limb from limb.

To be honest, if I'd been here for centuries all by myself and had to deal with intruders all the time, then I'd probably get bored and find new ways to entertain myself, too, and if that meant trying to find ways to get my food to entertain me, then I'd probably do it as well. I become even more alert the closer that I get to the door, but the mass of shadows never appears again. When my hand is on the door, I feel a wave of compassion and sadness wash over me at the thought of the beast being here by itself for all of this time; I mean, it has been protecting Hades' private quarters and doing a damn good job at it.

These thoughts prompt me to say into the darkness, "I'll make sure that he comes back soon so that you can rest. Thank you for granting me safe passage."

I don't get any sort of reply, and I don't see any kind of movement to let me know that it's heard me, but I feel better now that I've said it, and I wasn't lying. I will make sure that Hades comes back soon and relieves him of his duty, you know after he's told me what the beast is because I'm incredibly curious. Say what you want about the deadly creature, but it's extremely loyal even when it doesn't know if its master is still alive.

Chapter Twenty

Farren

With one last glance behind me, I step back through the door, making sure that all of my creatures make their way through with me and that I have not left any behind. A quick glance toward the tapestry shows that no one is looking through it at the moment, so hopefully, that means that the girl has told everyone that the castle is safe, the princes are dead, and that they can all go home.

Shit, I hope they haven't released the horses or something. From what I can remember, it's a long walk to the nearest village, and it would be a lot easier and safer on horseback. I can cross that bridge when we get to it. For now, I need to find all of the princes' bodies and break their gems. It only takes me a moment to orientate myself and I realise that the closest prince to me is actually Dagon, the room that I tortured him in is not too far from here.

It takes me very little time at all to get to Dagon, I have to admit that I'm kind of relieved that his body is still where I left it, and he hasn't started to do something disturbing like grow a replacement head or something equally ridiculous. I'm actually really hoping that the vision that I saw was an accurate representation of the past and that they are all wearing the bracelets because that means that I can help Hades get his magic back. Thankfully, I glance at Dagon's right wrist and find the gemstone bracelet looking exactly like it did in the vision, except, to my surprise, it's broken and covered in cracks.

I take it off his wrist anyway, just to make sure, but it's not a trick of the light or anything. It really is broken. That's got to be a good thing. I start to drop it on the floor before I think

better of it; it could need to be broken more in order to give Hades his power back. I mean, Azreal and I completely destroyed his one, and this one is just cracked. I don't sense any magic from it, but just in case, I want to take it with me. Maybe if I show Hades he will recognise the craftsmanship or something and be able to identify who made them and then figure out who is behind all of this and stop them before they make another move against him and the Underworld.

With this in mind, I put it in my pocket that's not containing Xerxes and head out of the door to find Yeal and Jomieal, for some reason I don't want to put the bracelet in the Void, preferring to keep it close to me. I guess it might have something to do with the fact that it's got another god's magic on it, and a bad one at that. I don't want to alert him somehow that I have them and that something is amiss. Of course, that's assuming that he doesn't know already.

It takes me a little bit longer to get to the princes that I killed in quick succession, but once I'm there, I quickly nab their bracelets, too, realising that, like Dagon's, they're both broken and cracked. I really hope that's a good sign and not something that we need to be concerned about. Now, the only one that I need to get the bracelet back from is Hiromu. Fortunately my sense of direction is playing in my favour for once instead of leading me astray and I only need to be corrected once by a sharp bark from Poca to stop me from going the wrong way.

"Ah fuck," I curse as I reach the open door to the gardens where Hiromu's body is and see that the sky is looking angry as fuck, I'm just hoping that I can get the bracelet off Hiromu before the rain starts.

I quickly rush through the hedges, following the path that I remember from before, and I'm once again immensely relieved that he is where I left him out of all of them and what they're capable of. I hate Hiromu's gift the most, it's his magic and illusions that leaves the most internal trauma that I have to heal from. Logically, I know that none of the things that he showed me are true, and they didn't really happen, but his illusions are so strong that the non-logical part of me struggles

to believe that, and it's like a constant war between the two parts of myself to reconcile what actually happened and my very real feelings about fake events.

I hate his magic, and I would've loved to have given him a taste of it before I killed him, but unfortunately for me and luckily for him, illusions are not a part of my skill set.

Kneeling down beside his body, still in the middle of the fallen Helliers headless bodies, I grab his arm and shift his shirt sleeve so that I can see the bracelet. What I reveal promptly has my cursing. The sick fucker has pulled and stretched his skin over the top of the bracelet and has stitched it in, it looks angry and uncomfortable, and the only part of the bracelet that's still visible is the broken gemstone. I don't want to leave the bracelet behind, especially since it's Hiromu's, but I don't have the time or stomach to cut the bracelet out of his wrist. I quickly realise that there's only one thing for it and using my newly acquired axes I swing downward, effortlessly slicing through his wrist just above the embedded bracelet.

Huh, that was pretty impressive; I think I'm going to like these axes. Even though my words were just a thought, the axes hum happily in my hands, and I feel my eyebrows raise; that was weird, but I'm just going to go with it. I look down at the hand still on the floor; there is no way that I'm going to try and put that in my pocket; one, it won't fit, and two, I would find that incredibly weird on so many levels. Instead, I open up a pocket of the Void, making sure it's nowhere near Hiromu's head just in case, and kick it in. I'm going to have to risk the god who created them finding out that something is amiss. There's no other way that I can move it, and that urgency to leave has picked up again. Looking around, I try to get my bearings about where I am on the castle grounds in relation to the stables. I need a horse, and I hope the staff haven't taken them all in their escape. I quickly realise that it would be better to cut through the castle again than it would be to stay outside and work my way around the perimeter to the stables.

So back inside I go; as I jog through the castle, it occurs to me that as soon as I leave, this place will be abandoned

entirely apart from the beast in Hades half, and it makes me wonder whether it will expand its territory and how long it takes other people to realise that it's been abandoned.

When I exit out of the castle on the side where I know the stables are, I'm pleased to see that the clouds seem to be holding out for the moment and the rain still hasn't fallen. With all of my creatures following me and my axes still in my hands, just in case there's a rogue Hellier hanging around, I race across the courtyard to the stables. They're worryingly quiet, and all of the stalls appear to be empty. I start to worry that the staff has used them all to leave this place. I can't begrudge them that since the girl that I spoke to made it clear that no one was here willingly.

Sighing, I start to turn around to head out, resigning myself to a long and uncomfortable walk, when a sound from one of the furthest stalls catches my attention. Striding down the aisle, I see a black horse, or the Underworld's equivalent, casually munching away; when it hears me, it gives me a look as if to say, what took you so long? He's all tacked up and ready to go, and there's a note pinned to his saddle. Putting my axes in their magical harness to keep them out of the way and not appear threatening to the animal, I unlatch the door and greet the horse calmly; as he nuzzles my shoulder in greeting, I pull the note off the saddle and read it out loud.

"I figured that the least we could do is leave you a horse if you've managed to survive the beast. Thank you for releasing us."

I'm guessing that it's from the girl that I met outside of Hades part of the castle and it makes me smile. There's no more time for any extra pets as the sense of urgency to get out of here peaks again, urging me to move faster than I currently am. I climb up onto the horse with ease, Meri leaving Poca's back and curling up around my shoulders; I guess he's decided that's where he wants to ride for however long this trip is going to take. I urge the horse to move out of its stall and toward the exit as I double-check that Oryn and Poca are close by. Once I'm outside, it takes a moment to orientate myself, and I realise that I don't know where to go.

I need to get some rest, catch up on some sleep, and allow my wounds to heal and my magic to recuperate, although, for some reason, my magic doesn't feel in the least bit tired despite the amount that I have used it over the last few hours since I escaped. I'm worried that I'm about to have a massive adrenaline crash and that someone is going to use that opportunity to take me out. To get this far and then to have my life ended would really fucking piss me off. Especially since I have no idea what happens to all the things that I've stored in the pockets in the Void and whether they'll just stay there or disappear or it's like a return to sender kind of thing and they'll go back to where I got them from, because that would be bad, and a hell of a lot of wasted effort.

Shaking my head slightly to get myself back on track and refocusing on the task at hand, I turn my thoughts to finding somewhere sheltered that I can rest for the night, out of the inevitable rain. The problem is that I have no idea where that could be, and even if I do manage to find a tavern or somewhere that I can stay for the night, I don't have any money to pay for it, and I look like I've been murdered several times over, covered in blood, some of it mine but some of it not and I stink, I haven't had a shower in god knows how long. My point is I'm likely to draw unwanted attention to myself if I head to a village.

Now that I've got everything that I need from the princes, I wonder if the Void will work for me; if it does, then I could zap to the nearest door out of here and get back to the Shadowlands, assuming the door isn't guarded. I already know from my last visit here that I can't zap out of the realm even though the first time I was here, I could use the Void to travel through the Underworld, just not out of it.

Taking a deep breath, I let my magic flow over me and use it to step through the Void and to the door that will get me to the closest exit to the Underworld that I know of. Frustratingly, I hit the proverbial brick wall again, and I sigh as I come back out sitting on my horse, who hasn't moved a muscle or blinked an eye at my antics; that's a no, then.

“Farren, do you know of a place to camp for the night?” X’s muffled voice comes from my pocket, and I pull him out hopefully.

I shake my head, “No, I don’t. That’s what I was just trying to figure out before we leave, and I end up heading in the wrong direction because my sense of direction sucks.”

X’s pages flick open, and sure enough, there’s a map, “It’s like before; if you say the word on the page, then it should help you find a safe place to sleep.”

“Well okay then,” I reply and repeat the spell word on the page.

Instead of a string of magic, this time, there’s just a wisp of light that appears in front of my horse.

“I guess you just follow it,” Xerxes says.

I shrug, “I hope so. Do you want to go back in my pocket or in one of the saddlebags?”

“One of the bags, please. They are a lot roomier than your pocket.” He replies, a smile in his voice.

“You got it,” I reply as I put him in the bag.

“Thanks, just don’t forget that I’m in here,” he replies.

“Don’t worry; I won’t forget you.”

I stare at the wisp, unsure how it works and kind of wishing that it came with instructions of any kind; even if they were super brief, it would be more helpful than the nothing that I’ve currently got. I urge the horse forward just to test a vague theory I have, and sure enough, the wisp moves further ahead. I don’t really have a choice but to trust that it’s going to lead me somewhere safe, and the only reason why I’m just going to follow it without any further questioning is because Xerxes hasn’t steered me wrong yet, and he stayed with me when I’m almost sure that he could’ve left if he had wanted to.

He’s earned my trust.

There’s a sudden spike in urgency, and I encourage my horse to move into a canter as we leave the stables, chasing

after the wisp that is now going as fast as we are but far enough ahead that we can see where we need to go next. So long as it stops when we need to stop, it's a handy way to travel. I don't know how long it takes us, but my butt is starting to ache, which means I've been riding for a while now.

My creatures don't show any sign of being tired or slowing down, which I'm grateful for because I don't think that I'll be able to get them up here on the back of the horse with me. Not only is there not enough room, but I highly doubt that the horse will take kindly to having a hellhound on his back and whatever creature Oryn is. The only creature that isn't pushing itself hard is Meri. He's still curled up around the back of my neck, and his little snores are even audible over the wind rushing past me. It's cold too, and the night brings a chill with it that quickly makes my whole body tense.

Well, at least it can't get much worse; I mean, I escaped, or I'm escaping, and the princes are dead, so at least there's that, there's also ... ah fuck ... my sentence stops midway as the first drop of purple rain lands on my hand. Fantastic, it's now raining as well. My horse clearly doesn't want to be in the rain any more than I do, and it kicks its speed up a notch. Thankfully, it's not long until we race through a break in the trees and come to a small clearing and a tiny dilapidated one-room cabin with a lean-to shelter on the side that should be just big enough for my horse. The wisp, having done its job and led me to shelter, simply fizzles out, leaving the rainy night even more miserable than it was moments before.

The horse heads straight for the shelter without any prompting or guidance from me, and I glance at Poca, he seems to understand what I want without me saying a word as he races toward the cabin. I watch as he does a simple perimeter check before nudging his way through the door. It takes him less than five minutes before he's standing back at my side and nodding that it's safe to enter.

I waste no time in grabbing Xerxes out of the saddle bag and patting my horse, telling him that he's a good boy.

Damn, I miss Revel; he better be behaving himself in the Fae realm, although since he's my horse, I know better, and I

have a feeling that he's causing mischief somewhere.

I've been away from him for a while, but he's used to me disappearing for long periods of time. He's always equal parts pissed and happy when I finally reappear.

"If there's any danger whatsoever, you take off, got it?" I say to the horse, I'm unsure how they've been trained, but I am aware that some are trained to stay put even if they're under extreme threat, and doing so means they're going to die. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that the princes have their horses trained this way.

Like Fae horse he has a high level of intelligence and nods once to let me know that he's understood. I decide not to take any risks and quickly take off his saddle and bridle, they're a hazard if he does need to escape. It seems that was some kind of signal to him because he suddenly takes off.

Fuck.

There's fuck all that I can do about now. I'm just going to have to hope that he's back by the morning.

Chapter Twenty-One

Farren

Once I'm sure that he's going to be okay, I make a run for it through the rain to the cabin door. As soon as I'm inside, Meri huffs grumpily at me for disturbing him and then launches himself off my shoulders and once again curls up on Poca's back. He's no doubt enjoying the extra warmth that his fur kicks off. It takes me mere moments to get my bearings; the cabin is really tiny. It's one room with a pile of straw that looks surprisingly clean in one corner and a stove in the other. That's it. As much as I would love to light a fire and use that to warm up and dry off, fire means smoke, and smoke means that I will more than likely get some uninvited visitors, and right now, more than anything else, I need rest.

With that thought, I reluctantly turn away from the stove and head to the pile of straw in the other corner; I nudge it with my boot just in case there's something living in it, but when nothing jumps out at me, I sink to the floor, finding it surprisingly soft. I am suddenly absolutely exhausted; I barely have time to place Xerxes down and check that all of my creatures are with me before my head hits the straw with a soft thump and my eyes begin to close. I really should put some safety spells up around the cabin before I fall asleep or at least an alarm to wake me up if anything comes near the place. That's the last thought that I have before I slip into a deep sleep.

I don't know where I am, but I do know I'm dreaming. The space around me is empty though, sort of like when the

goddess visited me although I don't think that's what's happening this time. It doesn't feel the same.

“Where the fuck am I?” the familiar voice of H has me spinning around.

“H?” I ask.

He freezes and slowly turns around, squinting in my direction, as he cautiously asks, “Ren?”

I sigh, feeling a little bit exasperated, “Seriously, after everything that we've been through, you still can't fucking see me?”

His smile grows as he strides in my direction and reaches out for me. I move so that he can easily reach me, and he pulls me into his arms; he holds me tightly, taking a deep, shuddering breath before his hands slowly travel up my arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake. His eyes become dark as he realises the effect that he's having on me, and I push closer toward him, even though there's barely any space between us anyway. His hands find my face, and his thumb caresses my lips, making me inhale sharply.

That sound makes something in him snap, and his lips come crashing down on mine. There's no slow build-up, no gentle touches.

No.

This kiss is primal, raw, and filled with so much emotion that it makes my heart pound painfully. He's so tall that he has to bend over ridiculously far to kiss me; it can't be comfortable, and considering I'm looking for any excuse to get close to him, I bring my leg up; he gets the message and lifts me so that my legs can wrap around him, he does it with such ease that it sends another wave of pleasure through me.

My hands dive into his hair, running through the strands and then gripping it tightly; the growl that it causes him to make vibrates all through me as his hands grip my ass almost bruisingly. I don't know how long we stay lost in the sensations, but eventually, the kiss starts to slow and become

gentler, and I revel in the fact that I'm feeling something other than pain.

He pulls back, resting his head on mine, his eyes filled with so many emotions that it makes my own well with tears, and I'm actually incredibly grateful that he can't see me right now.

"I thought you were dead," he whispers.

I jolt at his words, "What? You did?"

"There was just this bright light, and then you were gone, and I had no idea if you'd succeeded in getting your magic back or if you'd pushed yourself more than your already battered body could take, and you died."

"Shit, I'm sorry," I reply, even though I know that it's not really something that I can apologise for since I had no control over it. "I'm okay. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" he asks, "My magic still senses some pain."

I sigh, "I'm not nearly dying anymore, but I did have to fight, so I have a few new wounds that are healing," I pause, knowing that he's real is making me question whether I really should be as honest with him as I was when I thought that he was a figment of my imagination. There's not really much point in switching it up now, so I add, "The wounds that don't leave any physical marks are going to take a while to heal."

His hands clench around me as he pulls me closer, and I feel his magic spike with anger, "I'm well aware that those kinds of wounds tend to take even longer to heal."

I nod and then remember that he can't see me, so I reply, "I hate that you know that."

He lets me slide down his body until my feet are once again reluctantly on the floor, and changes the subject, "Are you safe?"

I shrug, taking a step back but stopping when his hand clenches around mine, "As safe as I can be in an unfamiliar realm."

“Tell me where you are, and I’ll come and find you.” He doesn’t ask; he tells me, and if I’m being honest, I don’t mind. It would be nice to have a familiar face with me while I try to get out of here. “I don’t plan to let you out of my sight, when I have you in my arms for real.”

“I know that you’re from the Underworld, but I have to get back to the Fae realm. You can’t follow me there. I know enough about native Underworlders to know that would be bad.”

His smile widens as his grip on my hand tightens, “I can travel between realms, and it has no negative effects. Trust me, I have spent the last few decades in the Fae realm.”

My heart lightens at his words, although it drops slightly when the guys flash through my mind. I have feelings for all of them too. How is this going to work?

I’m going to do the really unhealthy thing and ignore it completely. I mean, there’s a big chance that when H actually meets me, that he doesn’t like me; I’m pretty weird and very bloodthirsty.

I’ll cross that bridge if I come to it. There’s still a small part of me that doesn’t think that he’s actually real.

“Shade?” H asks, sounding unsure.

“Sorry, I got distracted. I’m ...” I start to tell him.

Before I can finish my sentence he’s gone, and I’m guessing he’s been dragged back to the awake realm. I try to tell myself that maybe it’s for the best, and it would get super complicated, especially since I have so much that I need to tell Hades about, and I have the guys and the games. I am entirely unsure about whether we’re still in the games or not; we have surpassed the longest-known level by months at this point, and I’m pretty sure that means we’ve failed.

All of this is extremely complicated and not something that I want to think about when I need to rest, so I will myself to leave the shared dreamscape and fall into a deeper sleep. Awake me can deal with the complicated mess.

Mayhem

When Monty said that we only had one more stop to make before we could get to the castle and get to Farren, I really thought that it would be closer than it is. We've been riding for almost two days with only brief stops to eat but no stops to rest, not that any of us wanted to stop for that long anyway. The problem is that we all know that we're running out of time; we know that not only because Monty told us but because we can feel it.

That, coupled with the lack of sleep, is causing us to snap at each other; all of us managed to hold it together for so long, but it's been too long now, and I know that, like me, they've all got images of her being tortured playing through their heads regularly.

I'm not going to lie; at our last rest stop, I got barely any sleep anyway; every time I closed my eyes, I saw horrific images of her being tortured in multiple inventive ways. I couldn't handle it, so I stopped trying to sleep. Poca and Meri clearly had enough of our shit too because I haven't seen them for a while. I'm sure they're in the woods surrounding us keeping pace with our horses but keeping out of the way of our moods. I can't say that I blame them. It doesn't help that the rain that has been threatening for a while has now decided to fall more heavily, and we're going to be soaking through within seconds.

"For fuck sake," Storm growls.

"What now?" Khaos replies, Storm's outburst waking him up. I'll never understand how he can sleep so well on the back of a horse.

He's just as on edge as the rest of us although for a different reason his dream woman is a whole other issue that I don't even have the brain space to deal with right now.

Storm glares at Khaos from the back of his horse, "What I can't curse now?"

“Oh, come on, don’t start again,” Rival hisses, sounding just as pissed as they both are.

“Wasn’t it you who started the last argument?” Zev taunts.

Suddenly, they’re talking over the top of each other angrily, insulting each other, and saying things that I know they don’t mean. Hades is riding next to me and I share a look with him. The only reason I’m not joining in is because I prefer to keep my pain internalised or fight it out, there is no way I want to risk fighting one of them while I’m on the edge of losing control like I am.

Hades somehow senses this, and he whistles sharply as he faces them all. The whistle startles their horses, and they have to stop arguing in order not to fall off them.

“Now is not the time to fall apart. We are so close to getting to Farren, and we need to stay united. Do you think Farren would want this?” Grey asks, and at the mention of her name, they all start to look guilty, “No, she wouldn’t. She’d be kicking all of your arses and telling you to sort it the fuck out.”

It’s silent for a moment before all of the tension leaves them.

“Sorry,” Storm starts.

“Me too,” Khaos replies.

One by one they apologise to each other, fortunately no one is going to hold a grudge against anyone else for what has been said during these arguments, we all understand that the words are coming from a place of deep worry and fear for Farren.

“Good, we can’t be that far out now,” I reply, speaking for the first time in a long time.

“She’s alive,” Khaos suddenly says.

“What!” Loki exclaims, startling his horse, who should really be used to his antics by now. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because everyone lost their damn minds and started arguing,” he replies.

“Hang on, if she’s alive then why are you so pissy?” Reaper asks.

“Because Storm woke me up before she could tell me where she is,” Khaos replies.

“Shit, sorry man,” Storm apologises, sounding genuinely regretful.

Before Khaos can reply, I spot a clearing up ahead. “Guys, I think we’re here. This must be the last rest stop before we get to Farren.”

All previous conversations are stopped as we scour the surrounding area to make sure that it’s safe. I can’t help the wave of relief that I feel when the little cabin comes into view. It means that we’re so much closer to Farren. This is the final step before we get to the castle and get her out. We haven’t really come up with a solid plan to rescue her. I guess it’s pretty much sneak in if we can since the princes probably have the entire realm’s Helliers at their disposal and guarding the castle, the whole place will be crawling with them.

In no way are we capable of taking them on and the Princes, so stealth is going to be how we have to play this. We’re counting on Hades and Khaos’ knowledge of the castle to help us out and get us to the cells as quickly and stealthily as possible. I’m not going to lie, and I’m kind of hoping that we run into at least one of the princes and manage to take them out, not only for the horrible things that I know they’ve done to Farren but also for this realm and what they’ve done to it.

It's pretty apparent to us that no one has been here for a long time, although any footprints or animal tracks would have easily been washed away with the rain. I've used my magic to suss out the place, and I can't sense anything inside either, living or dead. Something piques my magic's interest just as I start to pull it back; not wanting to take any chances, I let it loose again and scan the entire place from top to bottom just in case I missed something the first time around. This time, it doesn't even ping or anything; there definitely isn't anything in there, and there must've been a mouse or small animal of some kind that it got locked onto; that's the only explanation I have.

"Anyone find anything?" Hades asks.

"No, nothing at all; it's empty and has been for a while," Reaper replies, although he's got a slight frown between his eyes.

It makes me wonder if Ryu picked up on something I don't bother asking though because everyone else is replying that they didn't pick up on anything either and I just want to get in so we can make a solid plan, eat and then try to get some rest so that we can get Farren.

"Good, gather what you need from the horses," Storm orders. "The little stall here isn't big enough for all of them, so we'll let them rest in the trees. They'll have more room, and they're still close enough to us to get to quickly if we need to."

"Got it," Loki agrees, with no smile and no teasing.

We're all losing parts of ourselves to the worry for Farren. Loki is the most notable out of all of us, but he and Killian were the closest to her, and their bonds were the strongest out of those of us who had bonds with her. As I lead my horse over to the woods and gather the things that we'll need for the night, I can't help but wonder what the bond is; it's like none that I have read about before, and although it has never been my area of interest before I do have a fair amount of knowledge about it.

I hope that I'm going to need to look into it in the future and that we're going to get Farren back. Ironically enough, even though we've been a functioning team at Black Onyx for a while now and have been doing jobs, nothing has been like this and there's a small part of me that's hoping I can barricade myself in a library with Farren for a while before we have to deal with any more deadly situations. I suppose my brothers can be barricaded in too, I might miss them eventually and there's no way that I'm cruel enough to keep them from Farren after this.

I don't think any of them are going to want to be apart from her after we get her back, and it makes me smile wondering how far she's going to let us take it before she curses us out and tells us to give her some space.

"Mayhem, you ready, dude?" Rival asks, looking at me concerned. "Are you okay? I know none of us really are, but you're my twin and I can only remember one time that you were this quiet," looking more vulnerable than he has in a long time he adds, "I really don't like it."

Guilt instantly consumes me, and I pull him into a tight hug, "Shit, I'm so sorry. I didn't think."

He hugs me back just as tightly and replies, "It's okay. I get it. Trust me, I get it, but just don't stop talking to me, okay? I can handle you being mute with everyone else but not me."

I nod, "Yeah, I get it. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm just so fucking worried about her. Even if we do get her back, she's been here for weeks, and after what they will have put her through, she's not going to be okay. That scares me."

Rival swallows thickly as he glances away; when he looks back, it's clear to see my own fear reflected back at me; he feels the same.

Grimacing, he replies, "Yeah, I know. But she has us and we'll help her through it anyway that we fucking can."

I nod but don't voice my agreement as I grab my bag, and we both jog across the boggy ground, catching up with the

others just as they enter the house, ending up only a few steps behind them.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mayhem

“**W**hat the fuck!” I hear Kill exclaim suddenly, and I push through the stalled guys to see Poca and a Poca-sized Meri staring back at us and seemingly standing guard in front of something.

Before any of us can question what the fuck is going on, a figure launches itself from behind them and attacks the person that they’re closest to, who just so happens to be Kill. All of us step forward to get involved and stop the fight, but Poca stops us all with a growl.

“Cerb?” Hades questions confused.

“It’s fucking Farren!” Loki gasps, gripping his chest like he’s been punched in the heart; a quick glance at Storm shows that he’s doing the same, and from the grimace on Kill’s face, he’s feeling the same thing.

Kill has already realised that he’s fighting Farren, but she still has her eyes closed, I’m guessing isn’t fully aware that we’re here.

“Fuck, she’s a damn good fighter,” Khaos mutters from behind me and I glance back to see an impressed glint in his eyes.

“Just you wait,” Zev chuckles, clearly knowing something that we don’t. He turns to Storm, “You’re going to have to use your voice on her. You know it pisses her off enough to make her stop.”

I just stare; I can’t actually believe that she’s here, although it doesn’t surprise me at all that she saved herself.

“Farren, that’s enough; you’re going to Kill, Killian.” Storm’s voice is gruff and filled with emotion, but it does the

job.

She stops, her hand centimetres from Kill's face, and I watch as she very slowly opens her eyes.

"Kill?" she questions, her voice rough.

"Hey," he replies.

He doesn't get anything else out as she jumps at him, pulling him close and kissing him thoroughly. She gets quickly pulled out of Kill's arms and into Loki's as he kisses her just as fiercely; Storm does the same, getting a kiss as well.

Zev pulls her in close and whispers something in her ear. Whatever it is has her nodding as she buries her head in his chest, and he holds her incredibly gently and kisses the top of her head with so much affection that it leaves absolutely no doubt in my mind that he loves her.

When she pulls back and looks up at Zev, her smile is incredibly fragile, and I know that we're all terrified about that look; Farren is many things but never fragile. The fact that she is showing us that she is or a part of her fills me with so much pride because it means that she trusts us completely.

I also hate that the princes and probably Helliers have put that look there. I want to spend hours pulling the blood from their bodies through every pore possible in the most excruciating way as their organs shut down and their magic turns against them. There's far more that you can do with a water gift than people realise, especially one as strong as mine.

My twin looks at her surprisingly nervously, but she doesn't give him a moment to dwell on it. Instead, she jumps and wraps her arms and legs around him. Her hands go into his hair and his face buries into her neck, even from here I can see the shuddering breaths that he's taking. He's only been holding her for a few moments when he glances up searching the room and his eyes land on me. That's all the prompting I need, and I

stride over; he turns her, making her face fill with confusion before her eyes land on me, and she smiles, reaching for me.

I hug her in much the same way as my twin. As soon as she's in my arms, I feel something inside me click into place, her presence soothing the sharp edges of my soul. I want to hold onto her forever but I know that Reaper is standing to the side of me and I'm sure there's only so far I can push it before Ryu takes the situation into his own claws, if he hasn't already.

I turn to give her to him, and I'm surprised as Ryu lets Reaper pull her in for a gentle hug before he comes out to play.

"Mine," he growls, taking a deep inhale of her neck and then rubbing his face there.

It surprises me that when Grey clears his throat, Ryu just rolls his dragon eyes and steps back, allowing Reaper to come forward again and letting go of Farren so that she can go to Grey.

She surprises me when she doesn't immediately hug him like she has everyone else. Instead, she raises her eyebrow, crosses her arms over her chest, and says, "I think I prefer it when you've got your wings out, Hades."

His eyes widen as heat flares through them at hearing his true name on her lips. I can't help but smirk; she has no idea what she just did to him, and that makes it so much better. I then see panic flash through his eyes, like he thinks she's going to be scared of him or something equally ridiculous. Relief quickly replaces the fear as she launches herself at him, and he wraps her tightly in his arms. There's a look of understanding on his face; he's been in the cells before, and he has a better idea than anyone what she's been through. He gently kisses her cheek and then lowers her to the floor, keeping one arm wrapped around her.

"I want to introduce you to someone," he says, and Farren looks up at him curiously, "this is Khaos, my second in command and friend."

Farren's curiosity is peaked, but as he moves out of the way so that she can see Khaos, her eyes widen, and her expression becomes one of pure shock.

It can't be; nothing ever works out that perfectly.

"H?" She mutters, and I have no idea what the hell is going on right now.

Khaos's eyes fill with recognition and I feel his magic reach for hers.

It only takes two strides and he's in front of her, studying her closely.

I remember him telling us that his woman in his dreams was always shrouded in shadows and that he had no idea what she actually looked like.

His hands come up to cup her face and her lips tilt into a smile, as his forehead comes to rest against hers.

"Ren," he says simply.

"Er," Loki's voice interrupts the moment, "I hate to be that guy but what the fuck is happening right now?"

"She's the woman from his dreams," Zev says, his eyes flashing white with a vision.

"Holy shit, no way?" Kill replies, his voice shocked.

Glancing at Zev, I share an amused look with him as I say, "Dude, you called it back at the castle."

"What?" Farren asks as she moves away.

None of us miss the way that Khaos's eyes stayed glued to her and her every movement.

"Zev said that everyone gets enchanted by you," I tell her.

She grins, "What can I say? I'm fucking fantastic."

"I'm just going to put a light up; this half-darkness thing isn't really for me," Storm says.

As soon as the cabin is fully lit and not just in moonlit shadows, I get my first good look at Farren; I have to swallow the knot of emotion that tries to rise at the sight. She is completely covered in blood, from head to toe it's staining everything that she's wearing. It's splattered over her face and dried into her hair, and from the sheer amount of it, I know that she's been put through the worst things imaginable.

She notices us all staring, it's not like we're not being obvious, each and every one of us has the same look of shock and anger on our faces.

She glances down and then grimaces, then in typical Farren fashion she says, "Don't worry not all of it is mine, well most of it is actually, but not all of it."

"That doesn't make it any better, Ren," Khaos says through gritted teeth. "You're still in pain."

"Your magic is fixing it for real now though," she replies with a smile.

"Wait, your magic is fixing her?" Grey asks, sounding shocked. "It's enjoying the pain?"

I'd be concerned about his words, but by this point, we all know that Khaos's gift is pain and that he loves it. It's what his magic needs in order to replenish itself, kind of like a vampire needs blood.

Khaos shakes his head, "No, it hates it. It's healing her."

"Wow," Grey replies, and I'm sensing that there's something more shocking in that than I realise.

"Alright, we have a lot to talk about, but right now, Farren, when did you last eat Love?" Loki asks her gently.

She frowns, "I don't remember."

His eyes darken at her words but he manages to clear his expression quickly enough that he replies with a smile, "Then it's a good thing that we hunted on the way here. Let's get the

fire lit and some warmth in here, and then we can talk about whatever we need to. Sound good?"

She nods, "That sounds pretty amazing. Do you guys have any spare clothes with you?"

"Actually, we have yours," Rival smiles as he holds up the bag that we packed for her. He's been guarding it with his life.

Her eyes light up with happiness, "You guys are awesome, I'm not going to be able to get clean here but at least I won't be crusty."

I clear my throat, "I can easily summon you enough water to shower in, if you want me to."

"And I can summon some cleaning products too?" Grey offers.

"Kill, and I can cloak the corner of the room in shadows so that you can shower in privacy." Storm offers and Kill nods in agreement.

"I can make sure that the water that my twin summons is warm enough," Rival grins.

"Zev, Khaos, and I can prepare food for you so it's ready for you when you get out."

"Ryu and I will stand guard, I can promise you that you will be safe. We will simply eat anyone who comes near." Reaper offers.

She looks at us all, her eyes misting with unshed tears, and says, "Yes, please."

Farren

And that's how I end up in a corner of the cabin in my own makeshift shower, my men using their magic to help me without a second's hesitation. I wash

quickly, not because I don't feel safe but because I don't want to take full inventory of the new scars that are left behind.

Not right now.

The only thing that I do acknowledge is my missing finger, and that's because it's pretty hard to ignore, especially since I need to take the grungy makeshift bandage off it. I steel myself as I unwind it, the warm water soothing the rest of the aches in my body. When the gap is revealed, not even a stump is left behind. I must admit that I allow a couple of tears to fall, mixing in with the water.

I know it shouldn't matter, not in the grand scheme of things, I survived which is not something that I thought would happen, I'm back with my men and shockingly H is here as well. It's turned out far better than I thought it would. But still, I allow myself to mourn the loss of it for a moment before I shutter my emotions again and start to think of it as proof that I went through hell and fucking survived. The healed space where my finger used to be is proof of that.

It's going to take a while for that to sink in, but it will, and I will remind myself of it for as long as it takes. Storm and Kill's magic has obviously sensed my upset because two incredibly cute tiny puppies with razor-sharp teeth and wispy bodies break away from the main part of the shadows. They both rub their cheeks against mine and then play in the water, splashing each other and making me chuckle as they start to play fight. It's incredibly cute and gives me the best distraction.

"I'm done showering," I say, "Thank you, Mayhem. Can you guys keep the shadows up while I get dressed?"

"Of course," Storm replies.

The pups that were messing around in the water melt back into the main shadows as soon as the water turns off. It doesn't take me very long at all to get dressed and I touch the shadows that are surrounding me so that they'll let me through.

"Feel better?" Reaper asks as he's the first to see me. He pulls me under his arm, and I tuck myself in, revelling in how

safe I feel.

“Yeah, loads,” I reply. “I’m starving, though, which is weird because I stopped actually feeling hungry a long time ago.”

There’s a chorus of angry growls that sound out throughout the room, and if they react that strongly to me not getting any food, they’re really not going to like anything else that I have to say.

Clearing his throat, Storm gestures to the seating area they’ve set up on the floor in a semi-circle around the warmth of the stove. “Alright, let’s sit down and eat.”

That’s all the encouragement any of us need, and we all take seats and start to dig in. I end up between Loki and Reaper, and they both eat one-handed, with a hand on each of my thighs. Their reassuring presence is making me sleepy, but I know that we need to talk about a few things before we go to sleep for what’s left of the night.

As if he’s heard my thoughts, Poca huffs like he thinks that it can wait and then lays down behind me so that I can rest on him. Meri ends up underneath the veil of my now clean hair again, and Oryn is sitting on the other side of Poca, resting his head on him as he watches everyone closely.

Once everyone is starting to slow down I figure I may as well start the questions, “So, what the hell are you guys doing here? I’m guessing you can get into the Underworld because of Hades or Grey or whatever, and while I’m interested in that, I’m interested in how the hell you’re here in this cabin.”

The guys all share a look as if deciding who should start talking first; I’ve really fucking missed them, more than I let myself feel while I was trapped, and it’s just amazing to have them now.

“Monty sent us. We found an exact replica of his store in one of the villages on the way here. He told us that we could only stop two more times and that the last place that we could rest would be this cabin. He said we were running out of time to get to you.” Kill explains.

I frown, “You know, I’m not even surprised that Monty has a shop here and knows things that he shouldn’t.”

“I don’t think he knew that you were going to be here though, he was panicking himself about us getting to you in time.” Grey adds thoughtfully.

“Well I think that it would probably be a good idea to visit him again to see which door out of the Underworld that we should take, so we can ask him then,” Zev suggests.

“We’re going to have to be really careful travelling back. The princes are going to have everyone looking for Farren since she escaped again,” Rival warns them.

“The princes are dead, they won’t be sending anyone after me,” I say.

“What did you just say?” H asks, his eyes wide.

I sigh, “They’re dead, well I think they are.”

“Who killed them?” Storm asks.

“I think I’m slightly offended by that, but not entirely because they are demigods and difficult to kill, and I’m just me,” I reply with a teasing smirk.

Loki’s mouth drops open before forming into a proud smile, “That’s my girl.”

Grey shoots to his feet, “Hang on, you killed them by yourself?”

I nod, “Yeah, well like I said I think so. I’m not really sure how to kill them to make sure they stay dead, so I took these.”

I open the pockets of the Void where I stored the heads and pull them out one by one dumping them on the floor. It makes for quite a macabre sight.

“Fucking hell, calling yourself a bit bloodthirsty was an understatement Ren,” H grins, and then adds, “I love it.”

Clearing his throat and staring at them in shock, Grey says, “Erm, yeah, severing their heads and then keeping them separate from their bodies will do the trick.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, “Thank fuck for that.”

I smile as I look over their dead faces, and then one by one fling them into separate pockets of the Void. When I get to Dagon’s head, Meri chirps in my ear.

“You want to give it a go?” I ask her. The guys are all silently watching me as they seem to digest what I’ve just told them.

“Give what a go?” Zev asks curiously.

“Watch,” I reply and then turn to Meri; he launches himself off my shoulder and hovers in the air as I pick up the head by its hair, open a pocket of the Void, and then throw it in the air.

Meri chirps happily as he spins in the air and smacks it with his tail, launching it straight into the Void hole. He rushes back to me, chirping happily and wriggling his butt as I congratulate him and tell him what a good boy he’s been.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Farren

“**W**hat was that?” Reaper asks, looking more amused than disturbed.

“That is something that Farren and Poca do with severed body parts, apparently,” Xerxes says.

“Xerxes, what the fuck are you doing here?” Storm asks.

“Oh shit, sorry,” I tell him as I jump up and rush to the pile of straw where I put him before, picking him up.

I feel really bad that I forgot about him.

“Don’t worry about it; after everything that you’ve been through, you need the cuddles and the safety, and I wasn’t going to interrupt that for any reason.”

“Thank you,” I tell him softly.

As I sit back down, X answers Storm’s question, “I was sent here to help Farren and tell her about the key fragment in Hades’ vault.”

As soon as he’s finished talking, something occurs to me, “Wait, with the princes dead, why did I still need to get the key fragment?”

“I don’t know. Are you sure you did? I mean, maybe whoever sent Xerxes didn’t know that you’d end up killing the princes?” Mayhem suggests.

My mind spins, and it suddenly hits me: “It’s because this isn’t over. The princes were pawns; they weren’t the person calling the shots; that was the god.”

Grey holds his hands up, “Whoa, I think you maybe need to start explaining from the beginning.”

“Shit, okay,” I reply, trying to think where it is best to start; there’s no point telling them about the torture; they don’t need to know that.

“Won’t the Helliers be coming after you? How did you manage to kill the princes with all the Helliers at the castle?” Storm asks, thankfully giving me a starting point.

“Oh, well, there were only a few Helliers left at the castle, and since I was all full of Void magic and mad as fucking hell, they weren’t that difficult to get rid of.” I explain, “I used magic from X to help guide me to the key but got to a point where the cleaning just sort of stopped; there was a definitive line. A maid sort of found me, and she explained that the commanders had stopped coming to the castle and stopped sending new Helliers up there a long time ago. They were duty bound to follow the princes orders, but that didn’t include sending new Helliers up to the castle.”

“So there may be hope for them yet,” H mutters.

I nod, “Maybe, although they have been going into the villages and taking people to work in the castle, none of them were willing to go there. They were tortured and killed when the princes got bored.”

“What the fuck,” Reaper growls.

“They’re sadistic fuckers,” I hiss in reply.

Zev shakes his head, “I didn’t see this.”

“What?” I ask because he looks particularly confused.

“I saw us having to come back with armies in tow in order to take back the realm from the princes; I saw us fight; I didn’t see Farren take them out by herself,” Zev explains.

“Er, sorry?” I reply, slightly unsure but feeling like maybe it’s something that I should apologise for.

He smiles, and shakes his head, “It’s nothing to apologise for.”

“What does it mean if you didn’t even see it,” Kill asks curiously.

Zev's eyebrows dip in confusion, "It means that Farren has done something extraordinary. She's changed Fate, and I have no idea how she's done it."

The guys all turn to look at me with varying looks of shock.

"Wait, I changed fate?" I ask, needing to clarify; when Zev nods in confirmation, I add, "Fuck, I have no idea how I did that. Is it going to have any negative consequences?"

"I don't know. I guess it's just a case of waiting to find out," he replies, which is not reassuring in the slightest.

"Didn't you say that you couldn't see us? I know that you've been able to see a few things, but is there a chance that you just didn't see this outcome?" Mayhem asks. I missed the way that his brain reaches conclusions that the rest of us haven't thought about.

"Yeah, that's true, but I was getting blank spots where I knew that there was something that I was not seeing. I didn't have that this time," Zev replies thoughtfully.

"Could you have just missed it because of how much you were worrying about Farren?" H asks.

"I suppose that it's a possibility." He replies, not sounding convinced.

"So, we need to keep an eye on things. You need to keep an eye on your visions, and hopefully, it's nothing that we need to worry about." Storm suggests.

"Hopefully," Zev replies. Clearly wanting to change the subject he looks at me, "What else happened?"

"Oh right, yeah, so I was following the magic to get to Hades' vault," I start to explain and get interrupted.

"We can head back and get the key fragment," Hades says with a smile, automatically assuming that I couldn't get the key, which, considering it was guarded by some very powerful spells, I don't blame him.

"No need," I say as I open the Void pocket and pull out the key fragment. "I got it."

“Was it not in the vault?” H asks.

“It was,” I reply and then add, “Oh, and before I forget or get distracted because everything is being told in the wrong order, I picked up these on the way out; I thought you might want them since I saw you fighting with them.”

“Saw me, what?” Grey asks.

I stand up and reach into the Void, grabbing the hilt of one of the swords and dragging it out. They’re so fucking heavy.

Grey’s jaw drops, along with H’s, and I sigh, “A little help, please? These things are fucking heavy.”

Grey doesn’t say anything as he jumps up, takes the handle of the sword I have in my hand, and pulls it out with an ease that makes me envious as he reaches back into the Void and pulls the second one out, too.

His smile is broad as he mutters, “Hello, old friends; I did wonder what had happened to you. I should’ve known that you would’ve made your way back to the vault.”

“They’re sentient?” Mayhem questions.

Grey shrugs, “Sort of, it’s really complicated.”

“How the fuck did she pick them up?” H asks Hades.

“I mean, technically, I didn’t. I tried, but they’re too fucking heavy, so I had to use my magic to tip them into a pocket of the Void,” I explain.

H smiles at me, as he reaches for me and pulls me down onto his lap. A quick look around at the others shows that they’re all looking extremely amused, and none of them seem to be concerned that I’m sitting on his lap. I’m just going to go with it for now.

“You shouldn’t have been able to touch them at all,” he explains. “Although, I’m beginning to see that the usual rules don’t apply to you.”

“They never have,” Kill grins, looking incredibly proud.

“They wouldn’t have appeared to her if she wasn’t able to handle them,” Grey adds.

“Just add it to the growing pile of mysteries, I guess,” I reply.

Grey just smiles at me as he reaches behind himself and simply places his swords on his back. They stay in place, and I know for a fact that he wasn't wearing a harness a second ago. I can't help it; I jump up, H reluctantly letting me go as I move toward Grey and walk around him.

He looks amused but lets me circle him, “They appear when I need them to.”

“That's really fucking cool,” Reaper compliments, looking suitably impressed.

“They look like mine. They did that!” I exclaim.

Grey's eyebrows rise, “Yours?”

“Yeah, hang on, I'll show you,” I rush to the straw in the corner of the room where I left them, and pull them out, only now realising that I didn't take the harnesses off when I had a shower.

“Where in all the realms did you get those?” Grey questions, but I can hear an edge to his voice.

“Erm, that's kind of complicated, but look,” I reply as I swing my axes in my hands and then place them behind my back; just as I was beginning to suspect, my harness magically appears, and my axes stay where they are.

“Whoa, that's so fucking cool,” Loki exclaims, jumping up to check them out.

“Impossible,” H says, his eyes wide as he just stares at me.

“I feel like that's being said a lot,” I reply drily because it's true, and I don't know what else to say.

“Care to explain to the rest of us why it's impossible?” Rival asks, his eyebrow raised.

Studying him closer I realise that his hands are clenched and his leg is bouncing, he's not okay but he's trying to pretend that he is, running on instinct I head over, removing the axes from my back and then plopping down on his lap, as

place them down in front of me. His arms wrap around me tightly. Loki smiles as he sits back down but his eyes worriedly watch Rival.

“The harness is gone now,” Rival says.

“Before we get to the impossibility of it,” Grey starts, although knowledge swims in his eyes, “how did you find them?”

“I didn’t, they found me,” I try to explain, and then quickly realise that my words made no sense so I add, “when I walked out of the vault, they were on my back, even Poca looked shocked.”

“I’m not surprised. He knows what they are,” H says.

“He does? I mean, I thought he did from his reaction, but how do you know that he knows?” I ask curiously.

H doesn’t reply, he just smiles at me and I decide to drop it for now.

“They chose you,” Grey mutters, sounding impressed.

Loki throws his hands up in the air dramatically, “Okay, someone, please explain to me what the hell it means; all these half-answers are annoying, and I’m pretty sure Mayhem is going to bust a vein in his head or something if he doesn’t get the information soon.”

I glance at Mayhem, and sure enough, he looks like he’s got thousands of questions on the tip of his tongue; he doesn’t dispute what Loki has said and instead just smiles sheepishly, which makes me chuckle softly.

Rival’s arms tighten around me and he kisses my shoulder, making my heart hum with happiness. I’m in a state of disbelief at the moment; I know that they are here, really here, but there’s still a small part of me that thinks that they’re part of one of Hiromu’s illusions, one that he’s going to savagely rip away from me any second now. It’s because of that I’m still on edge waiting for the other shoe to drop, but maybe I should just let it go. If this is an illusion, then I’m going to enjoy it as much as I can before I’m thrown back into my harsh reality, and if it’s not, then well, that’s awesome.

“Sorry,” Grey winces and then immediately starts to explain, “those axes were formed in the god realm, much like my own blades.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool,” I mutter, stroking the axes.

“Yes.” H agrees and then adds, “But only gods and goddesses can touch them, and they never bond to anything but a god or goddess.”

“And they are clearly bonded to you,” Grey’s eyes are filled with the answers, but as he opens his mouth, nothing seems to come out.

“Which means you’re a goddess,” H says, and Grey nods in agreement.

I stare at them for a moment before the realisation hits me.

“Well, that proves it. Hiromu fucked up with that; I mean, a goddess? Seriously?” I question.

I’ll give it to him though the guys stay in character as they all look confused, he’s even got the realisation dawning on Hades and Khaos’s features. I slowly get up off Rival’s lap, pick up my axes and start to cautiously back away, moving away from them all as I grip the axes tightly, they may be a part of this illusion, but they’re freaking badass, and if any of the other illusions are anything to go by, then I’m going to need them.

They’re all watching me closely, concern on their faces and anger on Grey and H’s.

“Farren? What’s wrong?” Loki asks.

I don’t say anything as I crouch down into a defensive crouch and wait for them to make their next move.

“She thinks this is one of Hiromu’s illusions,” Grey says, managing to keep up the act as his eyes fill with sadness.

“What?” Mayhem asks, his gaze not moving from me. “She thinks that all of this is fake?”

Grey nods sharply once.

“Why does she look ready to fight us?” Reaper asks cautiously as if he already knows the answer.

H’s voice comes out as a growl, as he replies, “Probably because in the illusions we attack.”

“What!” Storm practically explodes.

I tilt my head to the side. His reaction is a new one. In fact, all of their reactions are new; they all look absolutely horrified.

Storm stands up, and I automatically take a step back.

“Careful, brother, she thinks that you’re about to turn on her,” Killian says, shadows clouding his eyes.

I don’t like the look of pain that I see there, and it makes me want to go to him to comfort him, but I know that it’s probably a trick, and as soon as I get close, he’ll attack.

I force my feet to stay still.

“How do we help her? How do we get her to realise that this is real?” Loki asks, his tone desperate.

“I’m not sure,” H replies, his eyes scanning me from head to toe.

Suddenly, Mayhem makes a noise, and I glance over at him to see his eyes light with knowledge. He looks at Hades, “Most illusionists have a tell, right? There’s usually something in their illusions that isn’t quite right, something that is slightly off. So while still terrifying and traumatic, if the recipient can find that they at least know it’s fake, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Grey replies and quickly cottons on to what Mayhem is getting at; his eyes move to me, and in a soft tone, he adds, “Farren, this is real. Even Hiromu isn’t good enough to have infallible illusions; I know you; I know that you’ve found the tell, the thing that will tell you whether this is real or an illusion; what is it?”

“If she tells you, she’s going to think that Hiromu has manipulated it that way and that this isn’t real,” Zev points out. He looks at me, “Don’t tell us, Farren.”

I am now incredibly confused; the illusions have never behaved like this; even Poca isn't acting how he would in the dream and is whining quietly.

I start to doubt myself.

"He's right," Reaper agrees, "Farren, we're going to stay exactly where we are. We aren't going to move, and you do what you need to do to prove that this is real."

I look around at all of them. They're all watching me earnestly, all with sadness and anger in their eyes, and usually, by this point, they would have started hurling insults or attacking me. My heart wants to believe so badly that they're real, that all of this is real, and that I got out, but they're right. I'm not going to believe them until I expose the tell.

"Farren?" Grey asks gently. He repeats Zev's words, "We'll stay still, okay?"

I nod sharply once; I really don't have anything to lose. They're either going to turn on me, or it's not going to be an illusion after all.

I hope they meant that they're going to stay still because they're not going to like this. Hiromu has everything perfect, except for one thing, and that's if I cut them, they bleed black, not the colour that they're supposed to. I found that out entirely by accident; I don't think he's aware of what his tell is since he can't see the illusions that he gives me. One tiny nick and I realised that it was real, it cemented it in my brain, and helped me stay grounded. It took me far too long to realise that though, and for some reason it only worked if I made them bleed, if they bled through any other means than by my blade they bled the right colours.

So, all the illusions of them dying were still incredibly real.

I grip my axes tightly in my hand. I know that they're overkill for this situation and that one of my knives from the Void will be more than sufficient for checking whether they bleed the right colour, but I'm terrified of what will happen when they turn on me and at least with my axes I have a chance to last for a bit longer. If the illusion doesn't last as

long as Hiromu thinks it should, then he throws me into a worse one, and when I'm already feeling raw from the trauma of the first, it destroys me.

Cutting only one of them should be sufficient enough to tell me whether or not they're real, but I know that my mind won't settle until I've tested them all.

This is one of the most intricate illusions that Hiromu has weaved.

I unglue my feet from the floor as I slowly make my way back to the circle, all of the guys watching me openly, with looks of horror and sadness on their faces.

I go to the one who I think may protest the least and stop in front of Zev. His eyes flash white, and when they land on me again, he simply rolls up his sleeve and holds out his arm. I'm glad that he did because, honestly, I hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Go ahead, Farren, I promise you that this is real," he says, his eyes soft as he looks up at me.

I nod and then, taking my axe, slice his arm as gently as I can, considering I'm cutting him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Farren

I don't allow myself to feel any relief when his blood bleeds the right colour, I won't allow it until I'm certain that they all bleed the right colour. Just in case Hiromu has managed to train his gift even more and make them bleed the right colour, if he had, he wouldn't be able to do it with all of them.

Zev smiles, "Go ahead and test the rest. No one will do anything. I promise."

Call it stupid on my part, but now that I've seen him bleed the right colour, I trust him, just a little bit.

The thought of how Hiromu couldn't make them all bleed the right colour at the same time crosses my mind, and I glance away from Zev while I think about how to make sure that I can see them all bleed at the same time. What I see when I face the others has me once again questioning whether it really is an illusion; all of them have their arms held out, ready for me to slice them.

An illusion wouldn't do that.

"I need to see you all bleed at the same time, and I need to be the one to slice you," I tell them.

"We can use our magic to keep the wounds open longer so that you can see us all bleed at the same time," Mayhem suggests.

I nod.

Wasting no time at all, I quickly slice their arms, noticing that with each cut, my axes buzz with magic. When they all have a slice on their arms, I spin in a circle, looking at all of their blood.

“It’s normal,” I mutter.

“Yes,” Kill says gently.

“It’s real?” I ask, my voice small and vulnerable.

“Yes, Love. We’re real.” Loki replies.

The relief is overwhelming, crushing in a way that I didn’t expect it to be, and my whole body is suddenly overtaken by heart-wrenching sobs. My knees buckle, but before I can hit the floor, I’m caught in a set of strong arms. I’m incapable of anything but trying to breathe through my sobs, but I am aware of each of my guys as they put their hands on me in comfort.

I gradually become more aware, even though my sobs haven’t stopped, that I’m not the only one shedding tears, and a wave of guilt crashes over me that I’ve made them cry. I know that they’d chastise me for that, but I’m suddenly feeling all of the feels that I’ve repressed while I was captured and knowing that this is real and they are actually here, well, it’s opened the floodgates, and I’m just going to have to ride it out.

It takes a long time before my tears calm down, and I fall into an exhausted sleep, surrounded by my men, all of them even H. My creatures are standing guard over all of us, and I know that I’m safer than I have been, maybe ever.

I don’t know how long we were all asleep, but I wake up surrounded by creatures and the sounds of the men bustling about the cabin.

“Morning, Love,” Loki says as he hands me some jerky, a hunk of bread, and coffee.

“You have coffee?” I ask.

“Of course,” he grins as he bends forward and kisses me softly on my cheek.

“Thank you,” I reply. I watch as everyone moves about, and it’s obvious just from their interactions with each other that they’ve gotten to know each other really well recently.

I am surprised to see how well H, or Khaos, is fitting in with them. It's like he's been with them for years. He keeps shooting me concerned looks and soft smiles, just like the rest of them.

"Farren," Grey says, coming to sit in front of me with his own drink.

"Yes?" I ask, with a smile when he doesn't immediately reply.

"Are you feeling okay today?"

I nod, aware that I'm now the centre of everyone's attention, "Yes, I think crying it out was more therapeutic than I realised it could be. Thank you for letting me do what I needed to in order to prove that you were real."

"No need to thank us," Storm replies, coming to sit down too and quickly followed by the others.

"He's right; you should know by now that whatever you need, we've got you," Zev adds.

Grey smirks at me, clearly sensing that I'm beginning to want to change the subject; I'm hoping he's not planning on bringing up the G-word thing again because I am in no way ready to deal with that and whatever it entails, not to mention that I think that it's impossible at best.

"Yesterday, you mentioned a couple of things that I was hoping that you could clarify?" he asks.

I nod, trying to remember what I could have said, "Sure."

"You mentioned that you liked my wings more, and that you'd seen me fight with my swords so that's why you picked them up, how did you know about them both?" he questions.

I frown, I was sure that I told them that part, "Oh, the story got all mixed up because you guys kept asking questions and so I ended up skipping bits."

Mayhem frowns, "So, something happened before you got to the vault?"

I nod, but I'm interrupted by Grey, "It didn't click yesterday, but in order for you to get to my vault, you had to go through the throne room."

"Yeah, they're all still there. On the floor where they fell," I reply, a wave of sadness flowing over me.

Grey swallows thickly, "They deserved so much better."

"I saw what happened to them," I reply, and he looks at me curiously; I save him from asking the question and explain all about the vision that I was shown and how I saw what happened. I also tell him about the gemstones that a god gave to the Princes. When it gets to telling them about how Azreal broke his stone, I tell them everything apart from how I helped destroy it; something stops me, although I don't know why.

"So, that's how they were keeping my power level low," Grey mutters as he thinks it over. "And why I suddenly got some back as we escaped the first time."

"Yes, so once I'd gotten the key fragment, I went back through the castle to check the princes and break the gems so that you'd get your magic back. They were all already broken; I thought it might be because they were dead, but knowing that you were in the Underworld all this time makes me think that they broke for a different reason."

"Yes, I'd imagine that they broke when I set my magic free," he replies thoughtfully, "You went back for me instead of just leaving?"

"Of course I did. I didn't know if I had really broken them or not, and I also didn't want to risk the god coming back and being able to restart the link to drain your magic. That's why I made sure that I picked them all up," I say as I move to where I dumped my stuff yesterday and pull the bracelets out of my trouser pocket. I then open up the pocket in the Void and pull out Hiromu's hand, "Of course, Hiromu had to go one step further, and he stitched the bracelet into his arm, so I had to take the whole thing."

"That's gross," Rival mutters as he looks down at the hand.

“Tell me about it,” I say, “but as you can see, they’re all broken.”

“We’ll have time to get a closer look at them, but we need to get going,” Zev says.

“As in need to?” I ask, wanting clarification.

“Yeah, we need to head out. There’s an urgency to leave that we need to listen to.” He explains.

“Gotcha,” I reply as I put all of the bracelets in the same pocket of the Void; since I had to put Hiromu’s in there, it’s probably going to have warned the god anyway, so putting in the rest won’t do anything apart from make sure that they’re safe. No one will be able to take them out of the Void except for me.

It doesn’t take us very long to pack up and get everything ready to go, but as I’m looking around to make sure that we haven’t left anything behind, I catch sight of Grey looking unsure.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him.

Everyone stops what they’re doing and turns to face Grey.

He frowns heavily, crossing his arms over his chest as he says, “I really should head up to the castle.”

The implications of that statement fly through my mind, and I feel my heartbeat pick up; as selfish as it sounds, I don’t want him to go; I don’t want to be separated from any of them, and I have a feeling that I’m going to feel that way for a long time. Before I can say anything or suggest that we head up to the castle with him because I refuse to be separated from any of them, Zev interrupts.

“No,” he replies, as his eyes flash white; this vision seems to last a lot longer than some of the flashes he’s had more recently, but it is nowhere near as dramatic as when he had the vision back at Black Onyx Academy, that seems like so long ago now.

Grey’s eyebrow raises, “No?”

“Sorry, I was trying to see if it would let me see any more,” Zev replies.

Reaper smirks, “You were arguing with your magic?”

Zev shrugs, “Well yeah, it’s frustrating as fuck that it won’t let me see you guys.”

“What do you mean no?” Grey asks again, hope flaring in his eyes.

“You need to come with us, and we need to leave,” Zev replies. When we all look at him expectantly, he throws his hands up in the air in a very Loki move and adds, “I’m sorry guys, that’s literally all I’ve got. It didn’t show me anything else. I just know that you need to stay with us, and we all need to leave the Underworld; I think we’re coming back at some point. That was all muddled and honestly is only a guess right now.”

“But what about the realm, there’s no one running it now,” Grey asks with a heavy frown.

“Well, let’s face it, the princes weren’t running it anyway, and besides, all Underworlders are terrified of the princes and the armies that they think are at the castle; no one is going to go up there,” Khaos reminds him.

“He’s right; I mean, from what Farren told us, everyone is avoiding the place as much as possible, so it’s going to be a while before anyone realises that the princes are dead,” Storm adds.

Khaos nods, “Exactly. Not only that, but the Underworld is going to be healing just by your presence in it, and we know that it can last a damn long time without your presence too. We’re going to have to trust Zev’s vision.”

Grey is quiet for a moment as he thinks about what the guys have said. “Yes, you’re right; if the vision says I need to come with you, then I’m going to come with you. I just hope none of the Helliers from training go up to the castle, while I’m gone, we’re going to have to figure out a fix soon. I need to get my realm back on track.”

“While I agree with you about coming back here, we’re going to have to talk about that at some point because I’m not letting any of you out of my sight,” I start honestly, making all of them grin. I don’t allow them to comment as I move on, “I don’t think you need to worry about them sending Helliers up to the castle; it would be a suicide mission. I’m sure that they sent them up regularly at one point, but there were a lot of dead Helliers on the side of the castle that belonged to Grey. Your beast took care of them and he now has the run of the whole castle.”

Grey’s eyes widen, “He’s still there? After all this time?”

I nod, “Oh yeah, and he’s done an amazing job of protecting your vault, the Helliers’ last resting place in the throne room, and whatever else you’ve got back there.”

“Wow, I honestly thought he would’ve moved on by now,” Grey replies.

I don’t bother to reply to him because I can feel magic growing in the air. Someone is coming.

“Shit, do you guys feel that?” I ask.

It takes them a moment, but they’re quickly all nodding yes.

“We’re sitting ducks in here. We need to see what’s approaching.” Storm says and then orders, “Everyone grab your weapons and get outside.”

My axes are already in my hands as I stride toward the door; this is where I’m comfortable, attacking things that attack me. I’m a fighter, and it has been rather emotional in here, and while I’ve needed it, and it’s had its place, I’m done now.

Everyone quickly exits the small cabin, my creatures running out ahead; as I spot Oryn, it occurs to me that we haven’t really had a conversation about him, and I still don’t know what he is. We can figure that out later though.

“I think that’s a bit dramatic for little old me,” Monty’s voice echoes around the clearing before he appears directly in front of me.

Unlike his usual demeanour, his eyes are worried as he looks over me with concern; I've always felt comfortable with Monty, but for whatever reason, when he just silently opens his arms, I happily accept the comfort. He hugs me tightly, his hands soothing my back. It feels like when I hug my uncle, that similar familiar comfort.

"I'm so sorry, Farren," he whispers into my ear, quiet enough that I know the others can't hear him, "you have to believe me that if I could have helped you, I would've, but my hands were tied. It would've affected the outcome."

His words weirdly echo the goddess's, but honestly, I don't care. I need this familial hug more than I realised.

"I know, Mont, thank you," I reply.

He steps back and glances over me again as if to reassure himself that I'm really here.

"You know you did the impossible when you changed fate, and without even meaning to as well. It's quite impressive," Monty says proudly, this time loud enough for everyone to hear.

"How did you know?" Zev asks and then shakes his head, "Never mind, I know there's no point in asking since you won't answer us anyway."

Monty smiles widely as he spins a cane in his hands and points the end at Zev, "Ah, smart man, he's finally getting it."

I chuckle, "I assume that you're here for a reason, Monty?"

"What, I can't come and check in on my favourite after the ordeal that she's been through?" Monty asks, his lips smiling but a hint of seriousness in his eyes.

I soften, "Of course you can, but I know that you aren't here for just that reason. There wasn't nearly enough drama to your entrance."

"She's right, Monty, what's going on?" Grey asks.

Monty's look turns into a glare although even I can tell that it's not that serious as he replies, "Nope, I'm still not happy about you."

“What did I do?” Grey replies indignantly.

“Oh, you’ll know Hades, my old friend,” Monty says and then adds, “Just you wait until the others realise.”

“Does anyone know what the hell they’re talking about?” Rival asks, looking around at us all.

“At this point, I don’t think even Grey knows what they’re talking about,” Reaper replies, watching them and looking completely confused.

“Knowing Monty, he probably only vaguely knows what is going on himself,” Khaos said.

“I heard that,” Monty calls, stopping the truly absurd conversation that has carried on between Grey and him while the rest of us were talking.

“Good,” Khaos grins when he replies.

“Alright, seriously, this conversation isn’t getting us anywhere,” Storm interrupts loudly, and everyone looks at him, “Monty, why are you here?”

Monty rolls his eyes and jumps into the air, landing on the top of his cane and balancing perfectly, even though it appears to be impossible.

“Fine, you can’t go through the exit that you came through,” he starts looking at the guys, and then his gaze switches to me, “and you can’t go through the one that you use either.”

“The one that she uses?” Grey asks.

“I accidentally found a door here a while ago, I freaked out as soon as I realised where it led me and I left immediately,” I explain. “It was through the Void.”

“That’s impossible; you shouldn’t be able to access this realm through Void. I know we call it a realm, but it isn’t, not really; it’s a whole other plane of existence.” Mayhem says, looking at me like he has thousands of questions that I simply can’t answer.

“Yes, but Farren has those weapons, and according to Grey, only a G...” Kill starts.

I shake my head and raise my hand, “Nope, we’re not going there. I’m not doing it; do not say another word.”

Monty’s eyebrows raise, “So, she knows then?”

“No, no more words from you either,” I say, narrowing my eyes at Monty, who chuckles but nods his head.

“Fine, as I was saying, you can’t go through any of the usual exits that any of you would use. Doing so will trigger alarms for the Helliers and that will trigger a whole host of events that we want to put off for as long as possible.” Monty explains.

“Do we want to know what kind of events that it’s going to trigger?” I ask.

Monty shakes his head, “No, and they’re going to be triggered at some point. I’m just trying to put it off for as long as possible.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Farren

“**Y**ou’re trying to?” I question, “Does that mean that you’re doing something that you shouldn’t be doing?”

“Aren’t I always Farren dear?” Monty smirks. When we all just stare at him, waiting for him to answer, he sighs, “Fine, yes, I am. But quite frankly, I refuse for Farren to go through anything else so quickly, and you all need a rest for what’s coming. The other doors are being guarded and watched.”

“Watched by who?” Zev asks.

“Unfortunately, that is a step too far and not something that I can comment on,” Monty says.

“Alright, if we’re not supposed to go through any of the normal gates, how are we getting out?” Killian asks.

“Through the Soul side,” Monty replies.

“I thought it wouldn’t be a good idea for us to go through the soul side?” Loki asks, and I’m guessing it’s from a conversation that they’ve had before.

“Under usual circumstances, it would be, but you need to get out of the Underworld without being seen; not only that, but you have Hades with you, so you should be okay.”

“This is really the best way?” Khaos asks.

Monty nods, “Yes. I must warn you, the princes have pretty much ignored the soul side; the Helliers and Underworlders that help to keep it running smoothly are doing the best that they can under the circumstances.”

Grey growls, “If they weren’t already dead, I’d be torturing them.”

“I tortured Dagon if it helps. I figured I owed him for this,” I say as I hold up my hand, which is missing a finger.

Of course none of them look surprised or shocked, they all probably noticed my finger, or lack thereof, almost immediately, however, anger does flash on all of their faces.

“Yes, it does make me feel better, actually,” Grey replies.

“One more thing,” Monty says, and he looks at Grey, “you’re going to have to drop the glamour and go in as Hades, it’s the only way to ensure that you will get through to the door smoothly. They are more aware than the rest of the Underworld of what the princes were doing and as you can imagine they’re all on high alert, anyone that’s seen in the soul side of the Underworld that shouldn’t be there are dealt with swiftly.”

Grey nods, “Okay, to be honest, I’ve been dying to get this glamour off me, so I can’t say that I’m disappointed by that, but are you sure because I’ve been gone for decades and my appearance is going to cause a commotion as it is.”

“Yes, but it’s also going to give them hope, and right now, they need that. Don’t forget you still need to get the last key fragment from the Dragon realm,” Monty replies.

“We do?” Loki asks, his eyebrows dipping into a confused frown.

I’m glad he asked because I thought it may have been something else that was spoken about when I wasn’t around.

Monty’s eyes go comically wide as he sarcastically replies, “Oops, did I say too much?”

Before any of us can ask any questions, he just disappears in a strangely un-fanfarelike way. He’s just gone.

It’s silent for a moment before Kahos says, “So, the Dragon Realm, huh?”

My eyes are watching Reaper closely; his hands are clenching at his sides, his claws slipping in and out as he tries to contain his shift, his eyes switching back and forth between his own and Ryu’s; they aren’t taking this news very well. It

doesn't take long for the guys to notice the same thing that I do, and they all take a cautionary step backward.

"It's okay, Reaper," Storm says, and then adds, "Ryu, we won't let them get their hands on you again."

"You're so much stronger than you were before. They wouldn't be able to capture you," Kill adds, his voice soothing.

The words don't seem to be helping though and Reaper's whole body starts to vibrate with the need to change, even I know that it would be really bad for him to change in this emotional state. So, I follow my instincts and make my way toward him.

"Go carefully, Farren," Loki warns, although he doesn't stop me.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Khaos adds.

I roll my eyes, although I can't blame him for his warning. I am about to approach an almost out-of-control dragon and a very fucking strong one at that. I don't say anything as I simply wrap my arms around him, rest my head on his chest, and hold him tightly. His reaction is immediate as he stops shaking, and his arms wrap around me, his head coming to rest on the top of mine.

"I'll never get used to the way that she can so easily calm him," Zev mutters, shaking his head, "the outcome if she hadn't would've been bad, really fucking bad."

I ignore them as I pull back slightly so I can look up at Reaper, "I don't know what is going on, but we can figure this out. If we really do have to go to the Dragon realm, then maybe only some of us go, and you can stay in the Shadowlands. You should know that if you do decide to go, I will personally take apart anyone who has or wants to harm you piece by piece until they're begging for death, and even then, I won't give it to them."

"Okay, that was a little scary," Loki mutters and then adds, "but super fucking hot."

“Agreed, it’s incredibly hot when she shows how bloodthirsty she is,” surprisingly, Khaos is the one to agree.

Reaper’s arms tighten around me. He nods once, “I will not allow any of you to go there without my protection, but I will admit that I may find it difficult. I was abandoned, imprisoned, and tortured for most of my childhood there until I thought I was saved, brought to the Fae realm, and subjected to the same thing.”

My blood boils with anger; I know that there is far more to the story and that he is telling it in such a casual way because it still greatly affects him, which is evidenced by the fact that the mere mention of us having to go there almost made him shift.

I squeeze him tightly, “As I said, we’ll figure it out. We may not have to go. For now, I think we should focus on one thing at a time. The first thing we need to do is get through the Soul side of the Underworld safely and get back to the Shadowlands; then we can figure out our next step.”

“She’s right,” Rival says, “we can figure it out when we get there.”

Before Reaper can reply, Khaos adds, “I’ve been to the Dragon Realm several times, in fact, over the centuries, and you have nothing to worry about, power-wise; you’re one of the strongest dragons that I’ve felt for a long time.”

“Even for an alpha, your power level is really high,” Grey adds.

“Alpha?” Reaper questions as he turns me so that I’m pressed into his side instead, his arms still around me, but now I can see the others as well.

Grey tilts his head, “Yes, you weren’t aware of that?”

“I have been in the Fae realm since I was a child; I can count on one hand the dragons that I have met since, and none of them were willing to share any information with me. The dragons are so secretive with what information outsiders have that all I know about my own kind are things that I remember from before I left, things that I have first-hand experience in,

and what we're taught in the schools in the Fae realm." Reaper explains, "I know that Alphas exist for dragons, but that's it. It doesn't tell you what the signs of an alpha are, or their gifts or anything like that because they're hunted."

"Wow, stupid prideful dragons," Khaos mutters, disbelief in his tone. "To not teach one of their own just because of where they live is just stupid."

"But not unexpected," Mayhem points out and then adds, "as soon as Reaper became one of us, I did as much research as I possibly could on dragons, hoping to help him and to learn more as well; I was extremely frustrated by the lack of information."

Khaos nods, "Yeah, they're pretty fucking good at keeping shit to themselves."

Reaper nods, "I'm better now. We can cross that bridge when we get to it. For now, how are we going to get to the Soul side?"

It's obvious that he wants to change the subject, and I can't say that I blame him.

"I can open the door here, and we can all step through. I'm not going to take the glamour off until we're on that side, but from what Monty said, I'm going to have to do it pretty quickly to make sure that we're not dealt with."

"We all need to be prepared that we're going to have a delay as everyone reacts to Hades being back, but there are only a few Helliers and Underworlders on that side, so it's not like a whole realm reacting. They're also the best of the best, so it should go smoother than it would if he were to be announced here," Khaos explains.

"Got it," Storm replies for all of us and then adds, "Is there anything that we need to know?"

"We're going to be entering into the communal area, which is where all the souls can choose to socialise if they wish to, I can explain more when we're there," Grey explains.

"Could you not zap us straight to where the exit back to the Shadowlands is?" Loki asks, "That way we could avoid all of

the drama of them realising that you're back?"

"One, they're going to know as soon as I step foot in the Soul side, even if it's for only a moment, so it's going to cause a reaction regardless, and two, there's only a few ways to get into the Soul side of the Underworld as it has to remain as secure as possible, I'm going to transport us as close to the door as I can but we're still going to have to travel for a few hours maybe a day or so in order to get us to the door that we can exit through," Hades explains.

"Don't forget what Monty said about the Princes ignoring it," Mayhem reminds us, "you don't know what condition it's going to be in, and that could bring up some problems that we haven't considered."

"That's very true," Grey replies, "what's giving me hope is that Monty said that they've ignored it, and the Underworlders that oversee it are incredibly capable."

"The Hellier's I trained for the punishment side of it are elite and stronger than most, I'm sure that they've managed to keep it running as smoothly as possible in our absence," Khaos adds.

"I think the biggest issue is going to be the effect of not having me here and my magic feeding the realm," Grey admits.

"I hear you, but Monty wouldn't have warned us unless the soul side was experiencing some issues," Zev points out.

"Yes, you're right. We will proceed with caution," Grey agrees. He looks over us all. "Is everyone ready?"

"Sure," I reply.

He grins, and I feel his magic build in the air as he builds the portal that will get us to the soul side; a sense of excitement goes through me; we're getting a sneak peek of where we go when we die and that's pretty cool.

The portal pops into existence, and whereas I'm used to them being swirling masses of colour that are somewhat disorientating to step into, this one isn't; it's like looking through a window. I can see what we're going to step into, and

curiously enough, it appears to be a town, and we're looking at a street with houses on either side.

"I'll go first," Grey says, "to make sure that you all arrive safely and don't get killed as soon as you step through."

"Appreciate it," Zev jokes, making me smile.

Grey steps through without problem, and I see him instantly drop his glamour. He's truly magnificent and the vision I had didn't do him justice. The smile that breaks out on his face as the glamour falls is full of relief, and I can't help but smile in response. It has to be so freeing, especially after having it on for so long. I also appreciate how difficult it must have been to put the glamour on again after he'd finally managed to get rid of it. I feel pretty shitty that it's taken me this long to realise that.

As soon as I step through the portal before I even look around or anything, I head straight to Hades, and in this form, he is definitely Hades; it just feels right to call him that.

He looks at me curiously, and I move up onto my tip toes. When I realise that I'm still too short, since he's a freaking giant now, I use my air magic to help me float. It wasn't my intention to kiss him, but he looks so amused that I have to use my magic to put me on the same level, that I want to do something to shock him.

So, I get really close until my lips are a hair's breadth away, causing him to still I'm not sure he's even breathing.

"Thank you for wearing that god awful glamour to come and get me, even when you didn't have to wear it," I whisper because he's close enough to hear me.

As he begins to open his mouth to talk, I lean forward and kiss him. I meant for it to be a quick kiss, just a simple thank you, but I'm lost as soon as my lips touch his. His arms wrap around me, holding me close, which is a damn good job because as soon as our lips touched I lost the grip I had on my magic and I would've dropped to the floor if hadn't held me.

Our lips move together as my hands move into his hair, and my whole body comes alive.

He pulls away before I'm ready, and I groan in protest.

"As much as I want to kiss you forever, we've just stepped foot in the Underworld, and I'm fairly certain that we're going to get company soon. These people haven't seen me for decades and most likely think I'm dead," he starts.

I finish his sentence, "And it's probably not a good idea for the first time they see you again to be when I'm stuck to your face."

Hades bursts out laughing along with the others, who must be standing close enough to hear us.

"I wouldn't quite put it that way, but yes, that's what I was getting at." Hades replies.

"Okay, fine. I suppose you make sense," I reply and then smirk, "I'm calling you Hades from now on. It suits you better, and I like it more."

Hades' eyes heat as he practically growls, "I like it when you say my name."

"Er, guys, whatever Farren was going to reply to that was going to lead to you guys making out again, and while I didn't mind watching at all, and I know I'm not the only one, we do have something that we need to focus on right now." Zev interrupts.

I glance over my shoulder, and I'm surprised to see heat in all of their eyes. Oh, well, that's an interesting turn of events, but it's not something that I can really focus on right now. That sort of revelation needs time to explore, and as we've been reminded multiple times now, we don't have that time right now.

Hades gives me one last quick kiss and then puts me down.

"I'm surprised we haven't had any visitors yet," Khaos comments, looking around with a frown.

Now that I'm not distracted by Hades, I get a proper look at the Soul side of the Underworld. Just like it looked through the portal, we're on a street. It's a long stretch of road with offshoots, grass verges, and trees lining it. It's incredibly well

looked after, and there aren't even any potholes, which is a sure sign this is the Soul side of the Underworld.

The difference here though is that unlike a usual street like this, every single house is entirely different, they're all from various eras, different sizes, and styles from all throughout the many realms. There's a house that I recognise from the Earth realm, there's a tree house where I know druids like to live, there are caves and cliffs, there are examples of all kinds of houses from as many places as you can think of, as we start walking I even see an ocean, with a shoreline and everything.

It's absolutely incredible.

There's also an overwhelming sense of peace here, and I take a breath; I've not felt anything like it before and want to soak up as much of the feeling as possible.

"Since we haven't been stopped yet, I'll explain a couple of things that I'm sure that you're all wondering about," Hades says, his eyes scanning around us rapidly.

"Each of the houses that you see is a person's individual heaven. They're entirely unique depending on the individual's beliefs and religions in life and what realm they've come from, that sort of thing. But they're not simply the house; the house is just the front of their heaven; most have whole worlds inside them."

"Wow, that's pretty fucking cool," Mayhem mutters, his eyes wide with wonder.

"We put members of the same family near each other, and of course, family pets are there as well. Each family has an optional communal area that's just for them where, when the souls are ready and have accepted that they're dead, they can meet up and hang out." Hades continues to explain.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Farren

“**T**hat’s a nice touch,” Zev replies, “individual heavens but spaces for family to get together.”

“There are also communal areas for everyone, parks, restaurants, and all sorts of places where people can meet other souls,” Khaos adds.

“So, it’s kind of like a realm in itself,” I reply.

“Sort of, but there’s no threat to life here because everyone is dead, no illness, no suffering,” Hades explains.

“Except for in the punishment side, there’s lots of suffering there,” Khaos grins.

“It kind of worries me that you’re so happy about that,” Loki points out.

Khaos rolls his eyes, “Don’t even pretend that you don’t like torture as much as I do. I know full well that if I took you to that part, told you what some of the inhabitants had done, you would take great pleasure in torturing them.”

Loki thinks about it for less than ten seconds and then replies, “Fair point. I would.”

“Why do you have Helliers and Underworlders in this half?” I ask curiously. My gaze is on my creatures. Poca looks extremely at home here and bigger than usual, so I know that he’s letting more of his power out than he usually does. Meri is sitting up on his back, looking at everything curiously instead of fast asleep, and Oryn is flying as close to Poca’s side as he possibly can without landing on him and looking a lot more nervous than the other two. This is a situation that I don’t think any of us thought we would find ourselves in.

“We don’t have many, but every now and then, we get a soul or two who don’t like how things are run, who want to go back to their lives, and who struggle to adjust.” Hades replies.

“So, we need people here to help in those situations and keep it under control until we can get in extra help if we need them,” Khaos adds.

“I have to admit that I prefer this side,” I say.

Hades looks sad as he replies, “You have only seen the other side tainted by the princes. You should’ve seen it before; there were festivals and street parties, and it was just an amazing place to be somewhere that I was really proud to be called the god of.”

“I hope that we can get it back that way again,” I reply.

“I think it’s going to take a lot of healing before it’s back to being as carefree as that sounds,” Rival says.

Hades frowns as he looks around at his realm, with an air of sadness cloaking him. “Unfortunately, I think you’re right. This side may look better than the other side, but the streets used to at least have a few souls out and about, talking to each other or on their way to places. There’s no one, and we’ve been walking for a while now.”

“Not to mention we should’ve been stopped by Hellier’s a long time ago,” Khaos adds.

As if his words have summoned them, three Helliers appear in front of us.

“Hades?”

“Commander Khaos?”

“Why are there only three of you?” Khaos demands and then looks at one of them, “What are you doing on this side?”

The Hellier he spoke to swallows thickly and replies, “Things have gotten a bit complicated since you both disappeared. We’re spread pretty thinly; the Princes have been sowing discord in the Punishment half, and we needed as many Helliers as possible over there. We’ve had to shut down

the private heavens during certain times so that the Helliers here can go over. We're all in positions that we shouldn't be."

It shows an amazing amount of respect that the Hellier simply replies and doesn't ask any questions despite the fact that Khaos has been gone for so long.

"I'm so sorry that you've all been through this," Hades says, truly apologetic even though it's not his fault. "I'm going to need you to make an announcement. Order should start to restore with my power here. The princes are dead, but they are still causing issues, one of which I have to sort out to ensure that the Underworld is truly safe, and as such, I have to leave. They kept me a prisoner and drained my power for many years. The other side does not need to know of any of this until I am back and the Underworld is truly safe again."

They all nod.

"Sire, I am so glad that you are back, even if it's only temporary. We have all felt your magic and what it's done for the Underworld already; some of us were beginning to wonder if you were back," the tall woman says, with nothing but respect and trust in her tone.

"I'm sorry to ask; I know that you are helping the realm already, and I can only imagine what those dicks put you through," the tallest one starts and then adds, "but I was wondering if there is anything that you can do to help the unrest in the punishment side. Some of them are under the impression that they can leave, and the princes are going to do that for them."

Hades frowns in contemplation for a moment as he tries to come up with a solution.

"What about Purgatory?" Khaos asks.

The three Hellier's eyes go wide, and it clearly means something to them that the rest of us don't understand. I don't even know much about Purgatory. I didn't even think that it was real, but then again, I was unsure that the gods themselves were real until recently, and now I've kissed one.

Holy shit balls, I kissed a god, I kissed freaking Hades, and I want to do it again; I want to more than do it again.

I have gotten way off track.

Back to Purgatory, all I really know about it is that it's sort of like a waiting ground; it's neither in the soul side nor in the punishment side; it's just midway. But as we've learned so far, there was a lot of information that was not given to the Fae realm, so this is most like one of those things that we don't know about.

"That could work," Hades replies, "it's secure enough; it's a wasteland; no one can get in or out of it, not even the other gods."

"The other gods?" one of them questions, but Hades just ignores him; that is not something that he needs to know.

"We weren't taught anything about Purgatory," Mayhem interrupts, "not really, but if there is some kind of prince backed uprising trying to happen in the punishment side, is Purgatory going to be enough to hold them? To stop them from trying to gain even more headway into their plan? Also, how have the princes been communicating with them?"

Hades eyebrows rise, "All very good points. I can answer the ones about Purgatory. I can seal them in a part that would have them eternally burning; on a continuous loop, they won't be able to think of anything but pain."

"Damn," I mutter, and Hades eyes dart to me, a worried look in his eyes until he sees the heat in mine, and then they become questioning; I shrug, "What, I think it's hot when you get all orderly and god-like."

The Helliers gape at me as Hades bursts out into shocked laughter.

"Sire, you found your Queen?" the one who has been quiet all this time asks, with a giant grin on his face.

Hades clears his throat and looks at me out of the side of his eye, his lips ticking up into a smile, "It's complicated. Back to the matter at hand, how did the princes manage to get

followers in here? We were led to believe that they'd pretty much ignored this side."

The woman nods, "Yes, they did, for the most part. We're not entirely sure where the breach came from, but our best guess is that it's from a prisoner. Every now and then, they take a prisoner out. It's only happened twice, once just after you were presumed dead, and once more recently, it was after the first time that things started to go wrong, and they got the idea that they could escape. The second one was more recently and he came back and added fuel to the fire, he kept talking about how the princes have already made Wraith's out of some of the souls and set them free."

"What?" Khaos asks, the growl prominent in his tone.

"Are there prisoners missing?" Hades demands, his power starting to whip around him.

The Helliers share a look that gives me a bad feeling.

"We don't know, sir. With all of the unrest, having to shut down the heavens on this side and dealing with the upset from that, none of us are sure if any are missing."

"Fuck," Storm hisses and then glances at Hades, "what can we do? How can we help?"

Hades' severe look turns into a slight smile before falling again, "There's nothing that you can do, but I appreciate the offer. Give me a moment, and I'll figure out if anyone is missing." He closes his eyes and then opens them again, "Erm, it's been a long time since I last did this, and I don't think it's going to go as smoothly as it usually does. I suggest that you all sit down."

We all sit without question, even the Helliers but then I guess if a god tells you to do something you fucking do it no question asked.

Once Hades is sure that we're on the floor, even my creatures doing as they've been asked, he closes his eyes again. The magic begins to build, a wind coming from nowhere and whipping around him, Hades' wings start to unfold but only enough to steady him. It very quickly becomes

incredibly intense, the magic growing, and I can feel its eagerness to comply. If it's anything like my magic, then it's pissed as fuck at being separated from Hades, and after all this time, it could be explosive.

"Fuck," Khaos mutters, "he's either hit a spell that he's trying to break through, or his magic is mad."

"I'm willing to bet it's the second one," Kill replies.

"What do we do?" a Hellier asks.

"Stay down and hope for the best?" Loki suggests, in all honesty, he looks far too calm in this situation, but then I don't think I've seen him freak out in any situation.

I think he's just too laid back for that.

Before anyone can answer what they think we should do, and by anyone, I mean Khaos because, let's face it, none of the rest of us have any idea; shit hits the fan.

Magic suddenly shoots out from Hades, the ball heading straight for where we're all sitting on the floor. Without thinking, I jump up directly in the path of the powerful god magic, I've caught magic before, sure, but this is fucking god magic and is so much more powerful than any other magic that I've come across.

I'm strangely calm as the magic hurtles toward me; I can hear the guys yelling for me to move in the background. I ignore it all and focus on my own magic. I bring it all forward, finding more magic than I should but not bothering to question it. Just before the magic hits Hades' eyes open, they lock on me and instantly fill with panic, but it's too late for him to do anything but watch in horror.

I wait for the magic to explode into me, but it doesn't; just before it hits, it slows and instead wraps around me. It zips and zigs around my arms and legs, tickling my chin and making me giggle; shockingly enough, my giggle makes it pause, and it does it again, seeing if it can make me laugh again. When it does, I feel it hum happily and then watch in shock as it sinks into my skin; my magic welcomes it as an amazing amount of

power rushes through me. I feel something within my magic snap open, something that I wasn't even aware was closed.

As quickly as it happened it settles, although I feel stronger and different, and I can still sense Hades' magic happily mixed with mine.

"What the hell was that, Farren? It could've killed you!" Killian shouts as soon as he knows I'm safe.

"I knew it wouldn't," I reply.

"Did you?" Mayhem asks, his eyebrow raised.

I glance away, "I had a pretty good inkling that it wouldn't."

All of my guys groan, even Khaos, but Loki is the one to say, "Farren, Love, please don't risk your life on an inkling. We only just got you back."

The raw emotion on his face stops my snarky reply in its tracks, and instead, I say, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again." I then turn to look at Hades, "What the fuck just happened? Why can I feel your magic with mine?"

Khaos's eyes go wide, "She absorbed your magic?"

Hades swallows thickly, his eyes never leaving mine, "I thought it was impossible, but I was obviously wrong."

"You thought what was impossible?" Rival asks.

"Oh shit," Zev suddenly interrupts, and I glance at him just in time to see his eyes turn back to normal. "Oh, that is not a conversation that we should have now."

Hades nods, "No, it's not."

He glances at the three Hellier's who are still on the floor but watching this exchange with interest. Walking over to each of them, he touches them on the head, and they all pass out, at least I hope they've passed out.

"Why did you do that?" Storm asks, more curious than concerned.

“Because what they just witnessed Farren do is incredibly rare and information that, if in the wrong hands, is incredibly dangerous. I have taken the memory from them and knocked them out, they will come around in a moment, and just think that my power went a little bit awry and knocked them out. I’m going to need all of you to pretend that you got knocked out, too.” Hades explains.

“You’ll explain what happened to me when you can?” I ask Hades.

He moves forward and grips my hands, “It is not a bad thing. You are not in danger, and I promise that I will tell you as soon as it’s safe to do so; there are ears everywhere here.”

“If it helps, I will keep looking for safe moments for you to tell her. There isn’t one currently,” Zev adds with a frown.

“Okay, I trust you,” I reply, making a beautiful smile appear on his face. He kisses my forehead gently.

“I don’t think you’ll ever stop surprising me,” Khaos says as I step back, “you are so much more than you appear.”

Before I can reply, although I’m not really sure how I would reply to that, the Helliers start to groan, and like some sort of comedic skit, everyone apart from Hades falls to the floor and then starts groaning and holding their head as they slowly sit up along with the Helliers.

“What happened?” the woman asks.

“I have no idea, but it sure as hell packed a punch,” Storm replies, playing along flawlessly, “is everyone okay.”

When everyone answers that they are, although we already know that, we all slowly stand up and look at Hades.

“I’m sorry, my magic has been apart from me for too long, and it was a bit over-eager to do as I asked. Fortunately, you were all sitting on the floor so you didn’t have far to fall,” Hades explains.

Khaos rolls his eyes as we all get up, “Yeah, because that makes a difference.”

“Did it work?” Mayhem asks, which is a good job because I’m pretty sure they were about to devolve into a fake argument about something that didn’t actually happen.

Hades smiles and nods, “Yes, I put all of the ones that were causing the unrest into a special slice of Purgatory. They’re already heavily regretting being easily influenced, I also have a list of the missing souls. If you leave it with me, we will locate them and send them back Wraiths when they die; get sent back here.”

“Thank you, Sire, that’s a massive relief,” the taller one replies, the relief evident in the droop of his shoulders.

“You can now reopen the heavens as normal,” Hades replies, “send everyone back to their usual posts. I imagine that there are some very confused Helliers on the punishment side right now, so I’d suggest that you get over there as quickly as possible and tell them what’s going on, along with the rest of the information about what is going on.”

“Yes, Sire,” they reply together.

“I will give the realm as much of my magic as I can before I leave, and I promise that I will be back soon. I won’t be gone for too long,” Hades adds.

All of the Helliers nod that they understand, and then they disappear.

Once I’m sure that they’ve gone, I say, “This is all starting to get a bit messy, isn’t it?”

“I think that might be the understatement of the century,” Reaper replies.

“It’s certainly up there,” Hades agrees, and I smile.

Loki shrugs, “In all honesty, I couldn’t care less how messy it is or how messy it gets. I’m just glad that we’re all together.”

All the guys hum in agreement and look at me with soft expressions. To have all of these incredibly strong men look at me like that, well, it’s pretty fucking amazing, and for the first time in my life, I feel my cheeks heat with the telltale signs of a blush.

If any of them point it out, I will kill them; their soft looks quickly turn into amusement as my smile turns into a scowl of warning.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Farren

“**S**he’s cute when she’s mad,” Khaos mutters out of the corner of his mouth.

All of the guys burst out laughing, and although I try to keep my scowl in place, it doesn’t last, and I end up laughing along with them.

The buzz of magic going throughout the whole realm stops our laughter.

“Should we be concerned about that?” Zev asks.

Hades shakes his head, “No, it’s just the heavens unlocking. They should have never been locked in the first place. Although I understand that it was to keep everyone safe, and they didn’t really have much choice.”

“They’ve done a really good job in our absence,” Khaos says as we start to walk forward again.

“Yeah, they have,” Hades replies thoughtfully, “I’ll have to think of a way to thank them properly, especially since I’m about to take off again.”

“I think it’s a testament to how well you ran the place,” Kill says to Hades and then looks at Khaos, “and how well you trained your Helliers. I mean, they didn’t even question anything; they just accepted that you were back and accepted that you were leaving again.”

“They spoke to you with the utmost respect, too,” Storm adds.

Hades shrugs, “You must remember that I’ve been doing this for longer than I care to admit, and Khaos has been here almost as long. In fact, none of those Helliers were new, and

we still consider a Hellier new if they're a couple of hundred years into the job."

"Wow, okay." Storm replies, "Yeah, it makes sense why they just go with the flow."

Hades nods, "Exactly, I've gone before, not for this long and not without checking in or letting them know I was coming back. I've never just disappeared on them before, but even a god needs a break every now and then so I did take time off occasionally."

"I guess that makes sense; I mean, I imagine that it could get pretty monotonous doing the same thing every day for thousands of years," Zev replies.

"You're really old," I mutter, and then smirk when he shoots me a glare.

"I am, and I've seen all sorts of incredible and shocking things in my time and yet, you still surprise me daily," he replies, smiling.

"I don't think that's going to stop any time soon," Loki adds before I can say anything.

"Nah, no chance," Mayhem agrees, "Farren isn't capable of not surprising us."

"Hey, it's not like I'm doing it on purpose," I reply, somewhat defensively.

"No, you're not, and that's why we know that you're not going to stop surprising us any time soon." Rival replies, pulling me under his arm and kissing the top of my head.

I haven't been back with them for very long at all, but I've already noticed that they are a lot more affectionate with me; they're all finding ways to touch me, and I love it. I like the reassurance that they're here and that they're real. It's helping to settle and smooth some of my raw edges.

"It's a good thing, Farren," Reaper adds.

"Yeah, we love it," Loki agrees.

“It certainly ensures that nothing ever becomes boring,” Khaos adds with a smirk.

I don't really know what to say to that, so I just smile and look around. Noticing that, whereas before, the streets seemed to be abandoned, now, people are talking outside the front of their houses, mowing their lawns, or picking up shells on their beach. It's an incredibly eclectic view, and I don't think that I would ever get bored of looking at the different houses.

“They don't look very happy,” Storm observes, obviously watching the souls like I am.

“Would you be?” Zev asks and then clarifies as he adds, “They're in heaven, and yet they've been separated and isolated from their families and the friends that they've made here; I'd be pretty pissed myself.”

“Yeah, actually, now that you've mentioned it, I think I'd probably feel the same,” Storm replies.

“Hopefully, they will be happier when they realise that it won't be happening again and that it's back to business as usual,” Khaos replies.

“Has it been working properly since you've been gone?” Loki asks and then rolls his eyes, “That was not very clear; what I mean is, have all of the dead got here like they were supposed to?”

Hades looks contemplative, “I'm not too sure, and it's something that I'm going to need to talk to someone about before we leave.”

He doesn't say anything else as I feel his magic spike, and suddenly, one of the Helliers that was here before is standing in front of us again.

“Sire?” he asks, not looking as shocked as he should be. I'm guessing that he is used to being summoned, or it's at least a normal occurrence.

“I'm sorry; I know that this isn't your usual area of expertise, but I don't really have time to deal with the reaction of me being here from someone else.” Hades starts to explain.

The Hellier nods, “Yes, I understand that. I will try and help as much as I can.”

“In my absence, have the souls been crossing over as they should?” he asks.

The Hellier frowns and shakes his head, “They have from most of the realms, although it’s been taking them longer to cross over. The only realm that we’ve had an issue with is the Dragon realm; we’re not getting as many souls through as we should have. Maybe only one or two a day, and with a realm that size, there should be many more than that.”

“Only the Dragon realm?” Mayhem asks; when the Hellier nods, he adds sarcastically, “Well, isn’t that a coincidence?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Hades agrees.

“Are you sure?” Khaos asks.

“As far as we’re aware, it’s only the Dragon realm. We know that they’re still dying in the right numbers, but for some reason, they’re not making it here,” he replies.

“Do you have any idea where they could be ending up?” Killian asks the Hellier.

He shakes his head, but his reply is hesitant, “No, we don’t know. But as I’ve mentioned before, with the Underworld in the turmoil that it’s been in the last few decades, no one has had the chance to investigate.”

“But you have a theory, right?” I ask, following a hunch.

Again, the Hellier hesitates, but with us all looking at him, he eventually nods, “Yes, several people have mentioned the possibility that they’re in the in-between.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Mayhem says with a frown, and I know that he’s itching to get more information about it.

Khaos rolls his eyes, “That’s because it’s a legend; it’s not actually a real place. It’s been spoken about in whispers for as long as I can remember, but no one has any proof that it exists or has ever existed.”

The Hellier nods, looking a little bit embarrassed as he replies, "That's why I was hesitant to mention it."

"Now that everything should start to calm down in the punishment half, put a team together and get them to investigate the dragon disappearances. The last thing we need is dragon spirits causing mischief. They're not the easiest to wrangle." Khaos replies. "It shouldn't be too long until I'm back, and I want an update on the situation."

"Yes, commander," the Hellier replies and then disappears.

Once I'm sure that he's gone and we start walking again, I ask, "It's a pretty big coincidence that the only missing souls are from the Dragon Realm."

"It's more than a coincidence. I think Monty was right, and we're going to be going to the Dragon realm," Reaper replies. Now that the idea isn't being sprung on him, he seems to be handling it a bit better, and it makes me wonder if Monty knew that he was going to struggle with it, so I gave him a warning.

For all his eccentricities, Monty is a good supe, and it wouldn't surprise me in the slightest for him to risk himself in order to help Reaper. Very few people see that side of him though, and I guess that's because he doesn't show it to many people.

"We can't just leave the Underworld," Loki says, "it's in a mess; it needs Khaos and Hades, especially the Soul side."

"Monty said that we needed to get out," Zev reminds him, knowledge in his eyes.

"I don't want to leave either," Hades replies, "but we've done as much as we can to help them now. I am putting as much of my magic as I possibly can into the realm while I'm here; that will make a massive difference. We need to go to the Dragon realm, not only because the key fragment is there but also to see what's happening with the dead dragons and where they're going."

"He's right," Storm says, "I don't like it any more than you do, but we need to listen to Monty."

“We will be coming back,” Zev says with an amount of surety in his voice which is reassuring.

I have to admit that, like the others, I don’t want to leave, I want to stay and help this realm after what those fuckers have done to it, but I also know that in order to keep the realm safe from that god fucker, then we need the last key fragment.

“Good,” Hades replies to Zev.

I can only imagine how difficult it is for him to leave his realm after being forced to be absent for so long.

“In order to get into the dragon realm, we’re going to have to do quite a lot of preparation; I can’t just create a portal to get us there. We would be killed immediately, and Farren won’t even be able to use the Void.” Grey explains.

“The Void is being a bit hinky since I got my magic back anyway. I haven’t been able to travel through it,” I explain.

Hades’ eyebrows raise, “Oh, well, that’s interesting. Back to my point, though, we need to head back to the Shadowlands. I’ve got several books that can help, and we’ll also need some things from Monty’s shop. There are customs and things that you all need to know about they’re a tricky species to get along with.”

“Well, this sounds not at all complicated,” Loki says sarcastically, making me grin.

“Let’s just get out of here, and then we can focus on the next steps,” Reaper suggests.

“I agree. I don’t know about you, but I desperately need a proper meal and an actual shower, at least before we head off on our next mission.” I reply.

“Here, here.” Khaos agrees wholeheartedly.

“Xerxes might have some information for us as well,” Mayhem suddenly suggests, clearly still focused on the information about the Dragon Realm.

“Shit, where is X?” I ask, knowing that I didn’t pick him up and feeling really bad about it.

“I picked him up, but he said he was being summoned back to the house, and he disappeared,” Zev says. “I would’ve mentioned it before, but with Monty showing up and then coming here, I completely forgot.”

“No worries,” I smile, “I was just panicking that I’d left him behind.”

“Hopefully, he’s already getting a head start on the research that we need to do,” Mayhem muses.

Rival chuckles, “Don’t ever change, brother.”

Mayhem just looks at his twin with a confused frown before shrugging, and I can’t help but chuckle. He’s so cute when he’s in information gathering mode.

“How much longer until we get to the portal?” Reaper asks, “Now that Farren mentioned it, I desperately want to sleep in an actual bed.”

“Ohh, now you’re talking,” Loki smirks; when I snort, he winks at me.

Hades shakes his head, looking amused as he says, “We don’t have to go too much further; just around this corner is one of the communal parks, it’s one of the trees by the river.”

Almost as one, we all increase our pace, wanting to get there as quickly as we can before we get stopped by something. Fortunately, Hades was right, and it’s only a few moments before we are walking through the park and heading toward the river.

“There are a lot more people here than I thought there would be, and they all look so normal,” Kill says.

“You wouldn’t realise that they’re souls unless you knew where we were,” Zev says and then adds with a smile, “Never mind, you’d never see humans peacefully coexisting with dragons, sprites and all the different creatures here if they weren’t dead.”

“Unfortunately you’re right, this is the only place where all creatures and species from all walks of life coexist peacefully,” Khaos replies.

“It’s a shame that it can only be achieved in death,” Zev adds.

Everyone is silent for a moment as we just enjoy watching the scene around us as we finally get to the river. It surprises me when the tree that we’re using as the portal isn’t in the middle of nowhere and out of sight of everyone but is in clear view of the park, I can still see a lot of people from where we’re standing.

“No one else is able to use it, they won’t even realise that we’ve gone, it will just be a case of one moment we’re here and the next we’re not, they won’t even question it,” Hades explains before anyone can ask.

“What now?” I ask, somewhat impatiently. I want to get out of here; I want to rest, even if it’s just for a moment before we head to the Dragon realm.

I also need to check in with Reaper and make sure that he’s prepared to go back there, because even though I suggested it, he’s already said that he won’t want us to go to the realm without him, so I know he’s not going to stay behind.

“I just need to use the spell to open it,” Hades replies.

We all watch curiously as he slices his hand and starts to draw a rune on the trunk of the tree. I have no idea what the rune says, but based on the complicated lines, I’d have to assume that it’s a complex spell. Blood is only used in the most powerful spells.

It takes him quite a while to draw, but when he’s done, he steps back and says a trigger word that makes the bloody rune glow. I can feel the magic build as the portal begins to open.

“Something is wrong, this isn’t the right colour,” Hades says urgently. “Everyone needs to take a step backward, don’t go in.”

We all begin to do as he says, the panic in his voice letting us know just how serious it is.

“What is it?” Khaos asks.

“I have no idea,” Hades replies, “I’ve done that spell literally millions of times before, and there’s never been an issue.”

While they’re talking, the glow from the tree is getting bigger, and I grab Loki’s hand to pull him further away, hoping that the others all copy and do the same; Loki’s hand grips mine tightly.

“It’s okay, Love, I’ve got you, I’m not letting go.”

His words are more comforting than I realised that they would be, and I find myself getting ridiculously emotional about them.

“Why isn’t it fading since no one is stepping through it?” Mayhem asks.

“I don’t know, it’s not behaving like a typical portal!” Hades replies.

Before anyone can say anything, a string of magic whips out from the portal and wraps itself around Killian, Storm grabs his other arm as the rest of us yell in panic and rush forward, but it’s no good as the magic is too strong and they both get pulled in.

The rest of us don’t hesitate as one after the other, we all follow Storm and Kill through the portal; we’re not being separated again, especially when we have no idea what is going on or where the portal is leading to.

I glance back over my shoulder as Loki and I head for the portal, following the others through it, and Loki’s hand still wrapped tightly in mine.

What I see almost has me stopping in my tracks, but Loki’s forward motion continues to pull me toward the portal. As the portal encloses around me, I watch as what I’m sure is Monty and my Uncle standing in the park and having a heated conversation.

What is my Uncle doing in the soul side of the Underworld? Oh, oh no. I can’t think about what it implies; I refuse to. I need to know where we’ve been pulled to.

I can't see a damn thing. The light is still blinding me; panic starts to build. The only thing keeping me mildly calm is Loki's hand in mine.

Finally, I hear Hades, although the alarm in his voice is not reassuring in the slightest, and his words make no sense.

“Shit, we're in the god realm, nobody move.” He commands.

Fuck, this can't be good.

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About the Author

Nikita Parmenter lives in England, with her husband and their children and three manic dogs. Coffee and cinnamon buns are what keep her going. Her Characters all have a special place in her heart and quite often enjoy throwing her curve balls that send the plot line in a completely different direction than she had originally planned, and she loves it! Not as crazy as it sounds, I promise. She writes, Paranormal Reverse harem, Contemporary Reverse Harem and has a Reverse Harem bully romance in the works too. She loves writing strong take no sh*t female character's that have become that way through fighting tooth and nail to survive and damaged alpha males with hearts of gold buried underneath all their jagged edges. Connect with Nikita via her Facebook page [Nikita Parmenter Author](#) or Instagram [nikitaparmenterauthor](#). There will be competitions, giveaways, POV's from some of our favourite guys, Bonus scenes and updates on when the next book's will be out!

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